HAZARD NOTE

bushfire&natural HAZARDSCRC

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TOPICS IN THIS EDITION | NON-TRADITIONAL RECRUITMENT | RESILIENCE | VOLUNTEERING

UNDERSTANDING MODELS FOR SPONTANEOUS VOLUNTEERING

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This *Hazard Note* draws on research across two related projects. The first, *Out of uniform* – building community resilience through non-traditional volunteering (2014-2017) investigated current and emerging issues around people's participation in non-traditional, or unaffiliated, emergency volunteering. The second, *Enabling sustainable emergency volunteering*, began in 2017 and is engaging with stakeholders to consider the future of emergency volunteering.

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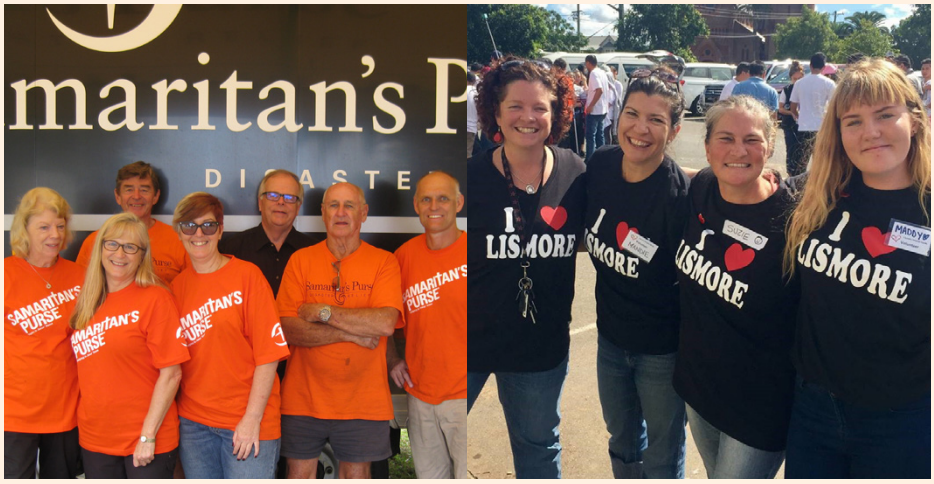


▲ Above: (LEFT) THE SAMARITAN'S PURSE SITE LEADERSHIP TEAM IN GAWLER, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, FOR THEIR RESPONSE TO THE PINERY BUSHFIRE IN 2015. PHOTO: SAMARITAN'S PURSE. (RIGHT) SPONTANEOUS VOLUNTEERS WITH LISMORE HELPING HANDS ASSISTED IN THE CLEAN UP AFTER THE 2017 FLOODS IN NORTHERN NSW. PHOTO: LISMORE HELPING HANDS.

SUMMARY

The dominant image of spontaneous volunteering in Australian emergency management – of many disorganised outsiders converging on an affected community – is overly narrow and unhelpful for emergency planning. This research provides evidence and a tool to better understand these volunteers and how they come together. It uses case studies of Samaritan's Purse after the 2015 Pinery bushfire in South Australia and Lismore Helping Hands after the 2017 NSW floods to demonstrate the narrowness of the dominant image. The research developed a typology of spontaneous societal responses to disasters that planners can use to help them understand the links to the affected communities and motivations for action, and thus prepare for, diverse forms of spontaneous volunteering that may be more realistic for their hazard conditions, communities and jurisdictions. This typology is included in Australia's first national handbook on planning for spontaneous volunteers, *Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers*, published in 2018 by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR).

CONTEXT

While spontaneous volunteering is romanticised and celebrated in the media, it has been distrusted and feared within emergency management circles. The dominant image of spontaneous volunteering in these circles is one of overwhelming numbers of well-intentioned but disorganised, uninformed and untrained people converging on an emergency site from outside, creating problems for the disaster-affected communities and the organisations and trained responders seeking to help them. While spontaneous volunteering can look like this, it often doesn't. This overly narrow and misleading image can therefore potentially undermine emergency planning.

BACKGROUND

The International Organisation of Standardisation's 2017 definition of a 'spontaneous volunteer' is "an individual who is not affiliated with an existing incident response organisation or voluntary organisation but who, without extensive preplanning, offers support to the response to, and recovery from, an incident". However, this relatively new term applies to an established, well-documented prosocial behaviour: people stepping up to help others in crisis.

