

# Connecting learning from a world of emergency experience

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In October, RedR Australia invited professionals with diverse experience in both the Australian emergency management sector and international humanitarian assistance to share what lessons can be drawn from these different contexts.

The workshop, held in Naarm (Melbourne) on Wurundjeri Country, brought together disaster and crisis response practitioners from a wide range of disciplines. Participants were drawn from RedR Australia's vast network of humanitarian deployees and trainers who had experience working and volunteering with organisations including AFAC, Australian Red Cross, Country Fire Authority, Emergency Management Victoria, Fire Rescue Victoria, State Emergency Services, Victoria Police, and state and local governments.

RedR Australia's CEO Dr Helen Durham said the workshop provided an opportunity to share knowledge across agencies and disciplines.

'The emergency sector in Australia delivers valuable work. As international humanitarians, we have also seen great examples of disaster management from around the world. So today has been all about bringing together diverse views', she said.

Interactions were lively, with many participants recognising the need for knowledge sharing and discussion in this area. There is an appetite for further opportunities to unpack transferable lessons between international humanitarian practice and the Australian experience.

## Starting the conversation

An exploratory approach gave participants the opportunity to shape discussions. An online survey was circulated prior to the workshop to identify areas of interest for participants and the greatest opportunities for learning.

Throughout the workshop, participants worked in small groups and engaged in open discussion on their chosen topics. A series of facilitated discussions and prioritisation exercises were then applied to refine and define key lessons and recommendations.

RedR Australia will share these findings to support continuous improvements for emergency responders and the communities they work with.

## Themes and recommendations

### People-centred approach is best practice

Affected people should always be placed at the centre of humanitarian action, with a heavy emphasis on the need for community participation and ensuring responders are held accountable by the people they seek to assist. This emphasis draws on core humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality, and a human rights-based approach that recognises that the inherent dignity of affected people and the right to minimum standards of assistance.

This contrasts with the evolution of Australian emergency management practice and its traditional emphasis on hazards and immediate response. Investment in training, resources and standardised coordination systems for response should be balanced with relief requirements and ensuring that the needs of affected people are met.

Some reflections and recommendations:

- While communications to the public are generally effective in Australia, greater emphasis on 2-way communication and engagement would benefit the response. This will empower communities to act, contribute and hold responding agencies to account.
- More humility before community is needed and a greater willingness to learn from experience, knowledge and practices of First Nations peoples. This includes the need for 'slow-listening' to build relationships and trust.



The workshop was a forum for discussions between people in the humanitarian and emergency management sectors.

Image: RedR Australia

- There is a need for better cultural competency and inclusion practices. Response and relief efforts need to genuinely improve engagement with multicultural communities and consideration for people living with disability. This is something that humanitarian practice continues to prioritise across all roles and through dedicated projects.
- Replicate the coordinated assessment and analysis of affected people's immediate and longer-term needs. This is a standard process in both humanitarian and domestic emergency management in other countries that includes the diverse needs of affected people and makes the collection of sex, age and disability disaggregated data a standard.

### Enhanced contribution from non-government organisations

The Australian emergency management sector is characterised by strong government leadership at all levels with formal plans laying out detailed roles and responsibilities. While these characteristics are generally positive, they can limit the participation of non-government organisations and the community.

The rigidity of a hierarchical approach to emergency management can inhibit meaningful input from the non-government sector that has a great deal to offer, such as connection to community, international experience and a diversity of perspectives.

An empowered and coordinated non-government role in Australian emergency management could foster increased

flexibility and innovation through diverse expertise and stronger connection to community. It could also create an imperative for consistent approaches, particularly to relief and recovery, as non-government organisations work across many communities could advocate effectively for harmonisation.

Additional recommendations:

- A shift in the coordination of relief and recovery is needed away from the traditional hierarchical command-and-control structures used in response operations (e.g. AIIIMS) towards inclusive, systems-based approaches that allow for meaningful participation of non-government organisations and communities.
- Stronger coordinated advocacy from non-government organisations is needed. Speaking with one voice (e.g. through the Australian Council of Social Services and state or territory bodies), non-government organisations can advance best practice accrued from domestic and international experience.
- Improving emergency management training and systems for non-government organisations not typically playing key roles in the emergency management sector will strengthen their ability to meaningfully participate. Similarly, community-focused government departments and agencies would benefit from specialised training.
- Improve mapping of government and non-government organisations in preparedness to better understand available resources and services.

## Relevance of extensive global standards and resources

Humanitarian organisations have developed a range of international standards and guidance documents that could be valuable in the Australian context. To date, this extensive pool of resources has been left largely untouched. Workshop participants related stories of Australian agencies paying for the development of guidance that replicated resources that already existed in multiple languages.

The international nature of these resources means they are designed to work in diverse contexts and require little or no adaptation for use in Australia. The most significant barriers seem to be awareness of their existence and differences in terminology, both of which can be easily overcome.

Similarly, standardised tools and approaches to inter-agency coordination and information management for relief and recovery are also available. These typically place an emphasis on open and transparent access to information for all agencies at all levels, which enables a decentralised approach to situational awareness and decision-making.

Existing international guidance, standards and resources are available, and have direct relevance to Australian emergency management covering:

- communication and accountability to affected people, including with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- community participation and feedback mechanisms
- evacuation centre management and other services for displaced people
- minimum standards for relief assistance
- inter-agency information sharing and coordination tools
- coordinated, inter-agency needs assessment and analysis
- surge capacity systems, standards and frameworks
- role of the military in emergency response and relief
- training, simulations and preparedness for relief operations
- ensuring safety and wellbeing of children and other vulnerable groups
- addressing sexual and gender-based violence in emergencies and response operations
- psycho-social support for people affected by crises
- integrating gender, disability, age and environmental considerations
- planning and delivering assistance in dynamic contexts with unclear timelines
- legal and institutional preparedness to receive international assistance.

## Moving forward

The workshop was initiated by RedR Australia and the findings and recommendations will be used to guide further work to connect and learn across the emergency management and international humanitarian sectors.

The recommendations identified by participants as being the most important and most easily adopted in Australia:

1. Promote the use of global standards and guidance within Australia.
2. Introduce coordinated assessment of the needs of affected people, based on a recognition of the diversity of the population and the holistic impact of the emergency.
3. Improve and expand emergency management training for organisations not typically involved.
4. Improve situational awareness for relief and recovery by using inter-agency information management tools and systems used in humanitarian response.
5. Strengthen coordinated advocacy from the non-government sector through dedicated forums that promote learning from international experiences.

Workshop coordinator Peter Grzic was excited to bring together experts with valuable experience.

‘Today, lots of people commented that this is a much-needed forum, so I’m hoping this will be the start of a long journey of knowledge sharing’, he said.

RedR Australia trains and deploys technical experts to support humanitarian operations around the world. With more than 30 years’ experience as a humanitarian organisation and a stand-by partner to the United Nations, RedR Australia builds greater knowledge and learning between the international and domestic emergency management sectors. This workshop demonstrated that there is more to say and more to learn.



Workshop participants shared experiences and lessons to identify further work.

Image: RedR Australia