

From community consultation to critical infrastructure resilience: a case study of 3 ‘invitations to responsibility’

Laura Exton¹
Mark Trüdinger¹

1. Civil Defence Emergency Management, Northland Regional Council, Whangārei, Aotearoa New Zealand.



© 2024 by the authors.
License Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, Melbourne, Australia. This is an open source article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>). Information and links to references in this paper are current at the time of publication.

Introduction

In disaster recovery, how do we undertake genuine community consultation, but also create the contexts in which this leads to action and to future systems resilience? In February 2023, New Zealand experienced Cyclone Gabrielle. For Tai Tokerau Northland, this was the largest disaster in a generation and led to the largest recovery the region had coordinated (Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management 2023). A part of preparing the *Regional Recovery Plan* for Northland was community consultation (Trüdinger 2023, 2024). This paper explores how community feedback about lifeline utilities and critical infrastructure led to infrastructure providers responding to the communities with written commitments to rebuild what was destroyed by Cyclone Gabrielle. They also committed to take practical steps towards future resilience. This innovative step was shared with critical infrastructure providers around the country. This paper draws on the idea of ‘invitations to responsibility’, a concept borrowed from the social work and family therapy fields to invite those in positions of power to take accountable actions.

First invitation to responsibility: from community consultation to infrastructure action

More than 300 people participated in the community consultation in Northland, New Zealand, following Cyclone Gabrielle. There was significant damage to roads (450 local roads damaged), power (64,000 customers affected) and telecommunications (30,000 customers) and it was these significant infrastructure assets that were common concerns raised throughout the consultation. These affected individuals, households, families, marae¹, businesses, farmers, community services and more. However, rather than just expecting restoration of service, many respondents asked what the lifeline utilities and critical infrastructure providers were going to do about future resilience in severe weather events.

Cyclone Gabrielle occurred in early February 2023. The local community response moved from response to recovery in late February. On 24 March, only 6 weeks after the event, the Northland Lifelines Group convened. This group comprised critical infrastructure entities that provide essential lifelines services and are named in New Zealand’s legislation as having a legal requirement to ensure continuity of service, even in emergencies. The meeting was about the cyclone, the effects to infrastructure, response plans and actions and lessons identified. While all of these are important to review soon after an emergency,

1. marae – a traditional Māori site containing buildings where significant gatherings occur, often used as civil defence community-led centres during emergencies in Aotearoa New Zealand

that day saw the release of the Initial Recovery Action Plan for Northland. Under the *National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015*², the regional statutory role of Group Recovery Manager across New Zealand holds the legal responsibility to coordinate recovery activities of lifeline utilities during recovery periods. This meant asking the Lifelines Group for their input to the upcoming Regional Recovery Plan, as well as their views on the challenges and requirements for communities to build future resilience.

This discussion took the form of an ‘invitation to responsibility’ where we asked:

If we were to listen to these community voices, to take on this feedback and respond to the challenge about action for future readiness seriously, what would this look like? Would it be possible to meet this challenge from communities with a list of ‘Critical infrastructure commitments’ that we could include in the Recovery Plan?

We borrowed the notion of invitations to responsibility from the field of community work and therapeutic practice, especially working with men around issues of violence (Jenkins 1990).

As a result of the invitation, 6 lifeline utilities committed to at least one specific, achievable action that led to resilience in the short term (3 months), medium term (15 months) and long-term (27 months). These actions were documented as a combined list of ‘critical infrastructure commitments’ in the Regional Recovery Plan (see Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management 2023).

As far as we are aware, this is the first time that a region’s lifeline utilities have worked together in this way and provided a unified approach to critical infrastructure resilience as part of post-disaster recovery in New Zealand. By including the steps taken and still needed for service restoration, as well as the ‘joined up’ list of resilience commitments, the lifeline providers showed they had heard the messages of concern from the customers and communities and that they intended to take action.

Second invitation to responsibility: bringing community voices to an infrastructure conference

In mid-2023, the National Lifelines Council announced the National Lifeline Utilities Forum. This is the pre-eminent gathering of critical infrastructure providers, emergency management practitioners, scientists and governments in New Zealand. This conference was wide-ranging in its content. However, the draft conference programme did not contain 2 major topics: disaster recovery and the voice of communities. A second invitation to responsibility was made where we asked the organisers: ‘If community are

at the heart of emergency management, especially post-disaster recovery, what would it mean if community voices are not present? Is this something you might be interested in doing? If so, how might you go about this?’

