

Untangling early recovery

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Key messages

- 'Early recovery' has functioned as a way to classify and conceive of a broad range of activities and strategies which seek to promote recovery in humanitarian and transitional settings. However, the added value of early recovery as an approach has yet to be consistently demonstrated.
- Attention to early recovery is part of a drive to better organise international responses to foster recovery from conflict. Policy-makers should understand the opportunities and tensions presented by different approaches, including humanitarian assistance, development, stabilisation, peace-building and state-building. There is a need for modesty about what assistance can achieve amidst ongoing conflict and instability.
- Policy-makers and practitioners must be specific in portraying problems and proposed solutions; early recovery has served as a catch-all term for very different issues related to recovery.

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How to lay the foundations for recovery in conflict and transitional settings is a problem that has long vexed the international community. The concept of 'early recovery' has generated attention in policy circles as a potential way of fostering recovery from an early stage, with governments and aid agencies examining how it might fit into their current ways of responding to conflict. Nonetheless, there is a good deal of confusion about what early recovery is, and how it differs from other approaches: humanitarian and development assistance, peace-building, state-building and stabilisation. Rather than trying to establish a definitive sense of what constitutes 'early recovery', the main question is whether it brings anything new to current efforts to promote peace and recovery from conflict. This HPG Policy Brief provides an overview of early recovery that will inform up-coming HPG research on early recovery, stabilisation and transitions. It argues that early recovery has functioned primarily as a way of framing the activities, strategies and approaches that take place in humanitarian and transitional contexts, and that its added value is yet to be consistently proven. As early recovery has been used as a catch-all term for a broad range of issues, policy-makers and practitioners need to explicitly define what problem or set of problems they are seeking to address.

The focus of this Policy Brief is on conflict settings. This is not to downplay the important lessons that can be learned from recovery in the aftermath of natural disasters. Indeed, natural disasters can trigger very similar processes of social and political change. While recognising the analogies between recovery from conflict and from natural disasters, it is also important to keep in mind the fundamentally different challenges that these contexts present and, consequently, the different responses that they require. The very concept of recovery takes on different connotations depending on what people are actually recovering from, and the conditions under which recovery can take place. The logic of recovery in a conflict-affected society, where institutions, governance mechanisms and social relationships are radically transformed, is inherently different from recovery in a natural disaster setting, where the institutional and political environment may well be relatively stable.

What is early recovery?

Recent discussions of early recovery are part of longstanding debates on how best to programme assistance in conflict and transitional settings, where there are evident

tensions between humanitarian, development and security-oriented approaches. Much of this thinking has focused on the interface between humanitarian and development assistance. Linking relief and development has been a topic of considerable discussion and research – resulting in arguably little progress – for over two decades. More recently, as addressing global terrorism and strengthening international engagement in fragile states have become dominant international concerns, the focus has shifted, from linking relief and development to integrating aid and security. Promoting peace and encouraging responsive states is as high as ever on the agenda of the international community, as shown by the surge in attention to how certain donors and the UN can restructure international responses in order to help achieve such ambitious objectives.

The term ‘early recovery’ is a relatively new addition to the vocabulary on international assistance, having been introduced through the humanitarian reform process that began in 2005. Growing concerns with the need to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action, and in particular the critical findings of the 2005 Humanitarian Response Review, led to a number of humanitarian reform initiatives. One key reform was the establishment of the cluster approach, intended to strengthen coordination and partnerships in key sectors, formalise the roles and responsibilities of UN agencies and organisations and create ‘providers of last resort’ to address critical gaps in the response. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster Working Group on Early Recovery (CWGER) was established within the cluster approach, with the objective of promoting opportunities for recovery in humanitarian settings.