More recently, the scale and visibility of spontaneous volunteering have grown, driven in part by the rise of social media and other new communications technologies. These digital technologies have increased both people's virtual exposure to disasters and their capacity to independently coordinate assistance outside of formal organisations when a disaster strikes (McLennan *et al.* 2016a).

This trend has fuelled distrust and wariness of spontaneous volunteering within the emergency management sector.

The dominant image of this phenomenon within the sector has been fed by the more challenging, large-scale examples that followed major events, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States (2001), which originated the term 'spontaneous volunteer'. Other large-scale examples followed the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (2009), the Brisbane 'Mud Army' in Queensland (2010-2011) and the Christchurch earthquakes in New Zealand (2011-2012).

Emergency managers often focus on the risks and challenges of spontaneous volunteering, particularly at these larger scales. However, risks and challenges can be significantly reduced through effective planning, collaboration and communication, and the benefits for the community, organisations and the volunteers can be high (McLennan *et al.* 2017).

In recent years, the understanding of spontaneous volunteering has grown. Emergency managers in local governments, not-for-profits and emergency service agencies now have a better understanding this phenomenon, its potential benefits, and the need to plan for contributions from spontaneous volunteers. Where resources and support exist, these managers are developing plans and processes for engaging with this emergent, human resource. Key examples include: volunteering peak bodies registering and building local capacity to manage spontaneous volunteers, led by Volunteering Queensland (see McLennan *et al.* 2016b); local government planning such as in Gannawarra and Yarra Ranges Councils in Victoria, and Logan City Council in Queensland; and approaches under the New South Wales State Emergency Service's Volunteering Reimagined strategy (launched in 2017).

BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH

Through the *Out of Uniform* and *Enabling sustainable emergency volunteering* projects, researchers interviewed people who have coordinated or worked with spontaneous volunteers. The *Out of Uniform* project included two research reviews about spontaneous volunteering: the first on informal, 'unaffiliated' emergency volunteering; the second examined the changing landscape of volunteering and its implications. The *Out of Uniform* project also held two workshops with stakeholders from Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia to develop a risk-benefit framework for 'non-traditional' emergency volunteering. Traditional organisations can use this framework to inform strategic decisions about non-traditional emergency volunteering, including spontaneous volunteering.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research supports the view that, especially in less severe events, most emergency response and recovery organisations are unlikely to face a scenario of mass, disorganised, spontaneous volunteering involving people from outside the disaster-affected community. In less severe events and outside large, metropolitan areas, spontaneous volunteering can take very different forms. Even in large-scale cases, spontaneous volunteering is more varied in its characteristics, degree of coordination, and impacts than the dominant image portrays.

Counter-examples of spontaneous volunteering

The following are two examples among many that counter the dominant image of spontaneous volunteering, drawn from interviews with coordinators of spontaneous volunteers, quoted anonymously.

Example one: Samaritan's Purse after the 2015 Pinery bushfire, South Australia

Samaritan's Purse is an international, non-profit, Christian organisation that provides emergency relief and development assistance. Through its Australian Domestic Disaster Relief Program set up following the Black Saturday fires in Victoria in 2009, it coordinates and deploys spontaneous volunteers to provide practical support and recovery assistance to disaster-affected communities:

> *"Quite often somebody will roll up; an individual, a group of people, mates, will roll up and say, 'We're here and we'd like to help' and some organisations cannot take, and will not take, untrained volunteers. They'll say, 'Go and see that Samaritan's Purse crowd.' So, we can … we have to be wise how we use people, but people are willing, and you've got to really capture that willing heart."* [Spontaneous volunteer coordinator]

At the request of the South Australian State Recovery Office, Samaritan's Purse worked with the local disaster recovery coordinator in the wake of the 2015 Pinery bushfire. Samaritan's Purse clearly positions itself as a 'second responder':

> *"As we know, the SES and the fireys do a wonderful job here. After they're gone we can then come in when the coast is clear and help people and stay longer."* [Spontaneous volunteer coordinator]

This volunteering was well organised. After assessing the situation, the Samaritan's Purse coordinator deployed their trained volunteer site management team, with its own mobile operations centre. The site team was supported by an offsite management team, also staffed by volunteers. After the team arrived at Gawler, near the fire site, the local Salt Church (now Encounter Church) agreed to host them.

The site management team mobilised around 70 spontaneous volunteers across four weeks to assist local families, businesses and service organisations with work such as building clean up. Most of the deployed volunteers had not mobilised with Samaritan's Purse previously. They included members of the Salt Church in Gawler, nearby small communities, and volunteers from Adelaide contacted via a national email list. Volunteers were diverse in their skills, ages and backgrounds.

