POLICY BRIEF

Disaster Resilience: Breaking the Cycle Through Circular Learning

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Disaster Resilience Coordination Institute
Author: Dr. Shaun Jones, MBBS, MBA, CHPS
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Executive Summary

Many disaster-prone nations, particularly Small Island Developing States (SIDS), remain trapped in a vicious cycle of disaster, response, recovery, and repeat. This pattern persists because learning mechanisms that should connect disaster experiences to improved future preparedness remain fragmented or absent.

This policy brief presents evidence that disaster resilience operates as a **circular life cycle** comprising five interconnected phases: **Relief, Response, Recovery, Research, and Readiness (Preparedness)**. Effective readiness (preparedness) is not an independent activity but an *outcome* dependent on systematic learning from each preceding phase.

Key Message: Breaking the cycle requires deliberate investment in research capacity and knowledge management systems that translate disaster experiences into improved readiness (preparedness). Every $1 invested in disaster risk reduction returns $15 in averted recovery costs.

The Problem: The Vicious Cycle

Current Reality

The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's Global Assessment Report 2025 identifies that vulnerable countries remain "trapped in a vicious cycle of disaster, response and recovery, only to repeat the pattern again and again."

Evidence of the Problem:

Indicator	Finding
SIDS annual GDP loss from disasters	2.1% (vs. 0.3% elsewhere)
SIDS with multi-hazard early warning systems	Only 39%
Disaster costs (including indirect impacts)	$2.3 trillion annually
Philanthropic funding to readiness (preparedness)	Only 17%
Funding to response/relief	51%

Why the Cycle Persists

Research identifies critical gaps in the learning process:

1. **Incomplete Learning Cycles:** Only 4 of 22 studied organizations completed the Plan-Do-Study-Act improvement cycle following disasters
2. **Inadequate Debriefing:** Lack of proper mechanisms for post-event analysis
3. **Knowledge Loss:** Organizations return to routine activities without capturing lessons
4. **Disconnected Planning:** Risk assessments remain disconnected from response plans
5. **Underinvestment in Research:** Most funding targets response rather than learning

