

Rhetoric or Reality: Coordination in a Time of Crisis



The 2009 Victorian Bushfires and 2011 Queensland Floods in Focus

Executive Summary of Doctoral Project Outcomes

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Understanding the Context of Disaster Management in Australia

In recent years Australia has experienced a number of significant natural disasters, which have placed a clear focus on how governments at different levels respond to these events. Large scale natural disasters represent a significant test of the public sector's ability to respond in a coordinated and efficient way in the face of adversity. This comes against a backdrop in Australia where trust in government from its citizens continues to decline. The public retain high expectations of government's ability to plan, prepare and respond to disasters. Crises are also occurring not in a vacuum but where changes in the public sector mean that whole of government, or connected forms of working are a highly pervasive mantra. Crisis responses oblige the different layers of government: political, bureaucratic and operational response agencies to work collectively to confront these events.

Towards a New Model of Understanding Disaster Management

This research explored the responses to two events: the 2009 Victorian bushfires and the 2011 Queensland floods by understanding how each state confronted each disaster and how they can be seen to epitomise the challenges of crisis management in Australia. The research specifically framed the understanding of these events through a model (below) that includes the following factors: whole of government, crisis management, leadership, coordination, organisational culture, social capital and institutions. These factors were central in meditating the responses and outcomes of these crisis episodes.



Key Research Findings

1. Operationalising Whole of Government

Although strong commitments have been expressed around whole of government working, it is often a difficult construct to operationalise across departments and agencies. The lack of incentive or motivation around connecting across agencies represents a crucial hurdle to collaborative working.

2. Whole of Government Complexity

Implementing whole of government across different strands of government such as: political, bureaucratic and operational is complex, given that each strand brings a different world view and emphasis on collaboration.



3. Crises are Unique

Crises provide the necessary imperative and sense of urgency in which to engender connected forms of working. During a crisis, there is recognition of a store of collective goodwill where 'turf wars' are put aside for the greater common good.

4. Visible Leadership

Direct responses from the executive leadership are important to provide authority and mandate but also to meet public expectations around leadership 'on the ground' as events are unfolding.

5. Coordination Built in 'Peace Time'

There is strong recognition of the need to have coordination mechanisms in place during 'peace time', and leveraged during a crisis. Having these structures in place, which facilitate consistent and informative dialogue between all parties, is seen as a pre-condition to improve integration.

6. Community Resilience at the Heart

Enhancing community resilience must remain a focal point of mitigation and response activities. There is a need to consider how phenomena, such as urbanization and changing demographics, impact on the ability to be resilient in the face of major events.



7. Organisation Culture in Action

There is recognition that there needs to be closer collaboration between operational agencies to improve integration, with strong advocacy for an emergency management doctrine, that recognises that overall system coordination is as important as the response of individual agencies.

8. Disaster Management Arrangements the Bedrock

Legislative frameworks around disaster management provide the tangible structure around coordination mechanisms in states. There is a strong requirement, however to juxtapose legislative frameworks against the need to act flexibly in the face of emerging crises.