

A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNITY BASED RECOVERY MANAGEMENT IN ENGLAND AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Community engagement in disaster management is recognised in policy in England and Australia. In both countries there is local engagement in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction at a local level. In England disaster management planning takes little account of community knowledge, skills and capacities. This places England at greater risk from newly evolving risks which are likely to require response and management arrangements that depart from a traditional, almost exclusive reliance on emergency services if these risks are to be dealt with effectively but also if the reality of spontaneous local involvement and volunteerism is to be recognised and effectively incorporated into disaster management.

Keywords. Disaster; Risk; Recovery; Community

INTRODUCTION

There is now a general acceptance on the part of Governments and Emergency Service agencies in the United Kingdom and Australia that the community should participate in disaster management (DM). This acceptance represents a significant policy move away from an exclusive reliance on emergency services (usually taken to mean the “blue light” services) to provide protective support to the population at risk.

In this paper I contend that community engagement occurs whatever the planned and formal arrangements are and that in Australia the disaster management arrangements are more broadly based in the activities of government agencies, voluntary groups and the community itself than they are in England and that this situation offers Australia a higher level of protection in a changing risk environment. Equally it suggests that the less formalised arrangements in the United Kingdom lead to a higher level of exposure to new risks and it suggests that DM is less responsive to the risks of everyday life that local people see as important.

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This paper is based on research conducted over a number of years in Australia with my colleagues Graham Marsh and Syd Smale and more recently in England and also on my experience as the Manager of the State Emergency Recovery Unit in the Department of Human Services In Victoria.

I have chosen to compare England and Australia. They are suitable candidates for comparison because they share many of the same social and political values that govern volunteer and community activity, principles of probity and community responsibility and of government's role, as protective and supportive but as assisting the community and not as an alternative to community activity. They are also suitable candidates for contrast, by which similarities may be heightened and differences thrown into relief. Australia has a different environment, it is remote from other countries, distances and remoteness in Australia are issues for the population and for social interaction. It is a country recently settled by Europeans and much of its' physical infrastructure is new, or at least within its design lifetime. England is small, crowded with an aged infrastructure. The Australian environment is still not fully understood, whereas the history of England allows in theory a better understanding of risk regimes

The Emerging Risk Environment

Over the past decade there has been a shift away from focussing on the hazard as the element to be managed or controlled in the DM process to a better understanding that the business of DM is concerned with managing risks (Salter 1997). This has been paralleled by a growing awareness of the range of risks that we now confront, or more accurately which we now see as being part of the risk environment that has to be dealt with by DM arrangements. Governments and communities, but agencies perhaps less so, now accept that it is not just rapid onset natural hazards such as storms, fires and flooding that fall within the scope of DM.

A wider range of events and processes that include infrastructure disruption (power, water, transport, telecommunications), extreme weather events (heat waves, cold waves, drought), Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) events, public health threats (such as HIV/Aids, TB, SARS, BSE, Foot and Mouth Disease) and the various impacts of Climate Change/Global warming are all candidates for emergency response.

This emerging risk environment includes events that have been known for many years (such as heat waves) but which are only now being include in the range of hazards that elicit a response in planning and management from Governments, agencies and the community. This reflects a heightened understanding of risk assessment but it also reflects the driving processes of the media and of public appreciation of risks and especially of risk to everyday life. (Buckle et al 2001)

The characteristics of these new risks are significant for DM. the hazards may be indiscriminate in where they occur and whom they affect (such as terrorist attacks), they may be invisible (such as disease or CBRN), they may be embedded in the

structure of our society and the ways in which we go about our normal business (transport disruption, electricity outages etc) and they may be long term processes whose cause and start is difficult to identify, which run for decades and which once begun, are difficult to halt or control, such as climate change.

This suggests that DM strategies based more on long term social, economic and environmental adaptation and drawing upon assessments of risk, vulnerability and resilience may be more appropriate strategies than traditional hazard control measures.

DEFINITIONS

I do not want to spend too much space on definitions as these are contentious issues that are not easily resolved (see Quarantelli 1998).

