



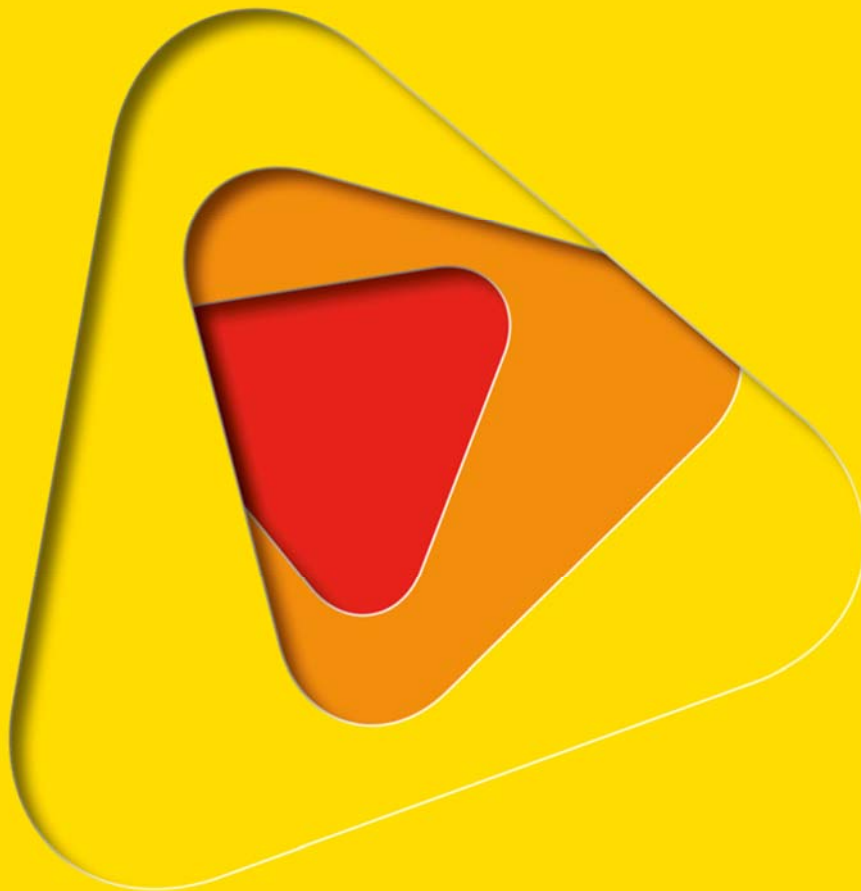
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF CITIZEN-LED RECOVERY IN POST- DISASTER SETTINGS

Non-peer reviewed research proceedings from the Bushfire and Natural
Hazards CRC & AFAC conference
Brisbane, 30 August – 1 September 2016

Joshua Whittaker^{1 2}

1. RMIT University
2. Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

Corresponding author: joshua.whittaker@rmit.edu.au





Version	Release history	Date
1.0	Initial release of document	30/08/2016



Australian Government
**Department of Industry,
 Innovation and Science**

Business
 Cooperative Research
 Centres Programme

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International Licence.



Disclaimer:

RMIT University and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC advise that the information contained in this publication comprises general statements based on scientific research. The reader is advised and needs to be aware that such information may be incomplete or unable to be used in any specific situation. No reliance or actions must therefore be made on that information without seeking prior expert professional, scientific and technical advice. To the extent permitted by law, RMIT University and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC (including its employees and consultants) exclude all liability to any person for any consequences, including but not limited to all losses, damages, costs, expenses and any other compensation, arising directly or indirectly from using this publication (in part or in whole) and any information or material contained in it.

Publisher:

Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

August 2016



INTRODUCTION

The rise of resilience thinking has seen a significant shift in responsibility for risk. Citizens are now expected to take greater responsibility for managing their own risks and are afforded more opportunities for participating in risk management processes. This shift is driven by recognition of the considerable knowledge and agency that exist among citizens, but also the diminished role of the state in service provision. This paper considers the complexities of a citizen-led, place-based recovery project initiated following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in south-eastern Australia. This innovative project aimed to provide practical assistance to people whose homes were destroyed by bushfire to enable them to begin the rebuilding process. A key strength of the project was that it was initiated and implemented by local people to meet specific local needs. As members of the affected community, project participants were able to draw on local knowledge, networks and resources to achieve their goals, and were highly responsive to changing local conditions. However, participants experienced significant difficulties in their interactions with official agencies and entanglements with bureaucratic processes and procedures. As local people, the strain of assisting affected people to rebuild and recover was also considerable. These findings reinforce the need to better assist and support community members who choose to participate in emergency and disaster management but are unfamiliar with bureaucratic processes and procedures, or the challenges of the post-disaster phase. It is also necessary to consider how to simplify processes and procedures to maximise community participation. Failure to do so may encourage people to circumvent formal processes, for better or worse.

BACKGROUND

Citizen participation is a key principle of disaster risk reduction and resilience building. Participatory approaches were central to the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015, which declared that ‘communities and local authorities should be empowered to manage and reduce disaster risk by having access to the necessary information, resources and authority to implement actions for disaster risk reduction’ (UNISDR 2005, p. 5). Its successor, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, calls for ‘empowerment and inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory participation’, noting that ‘special attention should be paid to the improvement of organised voluntary work of citizens’ (UNISDR 2015, p.13). In Australia, the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience identifies ‘Empowering individuals and communities to exercise choice and take responsibility’ as a key priority (COAG 2011, p.10). Priority outcomes include that recovery strategies ‘are developed in partnership with communities and account for long-term local needs’ and ‘recognise the assistance the community is likely to provide in the immediate recovery phase, and allow for the identification, facilitation and coordination of the community resources’ (COAG 2011, pp. 13-14).