‘Early recovery’ does not lack definitions, but it does lack a common understanding. The CWGER describes early recovery as the application of development principles to humanitarian settings to establish the foundations for post-crisis recovery. The work of the CWGER focuses on activities that are meant to occur in parallel with more traditional humanitarian interventions in conflict and natural disaster settings, such as the restoration of livelihoods, basic services and shelter, the return of displaced populations and the strengthening of local and national capacities. Situating early recovery within humanitarian systems raises familiar tensions to do with blending relief and development, including around key humanitarian principles like impartiality and neutrality. In terms of ambition and practicality, there are evident limitations to the extent to which humanitarian funding and coordination can be utilised (and potentially transformed) to foster recovery, particularly as this assistance is targeted at situations of ongoing instability.

Others see early recovery, not in terms of humanitarian or development assistance, but as

part of a larger process of fostering peace and recovery. Early recovery in this sense is understood as early efforts to secure stability; establish peace; resuscitate markets, livelihoods and services; and build state capacity to manage political, security and development processes. This alternative understanding asks how international response can better (and sooner) foster recovery from conflict, and how aid can be better adapted to settings moving from conflict to peace. In a report analysing gaps in early recovery, the Center for International Cooperation noted three: strategy, capacity and financing. Efforts to close such significant gaps focus less on tapping into humanitarian mechanisms and more on implementing peace agreements, enabling conflict-sensitive development and promoting flexible and risk-tolerant funding mechanisms.¹

Given the range of definitions and interpretations involved, there is no single answer to the question ‘what is early recovery?’. Rather, early recovery has functioned as a way of labelling and conceiving of activities, approaches and strategies seeking to promote peace and recovery in humanitarian and transitional settings. While recovery is the intuitive end-point of these approaches, precision on what ‘recovery’ looks like – for households, communities and state institutions – is often missing. Understanding the conditions under which recovery could be achieved (and for whom) is a necessary starting-point for efforts to promote it.

Early recovery, stabilisation, peace-building and state-building

Early recovery is part of a policy push to improve international responses in conflict settings. Understanding its relationship with other approaches is a conceptual challenge that has dogged early recovery from the beginning. With its focus on recovery and an initial transition from conflict to peace, early recovery has clear overlaps with stabilisation, peace-building and state-building. Notwithstanding disagreements about their precise definitions and how to go about achieving their ambitious goals, the basic aims of these approaches are well understood: ending conflict (stabilisation), institutionalising peace (peace-building) and enhancing state capacity and legitimacy (state-building). Such clarity has been lacking with early recovery, not only because of its different interpretations but also because no realistic vision of recovery can be extricated from these other approaches to promoting stability, peace and an effective state.

Early recovery could be understood both as a tool of a broader stabilisation process, in that it seeks to lay the foundations for wider recovery from conflict,

¹ R. Chandran et al., *Recovering from War: Gaps in Early Action* (New York: CIC, 2008).

and as an element of a peace-building agenda, as part of efforts to strengthen peace and create visible peace dividends. The UN report *Peacebuilding in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict* was initially intended to focus on peace-building and early recovery, but gave little attention to the latter.² This suggests that, at least for UN agencies, early recovery has been subsumed under debates on peace-building, and is viewed primarily in relation to humanitarian systems.

The overlap of early recovery with other approaches raises the question as to when, why and for whom it is useful to conceptualise activities and approaches as 'early recovery'. The utility of doing so undoubtedly depends on the actor and the context. Governments, aid agencies and donors will have different perceived gains from linking objectives to implementing peace agreements, supporting livelihoods, building government capacity, promoting development and moving beyond short-term humanitarian objectives. Were significant funding streams dedicated to early recovery to be created, this would probably become a very popular framework. At present many humanitarian agencies in particular remain unconvinced about the value of portraying livelihood and other activities in terms of early recovery, not least because early recovery is seen as more politicised than humanitarian assistance. A

² United Nations, *Peace-building in the Immediate Aftermath of Conflict*, Report of the Secretary-General, A/63/881-S/2009/304, United Nations, 11 June 2009.

fundamental point is that, as a way of approaching international responses, early recovery not only overlaps with more established frameworks, but is competing with them.

