

From Rubble to Renewal: Post-Disaster Corporate Citizenship, Responsible Innovation, and the Business of Hope

Introduction and Motivation

On July 30, 2024, a series of catastrophic landslides struck three villages in Wayanad district, Kerala, India, killing over 300 people and displacing thousands. The disaster devastated an ecologically fragile landscape long shaped by tea and coffee plantations in the Western Ghats, exposing decades of environmental mismanagement, unchecked development, and governance failures (Roy et al., 2025). At the epicenter of this tragedy, Harrisons Malayalam Limited (HML), one of South India's largest and oldest plantation companies, lost 41 employees and 48 family members, saw entire estate quarters buried under debris, and suffered the destruction of hundreds of acres of productive tea estate. Yet HML's response to the disaster offers a compelling and understudied instance of corporate citizenship enacted under conditions of existential crisis. Using a sequential multi-method approach, our research examines HML's post-disaster response and its impact on the broader affected community through the lens of three interrelated theoretical constructs: (1) exemplary corporate citizenship in crisis, (2) responsible innovation for future disaster mitigation, and (3) the business of hope as a moral imperative.

Theoretical Framework

We integrate three streams of scholarship. First, we extend Matten and Crane's (2005) extended theory of Corporate Citizenship, which reconceptualizes firms as political actors administering citizenship rights, into disaster contexts where state capacity is overwhelmed. When government institutions cannot deliver basic protections, corporations with embedded local presence assume quasi-governmental roles. HML's immediate provision of alternate

housing, employment continuity, and psychosocial support exemplifies what Carroll (2015) and Camilleri and Sheehy (2020) describe as the ethical and discretionary dimensions of corporate citizenship activated under extreme conditions.

Second, we draw from the Responsible Innovation framework (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Stilgoe et al., 2013) to analyze HML's subsequent deployment of weather monitoring systems across its Wayanad estates in partnership with AgriHawk Technologies. The installation of 35 real-time weather prediction units, with data shared directly with the Government Disaster Management Authority, represents a private-sector-led anticipatory governance mechanism that shifts the corporate role from reactive crisis responder to proactive risk mitigator.

Third, we introduce the construct of the Business of Hope, drawing on Pope Francis's framing of hope as a moral imperative in *Laudato Si'* (2015) and connecting it to organizational resilience theory (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011) and crisis leadership scholarship (James & Wooten, 2010). Hope, in our formulation, is not mere optimism but an organizational practice: the deliberate rebuilding of meaning, community, and economic possibility in the aftermath of destruction. HML's expansion of plantation tourism to generate new employment, its collaboration with Rajagiri Transcend for worker counseling, and its land transfer for community rehabilitation collectively constitute a hope architecture that sustains both the organization and the community through protracted recovery.

Research Design: A Sequential Mixed-Methods Approach

Study 1: Qualitative Theory Building (n = 76). We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders in 2025-2026. Phase A (n = 45) focused on disaster survivors, bereaved families, and estate workers, emphasizing lived experience, perceptions of loss, and evaluations of corporate and state response. Phase B (n = 31) targeted HML's CEO,

general managers, estate superintendents, HR and welfare officers, and institutional partners (Rajagiri Transcend, AgriHawk Technologies, local officials), focusing on strategic decision-making, resource allocation, and institutional learning. All interviews were conducted in Malayalam or English, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Our analysis followed Gioia et al.'s (2013) systematic methodology for qualitative rigor, progressing from first-order informant codes to second-order theoretical themes to aggregate dimensions. Study 1 generated our theoretical model of Regenerative Corporate Citizenship and testable hypotheses for Study 2.

Study 1 Findings and Conceptual Model. Our analysis of Study 1 revealed three aggregate dimensions that together constitute what we term Regenerative Corporate Citizenship. The first, Crisis-Embedded Stewardship, captures how HML's 150-year embeddedness in Wayanad's social fabric activated moral obligations that transcended contractual employer-employee relationships. The second, Anticipatory Innovation, describes HML's pivot from crisis response to systemic risk reduction through technology deployment and public-private data sharing. The third, Institutional Hope-Making, theorizes the organizational practices through which economic activity is reframed from extraction to renewal, as exemplified by HML's transformation of disaster into a catalyst for plantation tourism, community counseling infrastructure, and land-based rehabilitation partnerships. We designed Study 2 to test our conceptual model (see Figure 1).

Study 2: Quantitative Hypothesis Testing (n = 400, ongoing). Building on the theoretical propositions and construct definitions generated in Study 1, Study 2 is a structured survey with over 400 affected family members and citizens across the disaster-impacted region of Wayanad. The survey instrument includes (a) Perceived Corporate Citizenship Quality, a multi-item scale measuring perceived responsiveness, fairness, and embeddedness of HML's

