

STRATEGY

Beyond the Crisis: How Companies Can Build Long-Term Resilience in Natural Disaster Response

by Debbie Haski-Leventhal and Irit Alony



Image Credit | This_is_Engineering

For effective disaster response, businesses need a holistic and long-term approach. Here is why and how.

✔ **INSIGHT** | FRONTIER 04 Mar 2025

The January 2025 **wildfires in Los Angeles** have devastated the region. Fueled by severe drought and winds, the fires have burned over 40,000 acres, destroyed over 12,000 structures, and forced nearly 200,000 people to evacuate. **The Palisades Fire**, the largest blaze, has become the most destructive in Los Angeles County history. Tragically, at least 29 people have lost their lives. As scientists claim that **climate change contributed to the onset of these wildfires**, natural disasters are expected to continue to increase in frequency and severity.

RELATED CMR ARTICLES

G. Olcott & N. Oliver, “**Social Capital, Sensemaking, and Recovery: Japanese Companies and the 2011 Earthquake**,” California Management Review, 56/2 (2014): 5-22.

A. Karnani, “**Doing Well by Doing Good: The Grand Illusion**,” California Management Review, 53/2 (2011): 69-86.

From the onset of these devastating wildfires, **businesses stepped up to support affected communities** and first responders. **Airbnb.org**—the nonprofit arm of Airbnb— has provided shelter for those affected by the wildfires. **Many hotels and restaurants in California have offered free food and accommodation** for those who lost everything in the blazes. **Planet Fitness has opened its LA clubs** to anyone impacted by the fires, offering free access to showers, massage tools, Wi-Fi, and electrical outlets. And organizations like Project Camp are running **trauma-informed pop-up day camps** for children displaced by the wildfires.

However, as the acute phase of the disaster subsides, media attention and public assistance wane as well. At this stage, affected communities are typically left behind to recover from devastation on their own, with dwindling support. Although it may not result in glamorous headlines and photo ops, the painstaking efforts of recovery are essential for

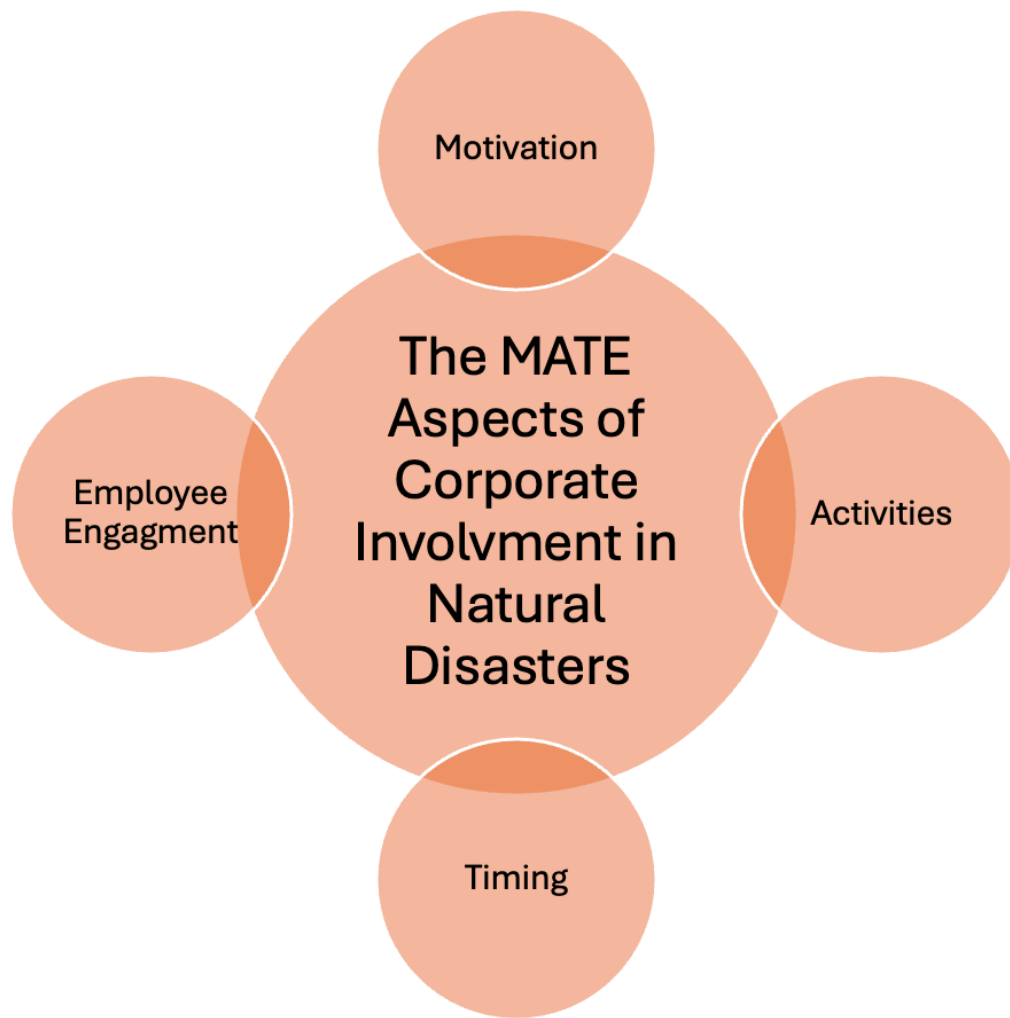
a successful rebuilding of infrastructure, homes, and social networks in affected communities. Help is still needed at this stage, from governments, nonprofit organizations, individuals – and businesses can play an important part as well.