> *"We will train those team leaders. Maybe they're people we haven't met before but cream floats to the top. We'll soon find out who's got the ability to lead a team … One of the most valuable people we would ever use is a farmer. They're hard workers and they can do pretty well anything."* [Spontaneous volunteer coordinator]

For information about the 2015 Pinery bushfire, see https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/bushfire-pinery-fire-november-2015/

Example two: Lismore Helping Hands, NSW 2017

In March 2017, Lismore in northern New South Wales was extensively flooded after ex-Tropical Cyclone *Debbie's* deluge overtopped the flood levee. Responders included emergency service agencies, not-for-profits and the Lismore City Council, as well as many informal groups from within the local and wider communities. Lismore Helping Hands was one, and it used Facebook and then recovers.org software to mobilise around 1000 spontaneous volunteers to assist with tasks such as cleaning and debris removal over the three to four week aftermath period. Its base of operations, the Helping Hands Hub, was close to the flooded area and became a grassroots relief centre involving many formal organisations and informal groups.

The Lismore Helping Hands experience challenged key aspects of the dominant image of spontaneous volunteering. Local community members led the spontaneous volunteers, who were also mostly locals with strong ties to the people and businesses directly affected. An organiser explained:

> *"It's not just that it's a whole bunch of strangers from all over the country. It's the community coming out and the community wanting to participate in … helping their fellow community members." [Spontaneous volunteer coordinator]*

Neither was the spontaneous volunteering disorganised, risky and problematic for the affected community and traditional first responders:

> *"It's been recognised that the way that we did things in that three to four weeks after the event was efficient and effective and a good use of the energy of the spontaneous volunteers. Whereas, I think in the past, spontaneous volunteers have presented problems."* [Spontaneous volunteer coordinator]

Lismore Helping Hands applied basic volunteer management principles and processes, relating to Occupational Health and Safety and team supervision, for example. They worked with, and were supported by, Lismore City Council and referred situations that were beyond their capacity to traditional response and recovery organisations. Their Helping Hands Hub operated as a complementary service to the government-run relief centre.

For its achievements, Lismore Helping Hands won the 2017 NSW Get Ready Community Award. One of the organisers reflected on the importance of community helping community through spontaneous volunteering:

> *"If we shut that down, then I think that has really grave implications for the longer-term recovery of the community, and for that community's willingness to do the same thing in another event."* [Spontaneous volunteer coordinator]

For information about the 2017 northern NSW floods, see https://riskfrontiers.com/the-2017-lismore-flood-insights-from-the-field/

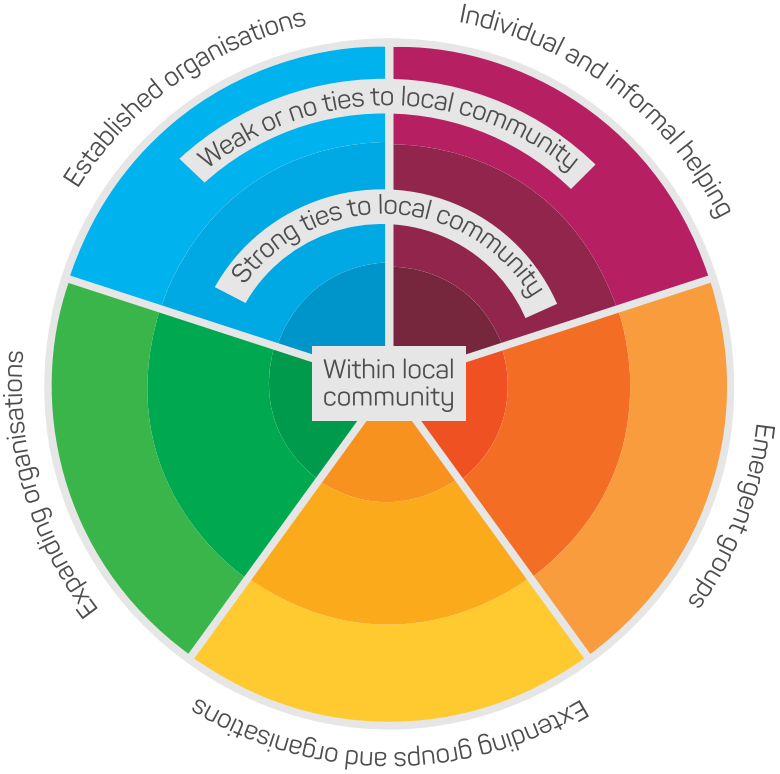
HOW THIS RESEARCH IS BEING USED

Figure 1, below, shows a typology of possible societal responses to disaster. It was developed by Dr Blythe McLennan (author of this *Hazard Note*) for the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) as a utilisation activity for the *Out of Uniform* project. It is included in the *Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers Handbook*, released by AIDR in early 2018 as the first national handbook for this area.

