Beyond capturing: implementing lessons learnt from the June 2021 severe weather event in Victoria

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In the wake of the severe weather event that ravaged much of Victoria in June 2021, the question must be asked as to what challenges and opportunities exist for Victoria's fledgling lesson management framework. This paper discusses these challenges and opportunities from the standpoint of 2 emergency management practitioners.

Climate change is well understood. The reality is unfortunate but now unavoidable and bushfires will increase in severity and there will be a reduction in time between significant bushfire events.[1] But what are the climate change implications for other severe weather events, such as storms? Extremes will be increasingly seen across the weather spectrum including droughts, floods, storms and bushfires.[2] Australia must prepare for a bleak reality punctuated by increased occurrences of all types of severe weather events. The June 2021 severe weather event provided essential learnings that must be integrated within Victoria's emergency management framework.

In November 2015, the Victorian Government adopted the sector-wide lessons management framework known as EM-LEARN.[3] This framework has been well tested within the bushfire context and has, at face value, proven valuable. However, Victoria has been long exposed to crippling bushfires and lessons have been captured, if not learnt, time and time again, long before the implementation of the EM-LEARN framework.

The storms of June 2021 were unprecedented, yet they will be surpassed in severity in the future. The emergency sector has captured dozens of valuable learnings from storms that crippled Victoria in ways bushfire seldom does. Bushfire typically affects regional Victoria and, to an extent, the rural-urban fringe of metropolitan Melbourne, making severe weather events a faraway thought for many Melbournians. However, the storms demonstrated that Melbourne is not without its vulnerabilities

with many suburbs suffering compromised critical infrastructure and widespread damage. Tens of thousands of people in Melbourne were caught unprepared for the storm, a precious lesson for agencies and the community alike. For the community, it demonstrated a need for enhanced resilience and reduced reliance on emergency services agencies and authorities. While this serves as an overarching lesson, it is impossible to simply build community resilience, as resilience is typically the product of multiple small-scale exposures. This may serve as the ultimate test of the EM-LEARN framework, likely a test that would challenge, if not overwhelm, the best lessons management framework.

In the wake of any emergency, the words 'lessons learnt' and 'lessons captured' punctuate every after-action review, often seemingly to no long-term benefit. This is due to several reasons, not least the relative immaturity of the lessons management framework within the emergency services sector. It must be acknowledged, perhaps unpopularly, that emergency management is a burgeoning profession with no form of accreditation or experience required to practice. This begs the question: who is truly best placed to implement lessons learnt? Emergency managers typically deal with rapid and high-consequence periods of perturbation. The reports that emerge in the months and years following the events typically parallel the event's magnitude, resulting in complex recommendations that skirt the line of public safety. Emergency services

agencies and authorities often have little capacity to implement complex recommendations and these recommendations, when implemented, may serve to confuse. Lessons captured, while invaluable, must be segmented into actionable recommendations that are consummate with the capability and capacity of the responsible agencies and authorities. That is, the sector must work with bite-sized pieces.

Within the scope of the June 2021 weather event, it is easy to identify lessons, as there were many. For example, the widespread telecommunication failures greatly hindered the response to the event and highlighted the sector's reliance on telecommunication systems. Likewise, particularly in the case of the township Trentham, the compounding failures of critical infrastructure (electric, road, telecommunications and water) demonstrated that current planning frameworks do not adequately accommodate for compounding failures. These are complex lessons that bridge professional disciplines and industry sectors. Therefore, the relevant recommendations must be actionable, clear and determinate.

The Australian Government has recognised the need for improved telecommunications in emergencies thanks to previous recommendations, with the rollout of the Strengthening Telecommunications Against Natural Disasters scheme.[4] However, not all areas will be serviced by this scheme, either due to failure of qualification or the responsible agency or authority declining involvement. This effectively demonstrates the limitations of recommendations in that they are just that: recommendations with no requirement for compliance beyond the public perception.

The complexity of the weather event degraded the ability to task and coordinate the activities required of the numerous agencies involved. Their ability to create and service a shared picture of the requirements was compromised by difficulties in obtaining, managing and sharing basic data. Local communities were left without clear, comprehensive information and warnings – before, during and after the event. Lessons tend to focus on what went wrong, as opposed to what went right. However, there is an inherent need within the lessons management framework to analyse the successes, partly to make lessons management a positive experience, but also to qualify, replicate and validate the implementation of recommendations resulting from lessons gone. At the time of writing, the final report into the lessons arising from the event has not been published.[5]

One positive observation was the incredible work done by the volunteer Country Fire Authority and Victoria State Emergency Services crews supported by professional staff from those agencies as well as other agencies. The emergency services sector already relies heavily on volunteers during the heat of the summer and is now being called on heavily during the winter months. There are complex lessons to learn from this, but whether they will be learnt, or even considered due to their poor political palatability, is another matter. Volunteers perform an invaluable role in Victoria's emergency management arrangements, particularly their ability to provide surge-capacity. At what stage does an elevated emergency response profile

transition from 'surge-capacity' to business as usual? This is an observation that is unlikely to become a lesson.

Despite the best efforts of Emergency Management Victoria to create a whole-of-sector approach to lessons management through EM-LEARN, there should be questions asked whether the measures in place to evaluate the success of implemented recommendations are truly fit-for-purpose in the all-hazard environment. Is this because the evaluative measures themselves are weak, or because the recommendations are so large that an evaluation would amount to a research thesis?

The challenge for lessons management frameworks is that the June 2021 severe weather event was a true multi-agency event that touched every level of government. Recommendations made must be actionable, pointed and practicable subject to evaluation. Lessons captured from the June 2021 severe weather event must receive widespread implementation within the sector, recognising the complex arrangements that underpinned the response and recovery. The recommendations that will drive this implementation must be fit-for-purpose and the lessons management frameworks must be developed in preparation for a changing climate. Observations indicate nothing less than a thorough commitment from the sector to learning and improving operational practices. However, it will be the works of the next few years, based on practicable lessons, that will truly test the sector's resolve to prepare for all-hazard emergencies in a changing climate. The sector has baked its cake and can eat it too, and everyone can have a slice.

Endnotes

1. Australian Government 2020, *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report.* At: https://naturaldisaster. royalcommission.gov.au [October 2020].

2. Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning 2021, *Victoria's Climate Change Strategy.* At: www.climatechange.vic. gov.au/victorias-climate-change-strategy [October 2020].

3. Emergency Management Victoria 2015, *EM-LEARN Framework.* At: www.emv.vic.gov.au/how-we-help/reviews-and-lessons-management/lessons-management-framework-em-learn [October 2020].

4. Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications 2020, *What is the Government doing to strengthen telecommunications resilience? At: www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/phone/communications-emergencies/strengthen-resilience* [November 2020].

5. Emergency Management Victoria 2021, *Update: Learning Review into June 2021 extreme weather event. At: www.emv.vic. gov.au/news/update-learning-review-into-june-2021-extreme-weather-event* [December 2021].