As companies showed during one of the USA's worst natural disasters, **businesses can make a significant difference in disaster response**. Because of their expertise, networks, resources, and skills, companies can help during horrific circumstances with outstanding efficiency and impact. But why and how should the business sector get involved during catastrophes like wildfires, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes?

To answer these questions, we conducted a longitudinal **study** with 34 Australian and international organizations. Using extensive qualitative data from 57 semi-structured interviews in 34 Australian and international organizations, we explored the why, how, and how of corporate disaster involvement, supplemented by analyzing 76 publicly available reports. As a result, we developed a typology that offers companies a road map for a more holistic and impactful involvement in disaster relief.

The MATE Model

Our findings show that companies engage in natural disaster relief for different reasons and in various ways. Often part of their **corporate social responsibility (CSR)** and sustainability approach, companies realize they have a significant role in society, especially in times of great need. To categorize corporate involvement in natural disasters, we developed the MATE model, detailing the four aspects on which such an involvement differs: motivation, activities, timing, and employee engagement.



Motivation: businesses have different reasons to help, and their “why” matters to all other aspects. Based on **the CSR literature**, we categorize it as *moral* (**doing the right thing**), *relational* (prioritizing the relationship **with all stakeholders**), and *instrumental* (what’s in it for us – good reputation and branding, new customers and sales, etc.).

Activities: there are **five forms of actions** in corporate involvement in disaster relief. 1. *Direct assistance to communities*, usually through philanthropy and resource mobilization. 2. *Disaster preparedness* for one’s own business, focusing on business continuity and the company’s resilience. 3. *Developing innovative products/services* based on the company’s technology and expertise. 4. *Joint projects* with nonprofits, governments, and international organizations utilized to implement solutions before, during, and after disasters. 5. *Establishing organizations* (e.g., private foundations, nonprofits, and trusts).

Timing: Disaster relief occurs **in four main stages**, two before it strikes and two after: *prevention, preparation, response, and recovery*. While most companies and organizations tend to help during the response stage, long-term recovery is also critical just after disaster strikes. **Prevention** relates to reducing the root causes of climate change and natural disasters (e.g., reducing carbon emissions) or preventing and reducing its impacts. Preparation helps to decrease the adverse outcomes of natural disasters by having the community ready for them (e.g., evacuations or building shelters). This dimension is closely linked to the activities, as different activities were conducted at various stages of disaster relief.

Employee Engagement: The final aspect concerns how employees were involved in disaster relief. Drawing on **employee involvement in CSR frameworks**, we identified three approaches to including the company's people in its help efforts: *transactional* (employees help to meet their own interests and needs), *relational* (employers and employees jointly commit to assisting the community in need); and *developmental* (where employers fully **activate employees and the organization** to produce greater value for business and society).

Three Approaches to Corporate Involvement in Natural Disasters

The data analysis of our interviews and documents helped us topologize companies' involvement in natural disasters according to their motivations, activities, timing, and employee engagement methods. The result is three approaches to corporate disaster relief: *reactive, strategic, and comprehensive*.

