

New tactics for a new era: how emergency management needs to change



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Our world has entered an age of shocks and disasters. The number of meteorological high-risk events (such as floods and storms) has been rising and the time between them is shortening.¹ Nations around the world have less time to prepare for new shocks and less time to build the financial, administrative and personnel capacity they need for effective responses.

Australia also faces a new era in terms of shocks and disasters. In recent years, there have been multiple fires (including the Darling Downs and Wanneroo bushfires) as well as Category 5 cyclones (such as cyclones Darian in 2022 and Ilsa in 2023). Flooding alone cost \$5 billion² in a year that researchers from the Australian National University labelled a ‘year of opposites’³, yo-yoing between wet and dry. Drought and heat pose major health challenges in rural and urban centres as demonstrated by increasing numbers of hospital emergency visits. Australia, like other nations around the world, has entered a new stage of hazards and it needs new tools to manage and respond to them.

For decades, emergency and disaster management has involved top-down, government-centred approaches that prioritise spending on physical and grey infrastructure after disaster events. That is, we wait until bad things happen and spend money on seawalls, fire trucks and building repairs after the shocks are done. But we can break this cycle.

I have worked with a social enterprise for the past several years doing surveys and fieldwork across Australia and have had conversations with hundreds of residents and business owners. We advocate for a bottom-up approach that is centred on community

resources, especially social capital (the ties between us), along with the places where that social capital is built. These places and spaces that build connection and trust are known as social infrastructure and they include libraries, parks and pubs.

An increasing amount of qualitative and quantitative data shows that our ties to other people (bonding, bridging and linking social capital) influence if we survive and thrive during crisis events. Research on the 2019–20 summer season bushfires⁴ shows that greater social identification with the disaster-affected community, greater continuity of social group ties and greater formation of new social group ties improved outcomes for communities. This finding has emerged from other crises in other nations, including in North America and Japan. How can we build these types of connections between neighbours and other residents?

Parks (linear reserves, cricket grounds, playgrounds), public spaces (community houses, plazas, city halls), places of worship (synagogues, mosques, churches, temples and shrines) and social businesses (coffee shops, video arcades, bowling alleys, bars and pubs) provide spaces where people can connect with others. Our research⁵ underscores that these facilities and places facilitate relationships with people from different groups and beyond the typical close family

and friends networks. These bridging ties are the most critical because, by connecting to people different from ourselves, we gain new insights, information and access to resources.

This may sound commonsense. But, during a recent conference masterclass held in Canberra with more than 60 communication professionals from not-for-profit organisations and government agencies, more than half said that their organisations did not consider social capital in their planning (and a handful said they had never heard of the term). Our analyses of spending from a variety of Australian states and cities show that most disaster-related money flows into large-scale grey infrastructure (bridges, roads and trucks) rather than grassroots activities that foster local connections or research that can better map how strong (or weak) connections really are.

The good news is that social enterprise Resilient Ready and I carried out a 'snapshot' project under the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund.⁶ We had to go out and rent lots of chairs to make space for a lot of people who wanted to discuss the issue. In talking with more than 70 participants in South Australia at the Adelaide forum, about half stated that social capital plays only a small role in their work in planning for and responding to disasters. The numbers were about the same when we asked our audience if they worked with social infrastructure facilities such as libraries, neighbourhood houses and community centres. The forum showed there is much work to be done.

Positive change requires leaders to 'lean in' and try something new. We recognise and applaud the SAFECOM⁷ team in doing just that; putting focus on and funding towards the critical role that people connections and the places where people connect bring to the organisations and institutions that try to keep them safe and thriving during shocks.

Findings from the snapshot project, which included surveys, interviews and forums, identified several recommendations for the South Australian (and Australian) emergency management sector. First, let's embrace and strengthen social capital and social infrastructure in everyday life, not wait for a crisis or disaster to bring people together. Several programs can help build social ties ranging from Neighbour Day to local block parties to more elaborate community currency programs that incentivise volunteering. Next, let's develop a unified definition of 'social capital' and 'social infrastructure' so we can all understand and use common terminology in everyday contexts. Agreeing on its importance and then defining social capital will help organisations in and outside of government to prioritise it.

I invite every government department, emergency services organisation and non-government organisation to share relevant data to bring holistic social capital and social

infrastructure measurement to the nation. Let's encourage stakeholders to think differently about their data and how it can contribute to measurement tools and capabilities that will positively change how we prepare and survive future shocks. Ideally, this will let us overlay social capital heatmapping and social infrastructure measurements with risk assessments and vulnerability data.

We cannot make these changes and investments fast enough. In an era of rising temperatures and rising sea levels, we need to help communities be resilient to shocks and disasters. And social capital and social infrastructure can provide low-cost, community-centred ways to do this.

Professor Aldrich visited Australia in March 2023 to work with social enterprise Resilient Ready on delivery of a 'snapshot' project in South Australia.

Endnotes

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6. Disaster Risk Reduction Fund, at <https://nema.gov.au/programs/disaster-risk-reduction-package>.
7. South Australia Fire and Emergency Services Commission, at www.safecom.sa.gov.au/home.