

POST-DISASTER RECONSTRUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF ISSUES AND PROBLEMS¹

by Anthony Oliver-Smith
Department of Anthropology
University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida 32611 USA

I INTRODUCTION

A disaster occurs when a natural or technological phenomenon brings damage or loss to the major social, organizational, and physical facilities of a community to the degree that the essential functions of the society are interrupted or destroyed, resulting in individual stress and social disruption of varying severity. The process of recovery thus involves the re-establishment of normal functions for every aspect of the society, including all basic services, housing, commercial and public buildings as well as the reconstitution of social, political, economic and cultural institutions. The potential inherent in reconstruction for enhancement or development of many dimensions of a community is clear.

Of all the stages of a disaster, reconstruction is probably the

¹. This paper is intended to be a general discussion of the major social scientific dimensions, problems and issues in post-disaster reconstruction. Due to space limitations there will be little reference to forms of reconstruction required by specific disaster agents such as earthquakes or hurricanes, or technological disasters such as explosions or chemical or radiological contamination. In attempting to delineate the major outlines of research on reconstruction I have drawn on literature based on a wide variety of disaster agents in many different national and socio-cultural contexts. The bibliography, however lengthy, is far from exhaustive. The reader will note throughout the text frequent reference to a number of items, most notably Bates (1982), Cuny (1983), Geipel (1982), Haas et al (1977), Oliver-Smith (1992) and Wilches-Chaux (1989). These works constitute the most comprehensive and longitudinal research and analysis of post-disaster reconstruction to date. Drabek (1986) is also an extremely valuable resource on reconstruction and other aspects of disaster research.