

## ABSTRACT

The national recovery principles state that disaster recovery should be community-led. However, reports from various recovery processes in Australia and overseas consistently identify that governments too often, in practice, do not support this. This research examines ways in which governments can enable communities to lead their recovery after emergency events. This is a preliminary report of a continuing study. To date, semi-structured interviews have been held with over 20 experienced individuals about their involvement in community recovery. Participants are community members from disaster-affected communities, government employees from all levels of government and across departments, and representatives from community sector organisations. These preliminary results show the complex interplay between communities, governments, and community sector organisations in disaster recovery, and the varying expectations and experiences of those involved. These initial findings show potential to influence policies, processes and systems across governments and communities, and better support community-led recovery.

# How can governments enable and support community-led disaster recovery?

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## Introduction

Community recovery is complex, involving multiple players with competing priorities and expectations acting in highly stressful situations (Mooney *et al.* 2011, Ryan, Wortley & Ni Shí 2016). Archer and colleagues (2015) found that there is little peer-reviewed literature relating to recovery; the bulk of material relating to 'good recovery' is in the grey literature, is difficult to find and is not comprehensive. While it is common practice for governments to release reports evaluating specific recovery efforts, there is a sense that these are often sanitised. Candid contributions by all parties, including government employees, are rare.

Both Archer and colleagues (2015) and Winkworth (2007) identified the importance of community-led recovery. However, tensions remain between government-led and community-led recovery activities. Further consideration needs to be given to the relationships between these approaches (Archer *et al.* 2015, Drennan, McGowan & Tiernan 2016)

The national recovery principles state that disaster recovery should be community-led (Community and Disability Services Ministers Advisory Council 2009). This is echoed by most state and territory emergency management frameworks and plans. While frameworks and emergency management plans can provide overarching principles and directions, the underlying assumption is that these documents exist in a government and political system that is unified, coherent and stable. In reality, such static documents exist in an environment that is influenced by ever-changing contexts, political imperatives and the experiences, expectations and priorities of those involved.

This paper gives a brief synopsis of some of the themes emerging from the research to date. A larger study will contextualise and test the concept of community-led recovery and examine ways in which governments can enable and support community-led disaster recovery. The study will consider the complex interplay between governments, community sector organisations and affected communities. To date, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 20 individuals who are, or have been, involved in community recovery from a number of Australian events over several decades. The primary concern of this study is the subjective experiences of participant understandings and knowledge of community recovery.

Palmer (2001) states that much of the academic literature in emergency and disaster research uses a positivist approach and ignores the complexity, power relationships and ambiguities that exist. Using qualitative methods

including data gathering through semi-structured interviews acknowledges that everyone experiences recovery differently and brings to their experiences their individual history, preconceptions and interpretations. Participants answered questions about their understandings of recovery, the roles and responsibilities of government, communities and community sector organisations as well as any lessons learnt.

Participants were community members from disaster-affected communities, government employees from all levels of government and across departments and representatives from community organisations. They were recruited non-randomly, using a snowball technique, accessed initially through members of the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee's National Social Recovery Reference Group (SRRG) that encouraged its networks to participate. The method for recruiting participants could be considered to bias the sample, in that SRRG members are government representatives for their jurisdiction. However, SRRG members encouraged a wide cohort of people to participate offering a diversity of views, including those critical of government actions. These participants also suggested others for interview.

The data gathered was analysed using Nvivo software. Common themes were drawn out that related to understandings of community recovery and the expectations of the roles and responsibilities of governments, particularly state and local governments.

## Community recovery and community-led recovery

There are many different understandings of what community recovery is and, more specifically, what community-led recovery is. The majority of participants in this research, aside from those employed in emergency management, said they had not really considered these questions until the emergency or disaster happened. Their understanding of recovery developed as they were immersed in the process. This included government participants who had been brought into a unit or taskforce from other government services after a disaster.