As I have discussed previously (Marsh and Buckle 2001) the word community has many different meanings, many of which have validity in the context of DM and many of which are context sensitive. For my current purposes I take Community to mean people at a local (that is sub-municipal) level who are not organised by emergency services but have skills, resources and an organisational capacity or structure that allows them to provide services to people at risk or actually affected by disasters. This includes organisation as part of voluntary groups such as the Red Cross or Churches. It also includes local volunteers who participate in response and control operations but who are not full time, are not paid and whose engagement is local, such as firefighting volunteers in the rural fire services in Australia.

Community therefore is local, voluntary, self-organising and may have DM as only part of its span of interests.

Given the emerging risk environment any definition of disaster that lists particular hazards is likely to be out of date.

In Victoria (Government of Victoria 1986) *Emergency Management Act 1986* contains the following definition²

...the actual or imminent occurrence of an event which in any way endangers
or
threatens to endanger the safety or health of any person in Victoria or which
destroys
or damages, or threatens to destroy or damage, any property in Victoria or in
any way

² For the purposes of operations in Victoria and for this chapter “emergency” is synonymous with “disaster”.

endangers or threatens to endanger the environment or an element of the environment

in Victoria, including, without limiting the generality of the foregoing –

- an earthquake, flood, wind storm or other natural event; and
- a fire; and
- an explosion,
- a road accident or any other accident,
- a plague or an epidemic,
- a warlike act, and
- a hi-jack, siege or riot,
- a disruption to an essential service (“essential service” means any of the following services: transport, fuel (including gas), light, power, water, sewerage, or a service (whether or not of a type similar to the foregoing) declared to be an essential service by the Governor in Council)

The definitions given in EMA’s Glossary are:

disaster A serious disruption to **community** life which threatens or causes death or injury in that community and/or damage to property which is beyond the day-to-day capacity of the prescribed statutory authorities and which requires special mobilisation and organisation of resources other than those normally available to those authorities.⁽⁵⁸⁾ See *also* **accident**, **emergency** and **incident**. Comprehensive **disaster management**. (

emergency _ An event, actual or imminent, which endangers or threatens to endanger life, property or the **environment**, and which requires a significant and coordinated response.⁽⁶⁰⁾ _ Any event which arises internally or from external sources which may adversely affect the safety of persons in a building or the community in general and requires immediate response by the occupants.⁽⁸³⁾ _ An unplanned situation arising, through accident or error, in which people and/or property are exposed to potential danger from the hazards of **dangerous goods**. Such emergencies will normally arise from vehicle accident, spillage or leakage of material or from a fire. ⁽⁸²⁾ See *also* **accident**, **incident** and **disaster**. The senior person responsible for the coordination of the emergency catering service. ⁽³⁶⁾ should be stated

The Civil Contingencies Bill HM Government 2004) (defines an emergency as

1 Meaning of “emergency”

(1) In this Part “emergency” means an event or situation which threatens serious damage to—

- (a) human welfare in a place in the United Kingdom,
- (b) the environment of a place in the United Kingdom, or
- (c) the security of the United Kingdom or of a place in the United Kingdom.

- (2) For the purposes of subsection (1)(a) an event or situation threatens damage to human welfare only if it involves, causes or may cause—
- (a) loss of human life,
 - (b) human illness or injury,
 - (c) homelessness,
 - (d) damage to property,
 - (e) disruption of a supply of money, food, water, energy or fuel,
 - (f) disruption of an electronic or other system of communication,
 - (g) disruption of facilities for transport, or
 - (h) disruption of services relating to health.
- (3) For the purposes of subsection (1)(b) an event or situation threatens damage to the environment only if it involves, causes or may cause—
- (a) contamination of land, water or air with—
 - (i) harmful biological, chemical or radio-active matter, or
 - (ii) oil,
 - (b) flooding, or
 - (c) disruption or destruction of plant life or animal life.
- (4) For the purposes of subsection (1)(c) the following threaten damage to security—
- (a) war or armed conflict, and
 - (b) terrorism, within the meaning given by section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000 (c. 11).⁵

The issue of these definitions is that they are open-ended and do not exclude events that may arise or which may become in the future to be considered as emergencies or disasters that were not previously considered hazardous to the community.