The **Reactive Approach** to disaster relief is characterized by instrumental motivation, activities mainly during the disaster response phase, and transactional employee engagement. The main goal highlighted by several participants from companies that engaged in this approach is to address the immediate loss of company assets, primarily to company-related elements. These companies tend to focus on themselves, even in times of

disaster. These companies act right after it strikes - when the media highly focuses on the unfolding tragedy - but put their own employees, business continuity, and needs as a top priority and offer pre-set and low-involvement assistance.

It's about understanding, first and foremost, the safety of our employees and their families. Getting in contact with them, understanding how bad the situation is for them, and [...] their particular needs – is that short-term housing, is it money, is it somewhere to evacuate to? (Executive Director of Human Resources, Pharmaceutical Company)

In the wildfires, we have an employee workplace giving platform [...] people could donate on [this] platform to all or some of those charities that we would identify, and the company would match those donations dollar for dollar. (Sustainability Officer, Financial Company)

While the examples above of companies helping communities affected by the LA wildfires are remarkable, they will all remain in the Reactive approach unless they become more strategic and comprehensive.

The second approach is **Strategic**. Companies with a strategic approach utilize core competencies and assets to support multiple stakeholder groups, including affected communities and other disaster-relief organizations, during at least two disaster-relief stages. Affected groups and nonprofit organizations' input is considered while helping the company customize its involvement. This response strategically aligns the brand, core competencies, and assets to maximize outcomes for all. The primary motivation here is mutual benefit for the company and the recipients. Related activities include using what the company has or does best to support three stakeholder groups: existing customers, other organizations involved in disaster relief and affected communities. Such companies involve their employees in a relational way.

We see ourselves as an enabler for our [employees]. There's a strong focus for our people to get involved in the community space, and it's one of our key drivers for staff engagement. [...] For years after the wildfires, we had staff [going to] the devastated properties and [getting involved in] the rebuilding that occurred for years afterward. We were sending our network teams and people who were just helping with the rebuilding efforts. (Head Corporate Social Responsibility, Healthcare Company)

[During] the floods where all the three telecom networks were impacted, we were the first to get in mobile base station cell sites on wheels. But when we put up those facilities, it wasn't just to support our customers. We gave access to emergency services and relief organizations in the areas that needed relief operations. It was open access in a sense. (Vice President, Sustainability, Telecom Company)

	Reactive	Strategic	Comprehensive
Motivation	Instrumental	Relational	Moral
Activities	Self-focused	Strategic	Holistic
Timing	Immediate response	At least two stages	All stages
Employee engagement	Transactional	Relational	Developmental

Coca-Cola can be seen as an example of Strategic corporate involvement in disaster relief. The beverage giant aligns what it knows and stands for in times of need. Through its worldwide logistics network, the company delivers clean drinking water and essential supplies to affected areas during natural disasters, often collaborating with the Red Cross and UN agencies to provide funding, expertise, and infrastructure for emergency response. Its awarded “**Disaster Resilient Communities**“ initiative focuses on long-term recovery, helping rebuild livelihoods and infrastructure in devastated regions. However, **Coca-Cola is one of the worst plastic polluters in the world**, contributing to climate change. Taking a more comprehensive approach is required. Finally, the **Comprehensive Approach** involves proactive collaborations in which all stakeholders jointly develop an inclusive and systematic disaster response across all four stages of disaster relief. Such companies demonstrate a more holistic approach to their disaster relief efforts, cross-

sectoral collaborations, and **climate activism** as part of their greater responsibility. They do so because it is the right thing to do, offering a large variety of activities and partnerships across all stages while involving their employees in ways that benefit them, the company, and the community.

We have community partnerships. We're partnered with organizations, both NGOs and government, which help reduce community risk. We are committed to trying to [reduce] the impact [of climate change] and the severity of the impact from the outset. It would benefit everybody if we could all work together and share information [...]. (Community and Sustainability Team, Strategy Manager, Service/Financial Company)

One of our values is "to do the right thing." So, during [the wildfires], we gave extra paid leave to employees who wanted to volunteer if they worked for the emergency services. [...] In these sorts of times, we regularly get back to what the right thing to do is. When we're writing commitments or making any decisions in our business, it's anchoring back to the [company] purpose and values to guide us. (Head of Sustainability, Retail Company)