*To be honest, I had no idea what community recovery was...it really wasn't on the radar, so ...it was breaking new ground as we went.*  
(Community participant)

*I've managed plenty of projects and I've worked with communities. I've never worked in emergency or recovery before so I went from having very little understanding other than probably an intuitive sense of what it might be.*  
(Government participant)

In terms of community-led recovery, participant responses fell into one of two viewpoints. One was that communities did not necessarily have the capacity, knowledge or skills to lead the recovery process, at least initially, because of disruption and trauma. Many

government participants reported feeling a sense of responsibility to 'get the ball rolling' by drawing on experience and knowledge of previous recovery efforts and establishing structures and services that communities were likely to need. For example, one government participant said:

*I entirely accept the premise... but actually, disentangling the waffle is really important... Because community-led recovery does not mean standing back and having people who've just had all their houses and property and whatever destroyed. You've got to intervene in particular ways that work for them and establish systems and processes that work for them and with them. But it's a bit of a tightrope, particularly in those early days.*  
(Government participant)

Another government participant thought governments should provide the 'scaffolding' for community-led recovery given that most communities may not have been through disasters before and were inexperienced in what support might be needed. Government participants, at both local and state levels, spoke of the need for governments to be involved to smooth over or address fractured relationships in communities.

*Community-led recovery is great provided the community has the necessary tools to be able to lead its own recovery. You need certain skillsets to be able to plan, to get people together, to manage conflict ... and lots of our emergencies happen in fairly isolated places where you don't have a pool of people to pull from. You might not have that necessary skillset.*  
(Government participant)

The other view was that communities were the obvious leaders of recovery from the moment of the emergency event. Community participants in particular said that community members and groups are usually the first responders and gave examples of the processes and activities communities put in place to support recovery from the outset. Several community participants were of the view that the arrival of 'help' from government can actually be a hindrance and that government 'interference' can sometimes fracture relationships and harm communities, albeit inadvertently. Interestingly, some government respondents recounted similar experiences.

Specific examples of governments 'taking over' were given by three community members who work for local community services from two communities that had experienced floods. They expressed dismay that local and state government-provided services disregarded existing structures and plans and people did not consult or involve local service providers who had a good knowledge of their communities.

One community sector participant reported that local and state government service providers had arrived in the town the week after the event and had taken over their building as the recovery centre. This was without

consultation or consideration of the impact on existing clients.

*The lady from the Council said that this building would be a great building for the recovery centre and she instructed me to cancel all our bookings in our meeting rooms, our youth centre and our playroom. We had regular people and services in there. We had to ring them the next day and cancel them indefinitely for two to three months. The disaster team took over the youth centre, which has two offices... and the big meeting rooms here. We were told by Council 'you do your thing and let us do ours, don't interfere'. They wouldn't let us in the meeting room.*

(Community sector participant)

The participant also spoke about the frustration of the effect of new services coming into the town without consideration of existing local knowledge, experience or services.

*We've got over 20 services [operating from the centre]. All those services were duplicated by government services. None of them knew the local area; none of them knew the local services.*

(Community sector participant)

Another community sector participant was concerned about the transition from locally established recovery services and specialised government recovery services.

*It was all working fine for the first week but then when the recovery centre started opening up and all the services went in there, and I totally understand the need for it and the role and everything else, and I'm really grateful that it comes with the level of support and backing that it does, but it was not an easy transition. The community did not like going to the recovery centre. It wasn't warm. They had to retell their story.*

(Community sector participant)

Not all participants were negative about government involvement. Examples were given of successful partnerships between governments (local and state) and communities. Some participants suggested that recovery worked best when governments led from behind or 'sidled up alongside the community', as one participant said. An example was given by a community participant who reflected that the state's recovery unit had given him the mandate, support and encouragement he needed to chair the local recovery committee, which had set up a good process for community-led recovery.