Early recovery in humanitarian settings³

Early recovery has mainly functioned as a way of framing responses. A preliminary review of experiences in Uganda, Darfur, the Gaza Strip and Colombia suggests that the added value of framing activities and strategies in terms of early recovery has not been overwhelmingly demonstrated, for three main reasons: difficulties in translating early recovery into context-specific action; the limitations of humanitarian mechanisms in promoting recovery; and the fact that strategies and activities crossing programming divides were already taking place. Greater modesty is needed regarding what recovery-oriented programming can achieve in situations of ongoing conflict.

Nowhere are the limitations of humanitarian mechanisms in promoting recovery more evident than in Northern Uganda. Following the start of peace talks and improving security, the international community, influenced by the history of strong development donor relations with Kampala, relied on the Ugandan

³ Contributions on Uganda and Darfur from Sorcha O'Callaghan, HPG.

Figure 1: International approaches to conflict and transitional settings

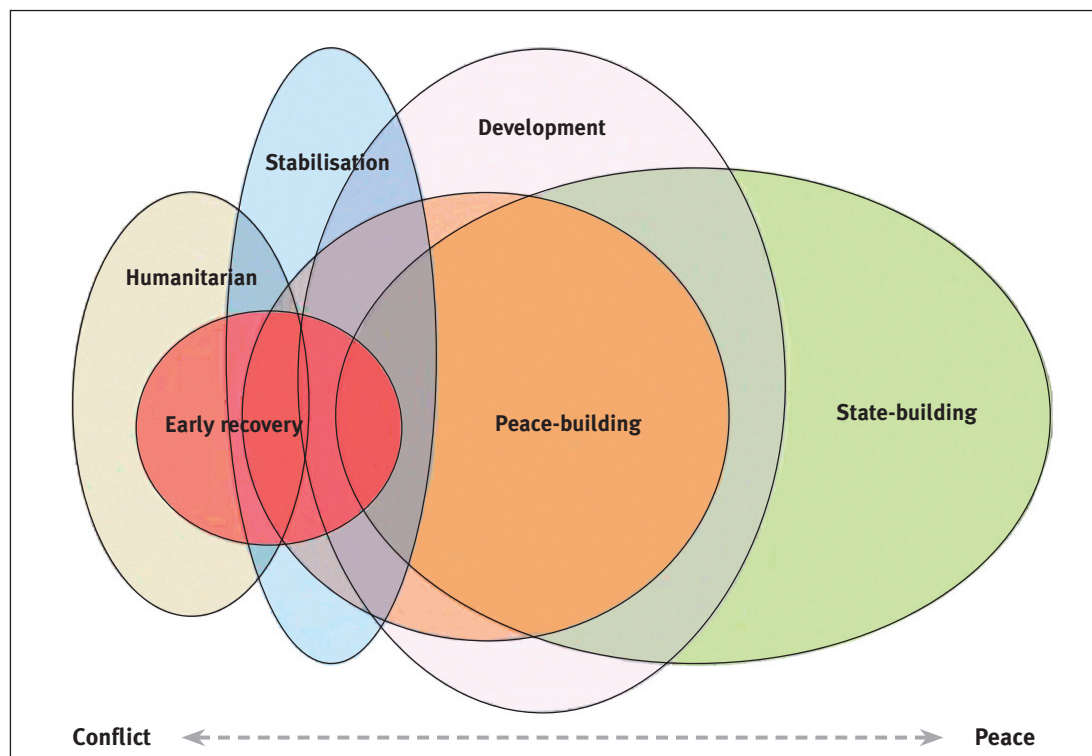


Figure by Samir Elhawary

government to kick-start the recovery process. Yet the programme lacked a funding mechanism until recently, a problem of particular concern to direct budget support donors given the corruption that had affected previous recovery-oriented programmes. In the absence of clear UN leadership and funding mechanisms for recovery, the comparatively well-resourced, well-coordinated and well-led humanitarian effort identified the facilitation of recovery as one of its two overriding objectives in the 2008 Consolidated Appeal. Financial support was limited for what many viewed as at best an inappropriate ‘stretching’ of the humanitarian mandate, and at worst as an act of institutional preservation for humanitarian agencies whose roles would decrease as responses became more focused on development. As a result, many recovery-oriented projects were removed from the appeal in mid-2008. In theory, this ‘stretching’ is precisely the problem that early recovery is meant to address. However, far from serving as a mechanism to achieve greater coherence, efforts to employ early recovery as a mid-way phase between relief and development reinforced existing tensions among the various actors involved.

Early recovery clusters, as part of humanitarian coordination, have in some cases served an important function in providing a home for discussions on key issues not covered in other clusters. These clusters have taken different shapes and names, incorporating livelihoods, land, governance, rule of law and environmental issues into humanitarian coordination. However, they have been hampered by conceptual confusion and leadership problems. There are also limitations to what such coordination bodies can achieve. In the Gaza Strip, in the absence of a political and operational space where initial recovery efforts could take strong hold, the role of the Early Recovery Cluster (renamed the ‘Governance, Livelihoods, Utilities and Environment’, or GLUE, Cluster) was limited to information-sharing, though some aid agencies had hoped to use it as a platform to push ahead with innovative programming.

