

2011 Winston Churchill Fellowship for disaster assistance programs and community resilience

Wendy Graham, Director Resilience and Planning, NSW Ministry for Police and Emergency Services shares her Churchill Fellowship experience in the UK, the USA, Canada and New Zealand.



I have been involved in the state wide co-ordination and delivery of disaster assistance programs to individuals and households in NSW in response to a large number of disasters over many years. During this time I have observed, particularly in some communities that experience frequent disaster events, that rather than becoming more resilient to future disasters, community expectations about what the government 'should do' and the financial assistance that it 'should provide' appeared to be a growing focus of community attention and tension.

In February 2011, the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). It provided a whole-of-nation resilience-based approach to disaster management and recognised that disaster resilience is a shared responsibility for individuals, households, businesses and communities, as well as for governments.

In early 2012 I embarked on a Churchill Fellowship to research how similar national strategies were being implemented in other countries and how they were influencing government and community thinking and actions in relation to planning for, responding to and recovering from disasters.

There were many highlights throughout my Fellowship research in UK, the USA, Canada, and New Zealand. I met with many individuals working in and supporting their local communities in planning for, responding to and recovering from disasters. Their passion and commitment to their work and their communities was both extraordinary and inspiring.

Project description

To study the effectiveness of disaster assistance programs in promoting individual and community resilience in recovery from disasters.

The severity, frequency and scale of natural disasters has been increasing over recent years. This fact along with the escalating immediate and long-term costs of disasters, made even more poignant in an environment of global financial crisis, has captured the attention of central governments around the world. There is a realisation that government alone cannot sufficiently respond and provide for disaster affected communities. A government-centric, top-down approach to emergency management is unsustainable and ultimately destined to failure. However, it is not just an economic driver that has precipitated this shift in strategic focus but importantly, recognition of the wealth of resources and expertise present in local communities and a desire to recognise and harness this capability within the emergency management environment.

National disaster resilience frameworks and strategies that focus on whole-of-community engagement, participation and shared responsibility represent a significant philosophical shift in how emergency management has traditionally been conducted.

Disasters happen to individuals in local communities. A bottom-up approach to building resilience recognises individuals and communities as the starting point. What works best in communities is what is already there. At a practical level this means working in partnership with the community, building on existing networks, resources and strengths, identifying community leaders and empowering the community to exercise choice and take responsibility. This approach requires government decision makers to "recognise the critical role of social capital and social resources"¹ as the foundation in building disaster resilient communities.

It is important to recognise that while this approach of public participation and empowerment is relatively new within the emergency management sector, it is the basis of community development work established within the social sciences over many decades and also aligns with the core principles of international aid.

1 Aldrich, D (2010). Fixing Recovery: Social Capital in Post-Crisis Resilience, *Journal of Homeland Security*, June 2010, p9.

This should provide some encouragement for emergency planners, as research within the social science arena has well demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in building resilient communities. It also suggests that emergency management policy makers and practitioners should look for opportunities to partner with the social sciences/community development sector to maximise learning opportunities and avoid duplication of effort.

Disaster assistance programs play a critical role in targeting unmet material and financial disaster related need in communities, however the provision of assistance by agencies to a community does not in and of itself enhance community connectedness or wellbeing, deliver better recovery outcomes, or build resilience. As Aldrich² highlights, recovery “*does not depend on the overall amount of aid received nor on the amount of damage done by the disaster; instead, social capital – the bonds which tie citizens together – functions as the main engine of long term recovery.*” This is an important consideration for government and the not for profit sector in how communities are supported to recover from disasters. It suggests that as well as attention on the aid and resources being provided to a community, there needs to be a greater focus and investment in identifying and building on existing community strengths.

Building disaster resilient communities must be seen within the context of long term generational change, requiring a fundamental cultural shift by government and communities in responsibilities and expectations of how disasters are planned and prepared for, responded to and recovered from. Cultural and behavioural change is never easy. Campaigns around wearing seat belts, wearing sunscreen and quitting smoking have all demonstrated this fact. Engaging individuals and communities in emergency preparedness is equally as challenging. Disaster preparedness programs will feel remote and irrelevant to most individuals unless they have been directly or indirectly affected by disaster. A more sustainable approach is to integrate everyday preparedness measures that focus people on being aware of their own risks and caring for themselves, family, friends and neighbours. This approach aims to build individual resilience by preparing people for personal emergencies and equipping them in ways that will also be effective in coping with disaster events.

The long-term nature of building disaster resilient communities means that it will rarely produce quick political wins. If this paradigm shift is to be successful it will require a long-term commitment from government. Working with communities in changing expectations and responsibilities is a complex and evolving process that is done *by* people, not *to* people and will take time before demonstrated outcomes are evident.

My fellowship report (available in full on the Winston Churchill website) summarises my observations, alongside the reading and analysis that were such an important part of my Fellowship. The aim was

to contribute to the ongoing dialogue occurring in and between countries about how communities can become disaster resilient. Throughout the report I identify key considerations for future practice and I provide a number of broad themes which I hope will contribute to ongoing discussions. These are:

- Recognising disaster resilience as a shared responsibility between the community and government requires an approach to emergency management that begins with identifying existing community strengths and networks and involves the whole community being engaged and empowered to make choices and take responsibility in planning for, responding to and recovering from disasters.
- Top-down, government-centric approaches that provide strategic frameworks, guidance documents and templates set direction and provide a clear road map for action but do not engage communities or drive cultural change at the local level. A greater focus and investment in supporting bottom-up, community-led strategies is the key to effecting sustainable change.
- Disaster assistance programs are effective in targeting unmet material and financial disaster related need in communities. However, the provision of assistance by agencies to a community does not in and of itself enhance community wellbeing, deliver better recovery outcomes, or build resilience. The critical role of social capital in building disaster resilient communities requires greater attention and research.
- Community engagement in preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters extends beyond information and consultation. Engagement means local communities having a place around the emergency planning table, being listened to and empowered to influence and make decisions that affect them.
- A greater investment in research and evaluation with regard what works well in communities that have been affected by disaster and how communities can best build resilience is required.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to:

- Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for the opportunity to travel abroad to research this challenging and important topic.
- Kate Alexander and Sally McKay who were my referees during the application process and provided me with so much support and encouragement.
- NSW Ministry for Police and Emergency Services for supporting my pursuit of knowledge in this area.

Full report available at <http://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/detail/3548/>

2 Aldrich, D (2010). Fixing Recovery: Social Capital in Post-Crisis Resilience, *Journal of Homeland Security*, June 2010, p1.