The typology is a simple, useful tool for checking assumptions about spontaneous volunteering and considering its different forms.

This typology builds upon a well-established typology of organised response to disaster (Dynes 1970), combined with insights from Ronnie Faggoter, Director of the South Australian State Recovery Office at the time of the Pinery fire. The typology has two dimensions:

- The degree to which the volunteers are tied to the local community (represented by the concentric shaded circles); and
- The radial sections showing the ways that volunteers can be organised



▲ Figure 1: A TYPOLOGY OF SOCIETAL RESPONSES TO DISASTER (SOURCE: AIDR 2018, FIGURE 1, P.6, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION).

END-USER STATEMENT

"The Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook Collection provides authoritative and trusted guidance on national principles and practices in building disaster resilience in Australia. The *Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers Handbook* provides guidance on planning for and supporting spontaneous volunteers by providing general guidance on ways to incorporate the principles into plans and activities. The handbook has drawn upon current and ongoing activities regarding spontaneous volunteers, building on latest research and the expertise, capability and knowledge of organisations and individuals across Australia and internationally.

"Development of the handbook was supported by Dr Blythe McLennan, through development of a discussion paper for consultation with stakeholders, support in conceptual development, research knowledge and connecting with relevant stakeholder networks, research assisting in environmental scan and literary review and a review of existing spontaneous volunteer management approaches, guides and manuals."

– Amanda Lamont, Director Engagement and Projects, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience

The differing degrees to which responses have ties or connections with a disaster-affected community is important to element in understanding the volunteers. At its core, the bullseye depicts responses mobilised from within a disaster-affected community. The next layer out captures responses that have strong ties to the community, and the outermost layer depicts responses that have weak or no ties.

The radial sections show the different ways that people and groups may be organised to respond:

- **Individual and informal helping**
- **Emergent groups** – new groups and networks that did not exist before
- **Extending groups and organisations** – no prior involvement in disaster management, who mobilise their volunteers after an emergency (for example, sporting clubs, businesses)
- **Expanding organisations** – have wider missions such as social welfare, but also hold recognised emergency management roles in relief and recovery (for example, Salvation Army)
- **Established organisations** – primary mission and structures are focused directly on emergency management (for example, Surf Life Saving Australia).

In combination with the three levels of association with the community, the five radial sections combine to create 15 categories for spontaneous volunteers.

These categories highlight the value of understanding the degrees of connection that the spontaneous volunteers have to the disaster-affected community and how they are, or are intended to be, organised.

USING THE TYPOLOGY

Each of these five ways of organising responses to disaster, and each of the differing degrees to which these responses have ties to the affected community, come with their own benefits, strengths, risks and weaknesses. Thus, they warrant different considerations in planning.

The dominant image of swarms of disorganised spontaneous volunteers who converge on a disaster site from outside a community sits most comfortably within the two segments of the typology depicting people responding with weak/no ties to the disaster-affected community, either individually/informally or possibly organised through an emergent group. By contrast, in example one (Samaritan's Purse), spontaneous volunteers with strong ties to the affected community mobilised through an expanding organisation with no previous ties to the community (Samaritan's Purse) that was supported by an extending organisation with strong community ties (Salt Church). In example two (Lismore Helping Hands), spontaneous volunteers mobilised within the affected community and with strong ties to it, and they were organised through an emergent group.

The typology's inclusion in the AIDR Handbook can help emergency planners from a range of organisations to distinguish, and thus prepare for, different forms of spontaneous volunteering that may otherwise be conflated together within an overly narrow, dominant image of what this diverse phenomenon looks like, its risks, coordination needs, and impacts.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Emergency Volunteering Shared Learning Network was established in 2018 in association with the *Enabling sustainable emergency volunteering* study as an avenue for managers, volunteers and researchers – irrespective of their organisational affiliations – to share their knowledge and experience with emergency volunteering. Spontaneous volunteering is a key area of focus for the network. For more information and to register to join the network please visit https://emergencyvolunteering.wordpress.com/about or email the author.

FURTHER READING

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (2018), *Communities Responding to Disasters: Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers Handbook*, Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience, Melbourne.

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