Institutional Resilience: Legacies of Chichi Earthquake

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After a major disaster, why are some communities able to rebuild quickly while others struggle to recover? In recent years, the concept of resilience has become a central focus of academic research and policy in post-disaster reconstruction and risk management. Resilience generally refers to the social factors that help disaster victims recover. In addition to state intervention or corporate donations, the involvement of community organizations, civic groups, and interpersonal networks—collectively known as "social capital"—has been recognized as a key factor in enhancing resilience. Recently, in the book "Rebirth from the Earthquake: Risk Analysis and Institutional Resilience of the 921 Earthquake" (2022), my co-authors and I compiled the work of a group of outstanding scholars, reviewing a quarter-century of research on the 921 Earthquake. We found that the "social capital" of disaster victims indeed helps promote community recovery and building reconstruction.

By organizing various historical data, we collected information on the reconstruction of 142 residential buildings, discovering that only 94 were completed. On average, it took 1,950 days from the disaster to completion, with the 94th building taking 5,479 days to finish. After that, there were no more successful reconstruction cases. Because the government provided similar incentives, such as floor area bonuses or interest subsidies, it might not influence the differences of reconstruction. The research found that unified disaster victim organizations, assistance from external civic groups, and communities that attracted the attention of politicians were able to complete reconstruction or urban renewal successfully. However, attention must be paid to the fairness of resource distribution to avoid internal factionalism among community members or even litigation between disaster victims. In summary, when government subsidies are applied uniformly, social capital and fair distribution may be more important than money in rebuilding buildings. The recent strong earthquakes remind us that the disaster risk of aging buildings in Taiwan is increasing, but the pace of urban renewal is slow. The success of rebuilding aging buildings should not rely solely on economic incentives such as increased floor area bonuses but also on promoting community solidarity and trust related to resilience.

Drawing from the studies of the Chichi Earthquake in Taiwan and comparative sociology, we also propose a historical institutional perspective. We believe that in the face of major disasters, the collaborative relationship between the state and civil society can create "institutional resilience." This means that when state elites and civil society possess the capacity for mobilization and the willingness to cooperate, they can leverage the political opportunity structure during the post-disaster rescue and resettlement period to mobilize resources, leading to extensive and meaningful institutional innovations. These innovations, in turn, reduce the potential risk of future major disasters. Major disasters not only bring pain but also open a window of opportunity for citizen participation in institutional reforms, which is a key institutional advantage of democratic societies.