The importance of an increasing range of *types* of disasters is that it is unlikely that that current – or even a single set – of agency based DM arrangements will be adequate to address the range of hazards, risk, impacts and consequences that we will confront in the future.

INDICATORS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Policy Indicators of community engagement

Apart from the relevant DM legislation and impending legislation the documents setting out roles, responsibilities and arrangements are the main sources of policy, doctrine and practice, and (unlike legislation) set out in a detailed manner.

Dealing with Disasters (Cabinet Office 2003) makes no reference to community but refers frequently to voluntary sector agencies, which we can take as a proxy for local and community engagement. Most references are to response activities but there is an explicit statement (Cabinet Office 2003 p6) of involvement in a wider range of activities.

With sudden impact emergencies (explosions, major transport accidents, riots) the initial response is normally provided by the statutory emergency services and, as necessary, by the appropriate local authorities and possibly voluntary organisations. Experience of slower onset or less localised emergencies or crises (BSE, the fuel crisis of 2000, foot and mouth disease) shows that other organisations may well face the brunt even in the early stages of a major emergency.

The *Draft Regulations* accompany the *Civil Contingencies Bill* (Home Office 2004) refer to community risk registers (but otherwise not to voluntary or community activity) and the *Standards for Civil Protection* (Home Office 1999) make a few references to voluntary sector agencies. In both cases the community (taking voluntary agencies as a proxy) is seen as passive recipients of assistance and support.

The capabilities workstreams (Cabinet Office 2004) refer to a number of planning and operational tasks without referring to local people, social support or recovery.

In Australia the references are more explicit. Emergency Management Australia refers to one of its four key concepts the "Prepared Community" with the expectation that community actions will be positive and may take the lead (Emergency Management Australia 2004).

The Emergency Management Manual Victoria, the principal policy and planning documents for the State, refers frequently to voluntary agencies and to community groups, again with the expectation that local people will be involved actively (Government of Victoria 2001).

In addition the recent extensive reviews of the 2003 bushfires in the Australian Capital Territory by the House of Representatives (2003) and the review of the 2003 fires in North East Victoria by the Victorian Commissioner for Emergency Services indicate through the level of very local, public and transparent public consultation that there is a growing commitment to engaging local people, involving them in policy and in directly taking their need into account (Government of Victoria 2003).

These reviews have been paralleled by a series of reviews into the outbreak and consequences of Foot and Mouth disease and also into the development of new arrangements for managing disasters in the United Kingdom.

All these activities suggest a strong commitment on the part of Governments to understanding the needs and priorities of local people and on the part of local people, in turn, to contributing to these reviews.

Planning indicators of community engagement

Policy commitment however has to be translated into action if it is to have any force and the first step in this is through the disaster planning process.

Planning is given great weight, as one would expect, in Australia and in England, though it is in the former that there is a concerted and directed effort to involve local people. In both countries emergency services and local government are expected to contribute to risk assessment and to planning.

Only in Australia, however, is there an explicit effort made at all levels of Government to involve local people, community groups and the voluntary sector. Due to Australia's federal constitution planning for DM occurs mainly at State and lower levels. In Victoria there are representatives of the community and the voluntary sector at State, regional and local levels.

This commitment is less evident in England. My discussions with a number of emergency planners from the emergency services and local government indicate that while local authorities are involved in planning, but as subordinates rather than equal partners to the "Blue Light" agencies, there is no capacity to engage local people in the voluntary sector or through purposefully designed processes.

This lesser commitment finds a statement by its absence in the various planning and policy guidelines. In Australia there are clear statements about the composition of planning bodies (see for example (Government of Victoria 2001). Whereas the guidelines in the United Kingdom are much less well developed in terms of setting out how, or even whether, local people should be involved.