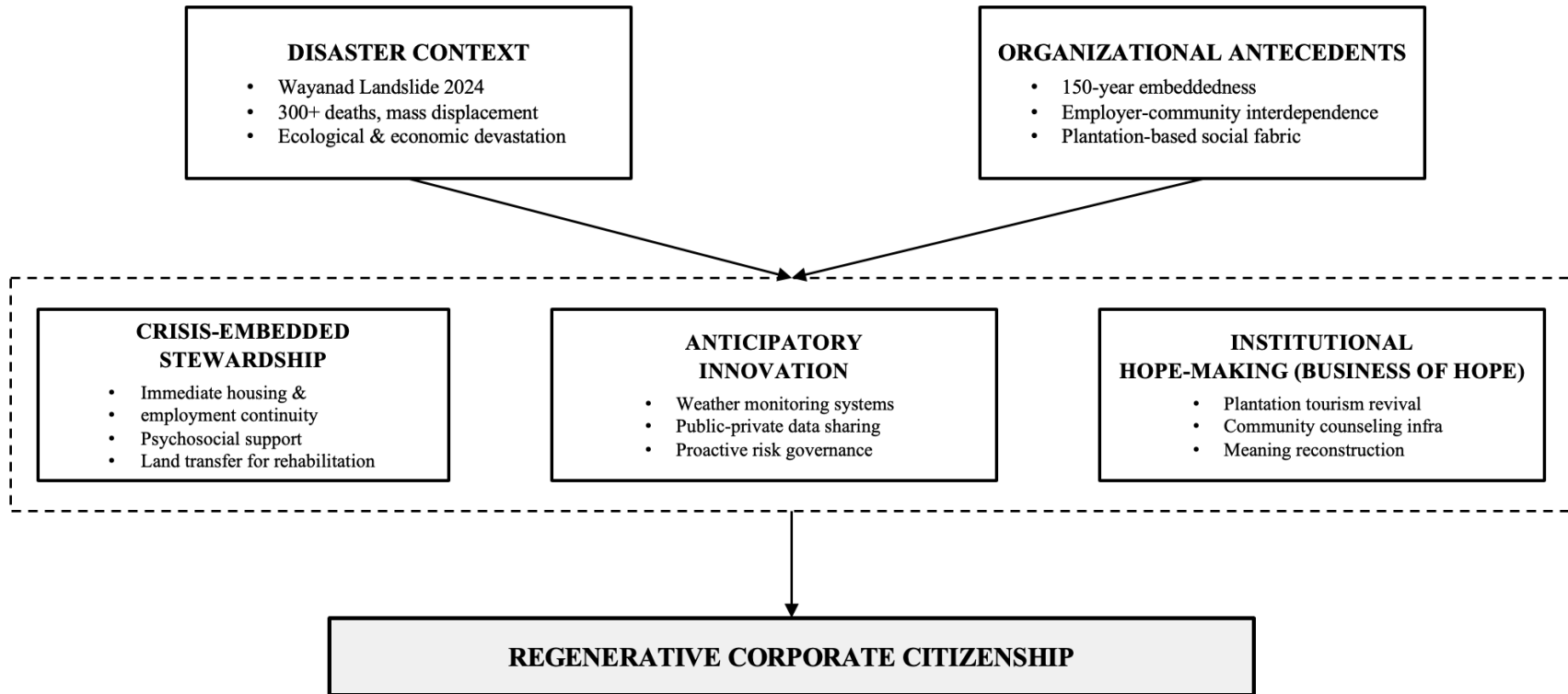
crisis actions relative to state and NGO responses; (b) Community Resilience, operationalized through social cohesion, collective efficacy, and institutional trust indicators (adapted from Norris et al., 2008); (c) Hope and Meaning Reconstruction, measured through the Herth Hope Index (Herth, 1992) and post-traumatic growth indicators (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004); (d) Perceived Future Safety, capturing confidence in disaster preparedness systems including HML's weather monitoring infrastructure; and (e) Livelihood Recovery Trajectory, assessing income restoration, employment stability, and housing adequacy. Our analysis tests the core proposition that perceived corporate citizenship predicts community resilience and hope, which in turn mediate livelihood recovery, and that perceived future safety, enabled by responsible innovation, moderates the relationship between corporate citizenship perceptions and hope.

Expected Contributions

Our research makes three main contributions. First, it extends corporate citizenship theory into natural disaster contexts in the Global South, where the interplay of corporate, state, and community actors is distinct from Western institutional assumptions, and provides the first empirical test of how crisis-enacted corporate citizenship is perceived by affected communities and translates into resilience outcomes. Second, it bridges responsible innovation scholarship with crisis management by showing how private-sector technology deployment can function as a public good in disaster-prone regions, and tests whether such innovation generates the perceived safety that enables hope. Third, it operationalizes the Business of Hope as a theoretically grounded and empirically measurable construct, responding to *Laudato Si'*'s call for business to serve as a force for ecological and social renewal rather than extraction.

Extended Abstract Word Count: 999 words

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Regenerative Corporate Citizenship in Post-Disaster Contexts



Endnotes

1. HML is part of the RPG Group and is the largest employer in Wayanad district, with 13 tea estates and 11 rubber estates across Kerala. The company's deep embeddedness in the region's social and economic life makes it an exceptionally rich site for studying corporate-community dynamics in crisis.
2. The term "Business of Hope" draws on Pope Francis's framing in *Laudato Si'* (2015, par. 71) and is operationalized here as distinct from corporate philanthropy or CSR: it denotes the systematic organizational reorientation toward meaning-making and community renewal as a core business function. Study 2 measures this construct through the Herth Hope Index and post-traumatic growth indicators, grounding the moral concept in validated psychometric instruments.
3. The Wayanad Model Township at Elston Estate, inaugurated in March 2026, provides a concentrated study site for Study 2, housing over 178 families in the first phase with a planned total of 410 homes for 1,600+ displaced persons. This rehabilitation context enables systematic sampling of affected families with varying exposure to HML's corporate response.

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