Interagency conflict in disaster recovery

Understanding what drives it so we can navigate it better

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What's the problem?

> *It's actually good that people are coming from different perspectives because then we can be more holistic in our approach... So, it's not a problem, but if it's not addressed, it is a huge problem...I think we are unrealistic if we expect that there won't be conflict... it's inevitable that we will have some conflict, but that per se is not the problem. The problem is how we manage that and what happens after that.* (P19)

Research question

What causes conflict in disaster recovery collaborations?

Interviews

38 interviews

5 Australian jurisdictions

Diverse organisational types

Various disaster events

Highly experienced

A defintion

Conflict:

An expressed struggle between interdependent parties who perceive incompatible values, claims, goals or interest, and act accordingly (Spencer and Hardy, 2014)

More united than divided

> *No-ones in this business to make a profit. (P8)*
> *There's a common goal as a headline. (P2)*
> *Organisations have a genuine committment to do good. (P29)*
> *People who work in recovery...it's for the greater good of the community and the individuals we serve. (P33)*
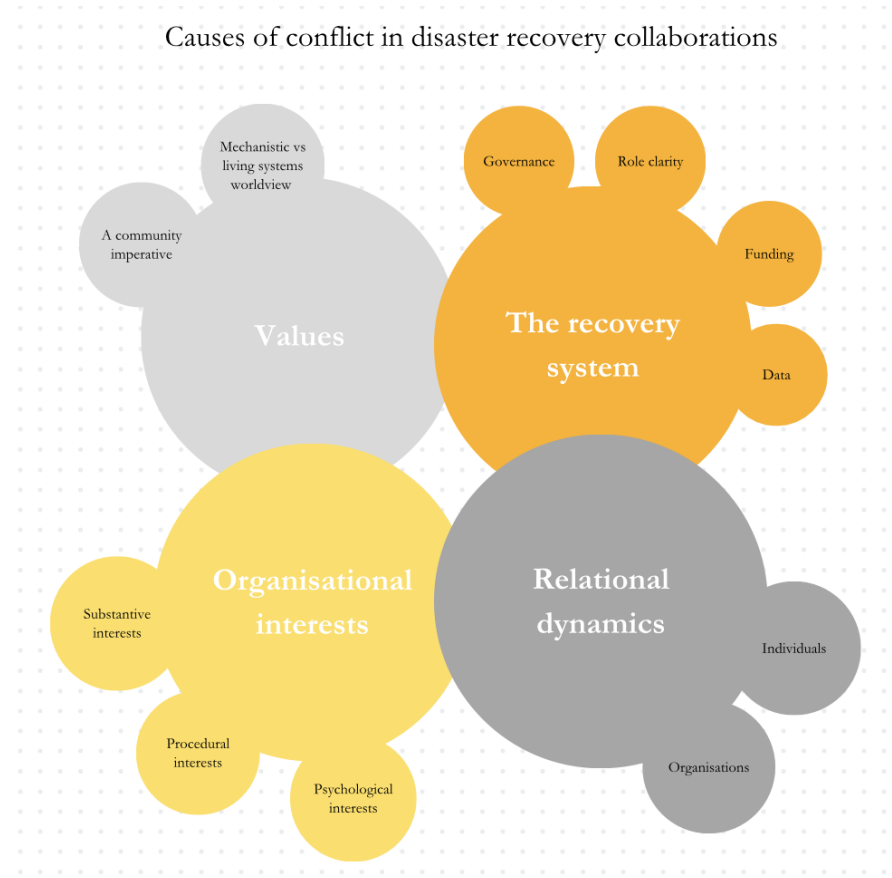
But...

> *There's been incidents...And then I've heard it's happened to other organisations. And all in silos. And I thought- this is how they're getting away with it. It relies on our prioritising being professional and still wanting to find a way to collaborate. So we don't challenge the behaviour...Calling them out or saying something or challenging the status quo would make us the problem, and then we are the ones causing conflict. (P32)*

Four main themes

Causes of conflict in disaster recovery collaborations

- Mechanistic vs living systems worldview
- A community imperative
- **Values**
- Governance
- Role clarity
- **The recovery system**
- Funding
- Data
- Substantive interests
- **Organisational interests**
- Procedural interests
- Psychological interests
- **Relational dynamics**
- Individuals
- Organisations