We therefore have a situation where policy commitment is similar in both countries, but commitment to local and community involvement through formal planning is less evident in England. To a degree planning for disaster operations can occur at the time, indeed all plans have to be fine tuned to the context in which they are invoked, and the research of myself, Marsh and Smale has indicated that for risk assessment and vulnerability identification this occurs in Australia and can be effective, it is certainly parsimonious with resources prior to the disaster event. (Buckle et al 2002). However, this is a risky approach especially when it comes to establishing management arrangements and arrangements for coordination, logistics and command and control as these especially are called into play as soon as the disaster occurs. They depend on defined and agreed roles and sources of funding, equipment and personnel and these are almost impossible to achieve at the time of a disaster.

Operational indicators of community engagement

The strongest indicator of community engagement will occur in the management and operational activities focussed at the control of and recovery from a disaster.

This is the strongest test of local engagement. Policy and planning are impotent if they do not lead to practical action, while extemporaneous practical action can compensate for weak policy and planning (though in some circumstances it may cause confusion where it conflicts with already agreed practice.)

The work of myself and others has shown that local people have a good understanding of the risks they face, though the priority they attach to any particular risk may not be shared with the emergency services and local communities will often identify risks which emergency services consider irrelevant or trivial or outside the legislatively mandated boundaries of DM (despite the open ended definitions set out in legislation – see above.) (Buckle et al 2001).

CASE STUDIES

In England my initial research has been at Lewes, a town in East Sussex and the seat of the Lewes District Council and at the village of Leonard Stanley in Gloucestershire. Lewes was badly affected by flooding in October 2000 and many homes in Leonard Stanley were affected by a windstorm in October 2002 which caused a power outage for 5 days.

In Lewes the local emergency management plan makes virtually no reference to the community, voluntary groups or to recovery activities. However, from discussions with officers at the District Council it became clear that following the floods local people were engaged in support and recovery activities. Home visiting and outreach programmes, the provision of local information, help with clean up and personal support activities were provided by a range of groups to the affected community.

In Leonard Stanley there was no agency or government response to the loss of power. Losing electricity was significantly for many people. Those on low incomes could not afford the loss of perishable goods in freezers and fridges, people dependent on stair lifts were trapped either at the bottom or top of their homes. Some people were unable to cook or heat water and were without lighting while others had to make frequent visits to hospital when their electrically powered medical equipment failed.

Local emergency services were not evident initially; though later they and the local council were broadly supportive. The initial response was begun by local people, one family in particular that assumed a leadership role, who contacted the local church. They arranged for home visits, for the church hall to be opened up as a support centre and as somewhere where hot meals (which were provided) could be prepared and eaten. A local community information programme advising on appropriate personal action and reporting on progress to power restoration was started and maintained. (Wendy Bevan pers. comm.)

Community leadership and mutual support was equally evident in events in Australia. I have described these responses previously (Buckle, 2001b) in reference particular to bushfires in the Yarra Ranges Shire on the outskirts of Melbourne, widespread floods in East Victoria in 1998, and the loss of gas to 1.8 million households across Victoria in October 1998.

The natural events showed a range of responses that were characterised by:

- local engagement
- local, non-coercive and inclusive management activity
- cooperative behaviour
- innovative support programs
- management structures focussed on local and particular issues
- attention to issues of lifestyle and development

(Buckle 2001b)

Which addressed a range of support programmes that included:

- Personal support
- Outreach programmes
- Child care
- Financial assistance for homes and farms
- Personal hardship grants for essential household items
- Locally provided clean up and immediate aftermath subsistence programmes
- Social activities
- Memorial activities
- Community development

These occurred within the framework of planned arrangements but the timing, shape, range and commitment to activities was wholly the communities own.

The gas shortage management arrangements were less well planned beforehand because this sort of infrastructure disruption had not been anticipated by Government or the emergency services. Nevertheless, after an initial delay, Government took a lead through relying upon the DM networks established through planning and training and applying the principles of DM to the gas outage, that is treating it as a disaster of the same sort as a flood or bushfire, and in particular treating the needs of affected people as the same sort of need requiring similar arrangements for support..

Local people penetrating a spontaneous response were critical to effective management of this event which ran for almost 3 weeks (Buckle 2001b).