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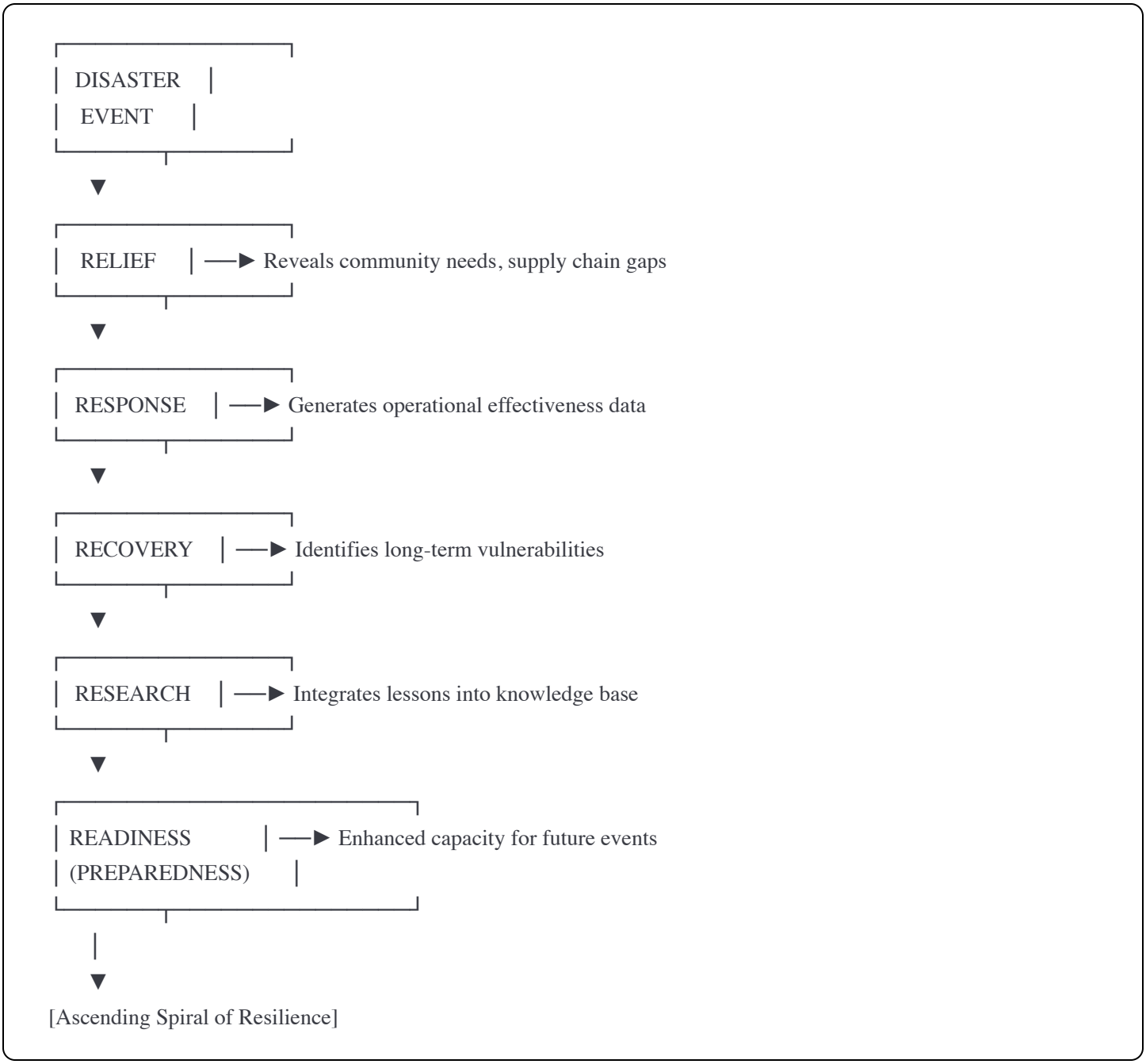
The Solution: Circular Life Cycle Model

Five Interconnected Phases

Disaster resilience must be understood as a circular system where each phase generates essential inputs for the others:



Key Insight: The Ascending Spiral

When the circular model functions effectively, communities do not simply return to their pre-disaster state. Instead, each complete cycle leaves them at a **higher level of resilience**—an ascending spiral rather than a repetitive loop.

Evidence Base

International Framework Alignment

The circular model aligns with established international frameworks:

Sendai Framework Priority 4: "Enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response and to 'Build Back Better' in recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction"

FEMA National Disaster Recovery Framework: "The Recovery Continuum highlights the reality that, for a community faced with significant and widespread disaster impacts, preparedness, response, and recovery are not and cannot be separate and sequential efforts"

UNDRR Priority Actions (2025): Ten actions for resilient recovery, including Action 10: "Establish adaptive monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems"

Case Evidence: Caribbean Hurricanes

Hurricane Maria (2017):

- 95% of communication services failed
- Emergency plans for Category 1 inadequate for Category 4/5
- Lesson: PACE (Primary, Alternate, Contingency, Emergency) communications required

Hurricane Melissa (2025):

- Jamaica's pre-positioned catastrophe bond ($150M) triggered
- Multi-layered risk financing system functioned as designed
- Lesson: Preparedness investments informed by prior research deliver returns

Return on Investment

Investment Type	Return
Disaster risk reduction	$15 saved per $1 spent
Disaster preparedness	$4 saved per $1 spent
Resilient infrastructure	$4 saved per $1 spent

Policy Recommendations

For National Governments

Immediate Actions (0-12 months):

1. **Mandate After Action Reviews** for all declared disasters within 90 days of event conclusion
2. **Establish Knowledge Management Units** within national disaster management agencies
3. **Develop Pre-Disaster Recovery Plans** before the next hazard season
4. **Create AAR Registries** accessible to all disaster management stakeholders