Values

Living systems vs mechanistic

> *The notion of a mechanistic output-input-output -piece versus a more interdependent system, a living system, was at play. It was like- if we get all the right people, doing all the right things, and in all these domains, we're just going to nail it all, everything will be fine, we'll be resilient. And different value systems operate within each of those spaces. (P24)*

A community imperative

> *We were suddenly thrust into as advocates and champions for our local community, to engage with the government and funders and to make sure their voice was heard, and the community priority was at the top of everything. It felt like such a battle when it really shouldn't have. And it's only been recently, at the end, where it feels like all that work is finally being recognised.... I was working from home a lot of the time, and kids were around in the background listening to me. They said one time, "you know, it's like you're the resistance against the Empire'...that is what it felt like- we were reduced down to, like in Star Wars, the resistance level, echelons of a place-based services who was being hit on every side. (P11)*

The recovery system

> *It has been a bit of a dog's breakfast. In terms of creating conflict...it led to major delays in funding and resources... Because they ultimately hold the power and the authority. We can't do what we do without those resources...It was messy and convoluted, and we could do nothing. We were helpless and hopeless to be able to get out to those communities as rapidly as we could. We were ready to go. But we had no funds to do it...So, they hold all the power. They hold the go button. And that meant we were stymied in being unable to get out there quickly...And we copped the blowback from the community, who were like 'Where have you been? Why weren't you here earlier?' (P29)*

Organisational interests

> In amongst all of that, is absolutely the kudos and the recognition...you know, everyone wants a plaque, or everyone wants a...I feel very Utopia here... everyone wants a launch. And that's at the minister level, but it's also at the department level, the council and in community organisations. (P20)

Relational dynamics

> " *What happens in disasters is normal behaviors are amplified. So, if you've got a history of good collaboration, that will likely continue. If you've got a history of competitive work, that's likely to continue as well. I think we tend to try and think about disasters as being as this 'other'. But really, it's an accelerator of what's already there. (P13)* "

> " *Those two stories become the domino narrative...they are default routines and stories... when push comes to shove, when you're under the pump, under stress for whatever reason, the two stories bubble back up and validate the need for competition and parochialism. (P12)* "

Overarching themes

Underlying and intensifying factors

A recovery worker identity

Understandings of collaboration

How do we manage it better?

> *What does conflict mean, what is it indicating? It's having government agencies and people working in recovery, understanding and stopping and taking the time to understand what conflict is. Why is it coming out? What does it mean? It's not because people are horrible...it's about conflict being a signal. And being a bit smarter about stopping and thinking what that signal is and trying to sense-make.* (P9)

General recommendations

1. Acknowledge conflict is part of collaboration.

2. Recognise we are united by shared values.

3. Ditch the stereotypes.

4. Invest in relationship building

Sector resource
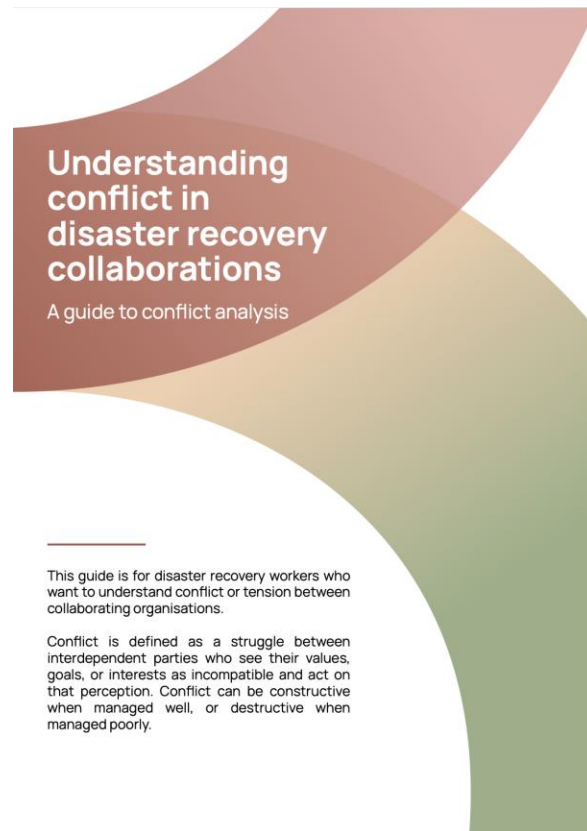
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