After a short time it became apparent that there were a number of especially vulnerable groups that included:

People on gas powered life support systems.
People with skin disorders or psychological disorders who had to bathe numerous times a day and who required hot water
People on palliative care
The frail elderly and newborn children who needed heating and hot water
Health care facilities, nursing homes and hospitals that required gas for heating, cleaning, washing and cooking

These people could not be adequately cared for without community support at a very local, sometimes street or neighbour level.

This local support came in the form of neighbourly watching and care, sharing of domestic hot water and cooking facilities, the use of community facilities for cooking and bathing, voluntary restrictions in gas usage and a range of daily support services.

WHY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Local communities in England and in Australia play a vital role in supporting communities affected by disasters. In Australia this derives in part from effective planning (but which itself grew out of the experience of the 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires across Victoria where, for the first time, local people organized themselves in a spontaneous but formal way to support each other and to put pressure on Government to provide assistance to affected communities.). In part too it derives from a culture of volunteerism and from a sense of neighbourliness that stems from the values of that society.

In England we can see the same sort of local engagement, but without the planning support. As a consequence the spontaneous activity of the community is “more spontaneous” having less supported through not being a formal part of planning, than it is in Australia.

This leaves it more vulnerable to being inadequately resourced and through occurring in isolation from official recovery efforts.

The difference between England and Australia therefore occurs not at a policy level, though here there are variations in emphasis, nor at a local level where preliminary results indicate comparable levels of local and community engagement in DM operations.

Why, then, should community involvement be an issue.

Planning as the basis for effective management

Effective management in disasters can occur without planning as the Victorian gas shortage showed, but it is fraught with risks, suffers delays in start up and is usually

inefficient in resource use. DM practitioners generally accept that effective management derives from effective planning. Effective planning needs to include all stakeholders, including voluntary agencies and community representatives.

The Government cannot do it alone

Governments are rarely able to meet all the needs of affected communities immediately. Our experience shows that support to affected communities, families and individuals is required as the disaster event unfolds and while emergency services and governments are concentrating upon control of the hazard and the protection of life and (to a lesser extent) property.

To achieve an effective balance of resource use, planning for priorities and for management and coordination and logistics is essential. Without arrangements and plans agreed beforehand it is likely that the activities they should address will be delayed until the immediate crisis passes with the result that the needs of people for medical care, personal support, emergency shelter and food may be deferred unnecessarily.

Demonstrably some services are provided by local people before or even as a substitute for Government and emergency services support. Search and rescue, first aid, personal support, evacuation and emergency welfare centers are frequently provided locally before agencies and emergency services are able to respond.

Government resources are limited

The resources of Government, emergency services and local government are limited, even for major disasters and there is a simple, practical need to rely upon the knowledge, skills, capacities and resources of local people to meet initial needs and, in some more importantly, to meet the needs of people weeks, months or years after the event when the attention of Government has been directed to other priorities.

Local engagement will occur inevitably

Local people will be involved whatever the planned arrangements. All our research shows that local people will assist each other. Planning just makes this commitment proceed more efficiently. Not recognizing the inevitability of local action, and not planning for it, is denying demonstrable social behavior.

CONCLUSION: NEW RISKS REQUIRE NEW RESPONSES.

Finally numerous authors (Buckle 2003, Quarantelli 2001, Rubin 1998, Rubin 2000) have written on the new risks we face. These risks described above may differ very significantly from risks we have been exposed to in the past. Rather, the arrangements we have for dealing with disasters have been designed around natural, destructive, rapid onset events and they may not be well suited to events that are non-natural, involve systemic failure or accident rather than destruction,

which are irreversible and which are slow onset (so making it difficult to recognize the threat until it has occurred and is escalating beyond control).

These risks are likely to tax Government and agency resources more than other have and are likely to be more widespread in their impacts and more long lasting in their effects than “traditional” disasters.

Governments – and this has been recognized at a policy level but less so in England in planning, training, education and awareness – need to engage the community whose knowledge and capacity will be essential components of any response.

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