In Darfur, major differences of opinion regarding what early recovery should aim to achieve have been reconciled not by defining what is appropriate for the context, but rather by rolling out early recovery through the clusters. This may result in early recovery focusing narrowly on transforming and transitioning humanitarian action, as opposed to involving development actors alongside humanitarian ones. The question remains, however, as to the appropriateness of formal or informal links between recovery activities and political processes in an ongoing emergency. Irrespective of how early recovery is defined, it remains a highly political process in conflict settings. This is also evident in Colombia, where recovery is linked to the government’s stabilisation agenda.

In all of these contexts, programmes moving beyond traditional humanitarian assistance have been under way for some time, and not necessarily under the banner of early recovery. In Darfur, for example, supporting livelihoods has been a central and crucial aspect of the humanitarian response. There is ample opportunity to learn from current and past efforts, including by multi-mandate non-governmental organisations and UN agencies, which effectively implement programmes that are neither strictly humanitarian nor developmental. Some donors and aid agencies may find early recovery a useful way to frame their approaches, but rebranding existing activities in terms of early recovery will not add any notable value to what is already taking place. Moreover, there is a danger that designating activities and strategies as early recovery may contribute to another separation in response modalities, instead of facilitating joined-up approaches.

Conclusion

The increased attention within the international community to ‘fixing’ states affected by conflict or in fragile situations – and the security implications for other states – has coincided with and fuelled a growing interest in promoting peace and recovery from conflict as early as possible. Early recovery may have a role in advancing this agenda, but there is a need to move away from conceptual debates about what early recovery is, and who ‘owns’ it. As it stands, ‘early recovery’ risks creating more division, rather than greater unity. The focus should not be on finding new overarching frameworks, but on understanding opportunities and trade-offs among different approaches (humanitarian, development, peace-building, state-building, stabilisation), and what they can realistically achieve in a given context. Experience has taught us that there is no magic combination of activities that will promote recovery, and certainly not amidst ongoing conflict and instability.

Ultimately, the many and varied instruments and objectives of aid agencies, governments and international organisations pose obstacles to coordinated efforts to foster recovery, both during outright conflict and in the ‘grey area’ between conflict and stability. However, short of dismantling international aid systems and rebuilding them from scratch, the focus has been on how to navigate around and minimise these obstacles through policy, programming and funding systems. This can only be achieved by precisely defining the problems at hand – whether aid coordination in transitional settings, risk-tolerant funding systems or synergies between humanitarian and development assistance. At present, multiple challenges and approaches are bundled under the heading of ‘early recovery’.