

Looking back, thinking ahead

In this special segment for AJEM's 40th anniversary issues, we interview past journal contributors about their early articles, what has since changed in the fields they work in, and their ideas and suggestions for the future of AJEM.

Listening to communities

An interview with Alison Cottrell

I was invited to do the research that became my first *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (AJEM) paper (Cottrell 2005). The approach came from the community themselves. There was an academic on the community flood committee and a well-connected retired union organiser who valued research, and together they recognised that what they had been doing was worth documenting. They saw it as a good story and asked if we would be interested – and of course we were. For me, it was especially appealing because of my social research background, but it was also simply a joy to work with people who were so dedicated to dealing with an issue that mattered to them.

What stood out was the level of commitment shown by local residents over a long period. From the late 1980s through to the late 1990s, they gathered information about flooding in their area, assessed the extent of the problem, and considered possible technical solutions. They then used that information to advocate to local government. It was a combination of citizen science and volunteerism – people coming up with information based on facts rather than opinions.

A key message from that experience was that people will devote significant time and energy to something they see as worthwhile. When that happens, there is a responsibility on planners and agencies to recognise and respect that effort. The outcomes reflected what can be achieved when community participation is taken seriously.

Looking back, I think some of the underlying challenges remain. Managers still don't fully grasp the knowledge within communities and can underestimate how informed and capable people are.

At the same time, communities are more fluid. People move more often for work, and their make-up can change quickly. That makes it harder to know who is in a community and how people are connected, reinforcing the need to spend time there and get to know it. Census data can help, but it is often out of date or incomplete. You still need time 'on the ground' to properly understand a place.

Social media has added complexity by contributing to misinformation, making it harder for people working in communities to understand what is really happening. That again highlights the need to spend time in communities and build direct understanding.

Agencies and councils can still focus on telling people what to do rather than working with them. That can create misunderstandings, especially when communication doesn't clearly explain what has happened or why decisions were made. It's not just about providing information, but clear explanations.

There's also a broader issue around how emergency management arrangements are communicated. Many people don't really understand how local systems work – what disaster management groups are, how decisions are made, or how different roles fit together. That gap in understanding can contribute to confusion.

At the same time, a lot of what communities do – especially informally – still goes unrecognised. People help neighbours, share resources, and support each other, but much of that activity isn't counted. Yet it remains an important part of how communities respond to disasters.

Looking ahead, I would like to see more research in AJEM that takes a broader view, particularly around the connections between disaster preparedness and community development. A systems approach may seem old-fashioned, but it is still a useful way to think about how different elements fit together.

I would also like to see more work on how communities of place function, and how people with quite different values and connections can still work together when disasters occur. That intersection between community development and disaster mitigation remains an important area for further exploration in AJEM in the future.

References

Cottrell A (2005) Sometimes it's a big ask, but sometimes it's a big outcome: community participation in flood mitigation. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 20(3):27–32. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.095661081652764>