To their credit, and testimony to the long-standing relationship of mutual respect between the Lifelines Council and Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management, the conference organisers listened to this feedback and immediately set about finding speakers for each topic.

Unfortunately, the speaker who had been approached to represent communities had to cancel at short notice before the conference. We agreed to present on their behalf with the condition that we could read out the words from community members – in this way, if community members were not present, then at least their voices could be.⁴ While not as ideal as community members being present themselves, we could at least do something towards having community members ‘speak through us, not just to us’ (Denborough 2008, 2012). Here are the community responses we shared.

The following is a selection of deidentified Northland community responses to 3 questions on recovery and resilience.

Q: How were you and your community affected by Cyclone Gabrielle?

Our road and local access routes were closed a number of times (due to trees, slips, silt, flooding). Power went out 3 times – the longest stretch was 32 hours. Our landline was out for 2 weeks, and there were periods where cell phone connectivity was even more patchy than usual ... As a mum of young kids, I felt isolated. Especially as my partner is an essential worker and was away from home, and we had limited ability to communicate.

We had no power for a week and no internet or cell cover for almost 2 weeks. Although we prepared as best we could with water supplies and had a gas cook-top, it was difficult personally as I have a dependant 82-year-old husband. The loss of contact with no internet, cell cover or landline meant we were quite isolated as we live in a rural community. It meant that if I had an emergency with my husband, there was no way for me to make contact with services. The nearest coverage for cell phone contact was close to the hospital!

My mother is medically dependent. Not knowing when or if the power would come on meant a trip to town to organise oxygen and try to get a generator with no luck.

We were cut off from all forms of communication, with cell towers down and no power for 7 days. Not to

2. *National Civil Defence Emergency Management Plan Order 2015*, at www.legislation.govt.nz/regulation/public/2015/0140/latest/DLM6485804.html.

mention our petrol stations not able to take Eftpos, so if you didn't have cash, you couldn't get petrol to go places, or buy food. Our Four Square was put in a position of whether to allow us to 'tick up' our supplies.

The most common issue I have seen is the amount of people who have lost their freezers full of food due to no power (some are still without power).

We lost income at our shop and holiday park. Roothing access impacts delivery of goods to local business centres, business trading and access by customers. Businesses are losing custom; that has a flow-on economic effect to the community.

Q: During the cyclone, and in the days that followed, what did you find most helpful? What were you thankful for? What examples did you see of people helping each other? What is helping your community get through this?

Power companies being clear about their issues and timeframes around resolution.

Thankful for power to keep our fridge on and to continue having hot water.

It was extremely helpful to have internet connectivity to keep up to date with the progress of the storm.

Copper wire [phone line] saved us but considered old tech and we can't upgrade (turned out copper wire helped keep us remain connected).

Grateful for the fantastic work done by power companies and road workers to restore order.

Power companies made amazing effort to get power back on (and therefore cell towers).

This is contrasted by:

Being rural and completely self-sufficient with off-grid power, water and, wastewater made the experience almost painless. We were able to provide refrigeration to our neighbours to preserve their cold and frozen foods as well as charging their devices to keep them in touch with the outside world.

Q: What are your hopes and dreams for your community in the coming months after Cyclone Gabrielle? What does 'recovery' from Cyclone Gabrielle look like to you?

My hope is that infrastructure, roading and communication systems will improve in Northland to ensure the community can endure future catastrophes.

More resilient infrastructure – e.g. power lines underground, prioritising roads on routes that are not at risk of flood or coastal inundation, and improving resilience of infrastructure that has to be in flood plains and coastal areas i.e. avoiding spend on repairs that will only last until the next cyclone.

Need to lobby those organisations who provide services and ask them what they are going to do better next time. People lost food in freezers, couldn't contact doctors, or communicate with support services.

I want to see long-term investment in infrastructure – especially by companies who make profits in NZ; they should be investing into resilient infrastructure. I hope and dream that our roads will be built back better – and I hope that there are better systems put in place for emergency situations – particularly around communication so that we can find out if people are okay.

Redundancy in lifeline services that are essential. Communication and transportation are the highest in my opinion as they are the enablers for Police and FENZ and the other lifelines.