Medium-Term Actions (1-3 years):

5. **Shift Budget Allocations** to achieve minimum 25% of disaster funding directed to readiness (preparedness) and mitigation
6. **Institutionalize Research Partnerships** with academic institutions for systematic disaster study
7. **Implement Recovery Readiness Assessments** using UNDRR methodology
8. **Establish Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems** with community feedback mechanisms

For Regional Bodies (CDEMA, CARICOM)

1. **Create Regional Lessons Learned Repository** accessible to all member states
2. **Develop Standardized AAR Protocols** for cross-border learning
3. **Fund Regional Research Capacity** through pooled resources
4. **Facilitate South-South Learning** exchanges between disaster-experienced nations

For International Development Partners

1. **Condition Recovery Funding** on completion of After Action Reviews
2. **Support Long-Term Capacity Building** (not just one-time training)
3. **Fund Research During Response** to capture perishable data
4. **Invest in Knowledge Management Infrastructure** for recipient nations

For Local Governments and Communities

1. **Participate Actively** in post-disaster assessments and planning
2. **Document and Preserve Local Knowledge** from disaster experiences
3. **Engage in Regular Preparedness Exercises** informed by past events
4. **Hold National Agencies Accountable** for implementing improvement actions

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Implementation Framework

The Five Success Factors

For the circular model to produce ascending resilience, five factors must be present:

Factor	Requirement	Indicator
Research Capacity	Dedicated resources for systematic learning	% budget for post-disaster research
Institutionalized AARs	Mandatory post-event analysis	AAR completion rate
Knowledge Systems	Accessible lesson repositories	Knowledge base utilization metrics
Research-Policy Links	Pathways from findings to action	Implementation rate of AAR recommendations
Community Engagement	Affected populations in learning processes	Community participation in planning

Monitoring Progress

Recommended indicators for tracking circular resilience implementation:

- Number of AARs completed per disaster event
- Time from event to AAR completion
- Percentage of AAR recommendations implemented
- Budget allocation ratio (readiness (preparedness) vs. response)
- Multi-hazard early warning system coverage
- Community readiness (preparedness) exercise participation rates

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Cost of Inaction

Failure to implement circular learning perpetuates:

- **Repeated Losses:** Same vulnerabilities produce same impacts

- **Debt Accumulation:** Disaster recovery comprises 40% of debt in some SIDS
- **Development Reversal:** Years of progress lost with each event
- **Human Suffering:** Preventable deaths and displacement
- **Economic Stagnation:** Resources consumed by repeated recovery

The Choice: Invest in learning systems now, or continue paying exponentially higher costs for repeated disasters.

Conclusion

Disaster resilience is not achieved through response excellence alone. It requires a functioning circular system where Relief, Response, Recovery, and Research systematically inform enhanced Readiness (Preparedness).

The evidence is clear: nations that invest in completing the learning cycle—through After Action Reviews, knowledge management, and research-to-policy pathways—transform disaster experiences into resilience gains.

The policy imperative: Shift from reactive disaster management to proactive circular learning. Break the vicious cycle. Build the ascending spiral.

Key Takeaways for Policymakers

1. **Readiness (Preparedness) is an outcome**, not an input—it depends on learning from prior phases
2. **Research is the integration mechanism** that converts experience into improvement
3. **$1 in prevention saves $15 in recovery**—the economics favor readiness (preparedness) investment
4. **Most organizations fail to complete the learning cycle**—deliberate systems are required
5. **SIDS cannot afford repeated mistakes**—every disaster must generate maximum learning
6. **The Sendai Framework provides the roadmap**—implementation is the challenge

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For more information:
Disaster Resilience Coordination Institute
Author: Dr. Shaun Jones, MBBS, MBA, CHPS

This policy brief is based on comprehensive research examining international frameworks, scholarly literature, and lessons learned from major disaster events including Caribbean hurricanes.