Adopting the comprehensive approach means that the company remains involved, and even leads, across all stages of disaster response. It requires taking a long-term view of the disasters' effects on the community. This includes considering prevention, preparation, and particularly recovery, to ensure effective help:

[During the recovery phase] in the case of the China earthquake, we helped rebuild a school. Our involvement with that school and education is a long-term and ongoing commitment to that community. We work with our NGO partners and communities [on] disaster preparedness: how can we apply our professional skills to help build the capacity of organizations to be better prepared when disasters do strike? It might be through helping them coordinate their services with other disaster response organizations on the ground. (Head of Corporate Citizenship Australia, Consulting Company)

One inspiring example is **Patagonia**. Renowned for its commitment to social and environmental impact, this outdoor apparel company goes above and beyond during natural disasters. It utilizes its business to provide financial aid, supplies, and support to

impacted communities. Patagonia frequently collaborates with local and global relief organizations, offering grants and resources to ensure effective disaster response. Its employees also engage in volunteer efforts, embodying the company's ethos of sustainability and care. Patagonia supports the world in all four stages of natural disasters, including the prevention stage, by leading the fight for climate action and funding organizations focused on climate action and activism. This kind of holistic involvement maximises the effectiveness of the company's involvement.

Be the Disaster Relief Superhero: Five Tips for the Comprehensive Approach

Many people and companies yearn to help when communities are severely affected by Mother Nature. It helps them feel less helpless, do something meaningful, and genuinely assist in a time of excessive need. It's what makes us humanity. But how to do it well?

Our research shows that the comprehensive approach offers the most effective disaster relief response. It encourages companies to provide a range of aids across all stages, including long-term **recovery** after the fires die, the smoke dissolves, and the media is no longer there. We need companies involved in the less heroic but even more critical stages of **prevention** and **preparation**, working in partnership with all organizations and stakeholders, including employees, in a way that benefits all.

For companies and leaders wishing to adopt the comprehensive way of helping, here are five critical tips:

1. **Start with the why:** Motivation matters. Great adversities often present an opportunity to reconnect with core values and higher purpose. Highlighting the right thing to do and calling for optimal action for the community can motivate the organization to harness its capabilities, networks, and innovation and expand its efforts toward a more significant impact. Companies' response at such times demonstrates their true values to all stakeholders.

2. **Take the long-term view:** Most of the response occurs immediately after the disaster strikes, but help can be even more critical before and after. The urgency of the disaster can be used to set up long-term systems and connections for assistance during recovery and later – during planning and prevention. Such disasters are expected to occur more often and have more impact, so a “next time” can be expected, and your business can be set up for a better and more effective response.
3. **Reimagine what you can do:** Companies with a comprehensive approach to disaster relief offer a variety of activities to help affected communities. Not only did they donate money and goods, but they also found creative ways to harness their core assets and resources, such as their people’s problem-solving abilities, when the local, national, and international community needed them the most. Consider what you do and what you know to transcend philanthropy.
4. **Involve your employees meaningfully:** Your employees may have ideas, projects, connections, and suggestions for expanded response to the disaster, and this can be the perfect opportunity for them to grow their capabilities. Their involvement will not only enhance their contribution to the relief efforts and will not only develop their skills – it can also enhance their commitment to the organization. This experience can strengthen the employees’ connection to the organization based on shared values. Doing so will give employees a sense of empowerment, meaning, and purpose.
5. **No one can do this alone:** Effective response must be coordinated across sectors, including government, nonprofits, and other businesses. Businesses can help not only with their core capabilities but also with their collaboration and coordination expertise and with their connections to other entities. This is also essential to build up over time, after the acute stage of the disaster, and to prevent the next disaster from taking a worse toll.

Business has a critical role in society, especially in adverse times. When communities face the worst, companies can show that they are concerned not only with being the best in the world but also the best for the world – one with humanity and the community.



Debbie Haski-Leventhal [Follow](#)

Debbie Haski-Leventhal is a professor of management at Macquarie Business School, Australia. An expert of CSR and a TED speaker, she published over 60 articles and six books, including 'Make it Meaningful' with Simon & Schuster. Her work is often cited by the media, including NYT and Forbes.



Irit Alony [Follow](#)

Dr. Irit Alony is a lecturer at the University of Wollongong. Her research focus is on relationships in the context of workplaces, volunteering, and CSR, and a contributing identity.