We need better cell phone coverage, which we didn't have for 10 days. How could those that needed help dial 111 if there was no coverage?

Third invitation to responsibility: the 'ethos of obligation'

Providing this input for participants provided a way to share community member experiences of the cyclone and its effects on infrastructure. It reminded the engineers, scientists, emergency managers and council workers 'who was at the heart' of what they do. It also gave a platform for a third invitation to the approximately 300 conference attendees. After sharing the accounts above, we asked, 'Having heard these voices, these stories and these challenges, what steps could you take to improve infrastructure resilience in your regions? And how might you be able to re-orient your organisations to be more available to hearing the voices of those you serve?'

How did these words, and this final invitation to responsibility resonate with the audience? Many attendees approached us afterwards, telling us that bringing the voices of community members into a formal conference reminded them about the context of their work and why their work gave them personal and professional meaning; that their work is linked to their own histories and what they give value to. Some spoke of having a sense of invigoration for their work. Some were visibly moved from reflecting on these links between the communities they work with and their own lives. These were unexpected discussions to be having with water systems designers, road managers and GIS spatial analysts at a formal sectoral conference.

These sentiments were expressed in a comment on the platform that the conference used for posing questions to presenters. This post was the most 'up-voted' (questions or comments that conference participants said they wanted spoken from the stage / raised with presenters) across the 2 days of the conference:



Bringing the voice of communities to the conference was a step towards what Eva Ziarek (2001) calls the ‘ethos of alterity’ or the ‘ethos of responsibility’ – drawing on questions such as, ‘what obligations might we whose voices are heard, or who have access to various platforms, or walk with privilege, have? And what are we doing about it?’ We find these questions to be profoundly invigorating in our work.

Final invitations to the field

The final invitations we’d like to extend are to recovery managers. Given that much of recovery work is advocacy, how might you ‘skill up’ in being able to invite decision-makers and those that hold power to take steps to be accountable to the communities they serve? What ‘invitations to responsibility’ have you made to recovery stakeholders, government and programme partners and what was the outcome? And how might you capture these stories and circulate them so that other recovery managers can learn from the actions you’ve taken? We welcome recovery practitioners contacting us who are interested in these explorations and extending on this practice together.

Acknowledgments

Thanks is extended to Graeme MacDonald, Louisa Gritt, Kelly Stratford, the Northland CDEM team, the Māori Relationships Team and the Cyclone Gabrielle Recovery Governance Group for their support. Special thanks to Lisa Roberts and Roger Fairclough for including the presentations in the National Lifeline Utilities Forum 2023. Appreciation to Tanya Newman for critical feedback on this paper. All opinions and ideas expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Northland CDEM group.

References

- Denborough D (2008) *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Denborough D (2012) ‘A storyline of collective narrative practice: A history of ideas, social projects, and partnerships’, *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1):40–65.
- Jenkins A (1990) *Invitations to Responsibility: The therapeutic engagement of men who are violent and abusive*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management / Te Rākau Whakamarumarū o Te Tai Tokerau (2023) *Regional Recovery Plan for Northland – Cyclone Gabrielle* | Te Mahere Whakaoranga o Te Tai Tokerau Cyclone Gabrielle. Whāngārei, New Zealand: Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management | Te Rākau Whakamarumarū o Te Tai Tokerau website www.wdc.govt.nz/Council/Council-documents/Plans/Northland-Recovery-Plan.

Trüdinger M (Ed.) (2023) *Cyclone Gabrielle and Tai Tokerau Northland: Stories of community resilience and messages of support for the rest of Aotearoa New Zealand*. Whāngārei, New Zealand: Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management | Te Rākau Whakamarumarū o Te Tai Tokerau. www.nrc.govt.nz/media/dqvgudn5/cyclone-gabrielle-stories-of-resilience_uvn_1.pdf

Trüdinger M (2024) ‘Recovery planning with communities at the heart’, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 39(2):62–66. https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/10650/ajem-2024-02_15.pdf

Ziarek EP (2001) *An ethics of dissensus: Feminism, postmodernity, and the politics of radical democracy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

About the authors

Laura Exton is Emergency Management Specialist and Lifeline Portfolio holder, Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management in New Zealand.

Mark Trüdinger is Group Recovery Manager, Northland Civil Defence Emergency Management in New Zealand.