*'B' was the overriding woman involved from the government agencies and there were three of us community members who weren't affected... so we could lead the recovery forward. And it was to her credit, I suppose, that even though she was the boss, she made me the chairman of that recovery committee.*

(Community sector participant)

However, the question also arose about the process of nominating people for community recovery committees; who should be on them and how representative of

the community they were. For example, a community participant said:

*I probably don't want to say too much about [the] community recovery committee. In my humble opinion, it wasn't particularly representative of the community. A lot of the people who ended up on the community recovery committee were just government appointees. People who were very happy to acquiesce to what government was doing.*

(Community sector participant)

## What is a community?

This leads to what is probably the most fundamental question in relation to community recovery: 'what is a community?' There is no single perspective. This was recognised, particularly by government participants, with many stating that local communities are complex and often not of one accord. A government participant said:

*There's a sort of a myth that communities are cohesive, that they have, if you like, a shared perspective. Often communities are quite fractured [before a disaster] but you don't notice it because people just get on separately doing their own thing.*

(Government participant)

The notion of 'squeaky wheels' came up a number of times; that is, people whose voices are heard often on quite specific issues and who are able to get the attention of others in the community or in government. A community participant said:

*There's always somebody that thinks [the support given] is not good enough. They look back and say 'why didn't I get this, why didn't I get that?' I know it's always the case of the squeaky wheel gets the oil and we noticed that back in the flood.*

(Community sector participant)

Inequities within communities in terms of participation in community life came up as a reason for friction. Another government participant said:

*...within the community there are the people that regard themselves as the 'doers' and that's part of their identity, and they distance themselves from that portion of the community that they perceive could be doing a bit more around the place. So, without wanting to paraphrase Joe Hockey's 'lifters and leaners,' you could see it there.*

(Government participant)

A number of participants identified that community divisions arose relating to the provision of financial assistance to people who weren't insured. A government participant said:

*I think the thing that surprised me was the strength of the feeling of moral hazard, the idea that you as a government would pay for people who hadn't bothered to get insurance was stronger than I thought, and it trumped the community sense that we look after our vulnerable.*

(Government participant)

The need to look after vulnerable groups in the community was identified by several participants, particularly those from government and the community sector. They talked of the need for government involvement and leadership to ensure that the most disadvantaged people in communities were considered in recovery efforts.

*As a department, our business is about vulnerability... So the most vulnerable or groups with vulnerabilities, like public housing, child protection, disability support... we reach into lots of service systems to get a sense of that vulnerability.*  
(Government participant)

*Our tenancy worker was dealing with homeless people that were actually homeless before the floods that got wiped out anyway, but because they actually weren't in a building they didn't get assistance.*  
(Community sector participant)

## Coordination

One role of government identified by many participants was to coordinate across government departments, other levels of government, community sector organisations and the community. The practice of establishing a specific taskforce, or working with a recovery unit centrally located in the state government, was identified as a key element of a good recovery process. Bringing together several departments into one unit was seen to improve knowledge about, and coordination between, services already in existence.

Having a central unit was seen to help communities to access services and support. Many participants, again across sectors, stated that community members are often unaware of the services and support available to them. A community participant expressed the role of government:

*Obviously they've got that pool of all the agencies – Housing, Families, Red Cross and all that, which the community itself hasn't got the contact details for, and that's what they do in 'peace time', they set all those things up. ... [For] both these major events, the flood and the fire, right from the start there's a lot of.. organisations getting involved... and they drop off as their job is done or as things develop. The ones that are still involved have certainly got the work there to do. You always think, are there too many public servants in the state, or in Australia, and most who answer would say 'yes' but you know, when the need arises...well, there's never enough.*  
(Community sector participant)

## Conclusion

The issues that emerged in this research highlight the complexity of the recovery process as well as communities. The experiences of participants from communities, different levels of governments and

community sector organisations reflects this complexity. There are no easy answers to the question of how governments can best support community-led recovery. However, some preliminary suggestions could include that governments are transparent with communities about possibilities and constraints, listen to the diversity of views in a community, ensure that those who are vulnerable have a voice and are looked out for and that community strengths and assets are acknowledged and built upon.

The participants interviewed for this study have generously and thoughtfully reflected on their experiences. All, regardless of whether they were from government, the community or the community sector, showed immense goodwill and a strong commitment to helping disaster-affected communities. The willingness of participants to consider ways that processes and systems can be improved provides potential for rich research, policy and practice in this area.

## References

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## About the author

**Carole Owen** was out-posted to the Tasmanian Bushfire Recovery Unit in 2013 to lead the Department of Health and Human Services recovery programs. A former resident of the bushfire-affected area, Carole became interested in the relationships between community and government. Her PhD research examines how governments can better support community-led recovery.