Of course, citizen participation in emergency and disaster management is not a new phenomenon. Research has shown that people and communities tend to become more cooperative and cohesive in times of crisis, often working together to overcome individual and collective challenges (e.g. Fritz and Mathewson, 1957; Stallings and Quarantelli, 1985; Perry and Lindell, 2004; Helsloot and Ruitenber, 2004). Increasingly, the often important roles played by informal volunteers before, during and after emergencies and disasters are being recognised (e.g. Scanlon *et*



al. 2014; Whittaker *et al.* 2015). Informal volunteers work outside of formal emergency and disaster management arrangements to help others who are at risk or are affected by emergencies and disasters. They may volunteer as individuals or as part of a group, on a short or longer-term basis, regularly or irregularly, and in situ or ex situ. Their participation may be spontaneous and unplanned, or deliberate and carefully planned. There are a range of opportunities and challenges associated with the participation of informal volunteers during emergencies and disasters (see Whittaker *et al.* 2015).

COMMUNITY ON GROUND ASSISTANCE

Community On Ground Assistance (COGA) was a citizen-initiated project that provided assistance to people who experienced property damage as a result of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, Australia. The project was funded by the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF) and utilised a workforce of qualified, paid employees and corporate volunteers. COGA assisted eligible individuals, couples and families to undertake a range of activities including: dangerous tree removal; removal of re-growth; property clean-up to enable rebuilding to start; cutting and splitting of fire affected trees for wood heating; minor fire-related earthworks; carpentry and building-related tasks; rebuilding and recovery planning and advice; referral to other relevant services; technical advice; and assistance and advocacy with occupancy permits.

The goal of the case study was to better understand the key characteristics, processes, activities and outcomes of the COGA project. It sought to learn from the experiences and perspectives of those involved in the project. It provides insights into the potential opportunities and challenges for undertaking community-led initiatives in the disaster recovery phase. The findings will be valuable for emergency management organisations and other government and non-government organisations that are working towards more localised, community-based approaches to community safety and engagement.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with: COGA founders and team members; corporate volunteers; COGA clients; state and local government officials; and representatives of auspice organisations. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo v.10 was used to manage interview data and assist the analysis. A coding framework was developed, setting out the categories into which segments of interview text could be grouped to enable closer analysis and comparison. Interview data was supplemented by additional, secondary data from: COGA documents; annual and other reports of relevant government agencies; annual and other reports of auspice organisations; and media reports.

Key findings from the analysis include:

- **Relationships with other agencies:** COGA had strong ties to a number of organisations, including the Salvation Army and numerous community and faith-based organisations, which provided initial funding and support. Project members received considerable support from a number of officials with government agencies. However, over time, project members became frustrated by their relationships with some government agencies and officials. Participants believed that the focus shifted from helping clients to fulfilling bureaucratic requirements.



- **Benefits and impacts:** By undertaking tasks such as tree removal, property clean up, and the provision of technical advice and building services, the project helped people begin to rebuild. However, the projects impacts were not just physical. The 'person-centered approach' that was adopted meant that the project also had significant psychological or emotional benefits for clients.
- **Key strengths:** COGA was a highly innovative, community-initiated project designed to meet specific local needs. A key strength of the project was its holistic, client-centered approach.
- **Challenges:** COGA participants were challenged by their relationships with some agencies and officials, who they believed questioned their motivations and integrity. They also felt overburdened by reporting and other bureaucratic requirements. Some community members were disgruntled because they had been deemed ineligible to receive support.

IMPLICATIONS

The COGA project highlights some of the opportunities and challenges associated with citizen-led initiatives in post-disaster settings. A key strength of the project was that it was initiated and implemented by local people, who drew on local knowledge, networks and resources to achieve their goals. However, as local people, the strain of assisting affected people to rebuild and recover was considerable. Decisions regarding eligibility were particularly difficult. Relationships with some officials and the burden of reporting and other requirements also challenged the project. These findings reinforce the need to better assist and support community members who choose to participate in emergency and disaster management but are unfamiliar with bureaucratic processes and procedures, or the challenges of the post-disaster phase. It is also necessary to consider how to simplify processes and procedures to maximise community participation. Failure to do so may encourage people to circumvent formal processes, for better or worse.



REFERENCES

- Council of Australian Governments (2011) National Strategy for Disaster Resilience: building our nation's resilience to disasters. Available at: https://www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/national_strategy_disaster_resilience.pdf [last accessed 22 February 2016].
- Fritz, C.E., Mathewson, J.H. (1957) Convergence behaviour in disasters: a problem of social control. Publication 476. Committee on Disaster Studies. National Academy of Sciences – National Research Council, Washington D.C.
- Helsloot, I., Ruitenbergh, A. (2004) Citizen response to disasters: a survey of literature and some practical implications. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 12, pp. 98-111.
- Perry, R.W., Lindell, M.K. (2003) Understanding citizen response to disasters with implications for terrorism. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 11, pp. 49-60.
- Scanlon, J., Helsloot, J., Groenendaal, J. (2014) Putting it all together: integrating ordinary people into emergency response. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 32 (1), pp. 43-63.
- Stallings, R.A., Quarantelli, E.L. (1985) Emergent citizen groups and emergency management. *Public Administration Review* 45, pp. 93-100.
- United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2005) Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the resilience of nations and communities to disaster. Available at: <http://www.unisdr.org/2005/wcdr/intergover/official-doc/L-docs/Hyogo-framework-for-action-english.pdf> [last accessed 22 February 2016].
- United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2015) Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. Available at: http://www.preventionweb.net/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf [last accessed 22 February 2016].
- Whittaker, J., McLennan, B., Handmer, J. (2015) A review of informal volunteerism in emergencies and disasters: definition, opportunities and challenges. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 13, pp. 358-68.