

The review of the National Principles for Disaster Recovery

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The National Principles for Disaster Recovery create a set of fundamental underlying truths that form the foundation of our knowledge and values and guide actions and practice. This article describes the process and outcomes of the 2017 review of the Principles.

The complexity of many agencies working with communities post-disaster requires an approach that enables all partners to navigate the changed terrain. The Principles hold an important place in disaster recovery in Australia, as recognised at the national level. They were originally intended for use by government workers involved in providing recovery planning and services. In 2017, they were reviewed with the assistance of over 80 agency stakeholders along with the input of two communities that had experienced a disaster and recovery. The review has produced an updated version of the Principles and validated their relevance. They remain useful to both the recovery sector and affected communities.

Disasters deeply effect lives and livelihoods. Organisations that work with communities recovering from disasters know how complex and challenging it is to achieve the best outcome for the most people, particularly when they are in transition or trauma.¹ The complexity of working with a community post-disaster includes coordination and collaboration between individuals, groups, volunteers, professionals, governments and the private sector. It also involves working within uncertain, complex and rapidly changing environments. These circumstances require a principles-based approach.

The term 'principle' is defined in Webster's New World College Dictionary Fifth Edition as 'a fundamental truth, law, doctrine or motivating force, upon which others are based'. Emergency management research speaks of principles forming a basic strategy to improve emergency response capabilities.

The objective of disaster recovery is defined at the national level as 'helping communities to reach a point where they are sustainable and resilient':

- 'A sustainable community has the capability and capacity to manage its own recovery, without government disaster-related assistance. If government disaster-related programs are withdrawn, the recovery process in a sustainable community will continue; it will not stop or reverse the gains achieved during the government-assisted phase.

- A resilient community is better able to withstand a future disaster'.²

In the field of emergency management, recovery managers work in local, state and federal spheres with the private sector and not-for-profit agencies. As more government work is privatised, a growing portion of government emergency management work involves the use of non-government organisations including private contractors and volunteer organisations. Given this complex system, having a principles-based approach means that recovery is not 'owned' by any single sphere or player. The core values reflected within national principles can be considered independently by a variety of partners, aspiring to preferred outcomes and consistency in approach irrespective of position, authority or responsibility. The Principles create a set of fundamental 'truths' that form the foundation of shared knowledge and guide action and practice.

Methods

The Principles were initially developed and endorsed by the Standing Committee of Social Administrators in 1986. The Principles underwent a substantial review in 2008 and another during 2017, under the guidance of the Social Recovery Reference Group (SRRG), an independent reference group with an advisory role to the Community Outcomes and Recovery Subcommittee of the Australian Emergency Management Committee. Mark Stratton, the then National Consultant Disaster Recovery for the SRRG, led the process with agencies and Dr Margaret Moreton conducted community consultations.

1 Marsh G, Ahmen I, Mulligan M, Donovan J & Barton S (Ed.) 2018, *Community Engagement in Post-Disaster Recovery*, Routledge, Oxon, UK, offer this as what should be aimed for in the recovery process. Reilly MJ & Markenso DS 2011, *Health Care Emergency Management: principles and practice*, Sudbury, MA, USA speak in terms of 'attempting to ensure the best possible outcome for the greatest number of people' p. 341.

2 Australian New Zealand School of Government 2016, *A Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Disaster Recovery Programs*. At: <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/media/1779/a-monitoring-and-evaluation-framework-for-disaster-recovery-programs.pdf>.

The SRRG involved over 80 agency representatives, including experts from all levels of government, private and not-for-profit agencies in New South Wales, Tasmania and South Australia. Workshops with SRRG were held in Adelaide and Brisbane and involved all states and territories along with Department of Human Services, Emergency Management Australia and Australian Red Cross. Practitioner workshops analysed the 2011 version of the Principles addressing the questions:

- Are the six existing principles 'right' in terms of title?
- What changes need to be made to the underlying text?
- Do the Principles adequately address all domains of recovery, non-natural events and culture, diversity and equity?

Community consultations were held with people directly affected by two recent disaster events in different states in Australia. A total of 32 people attended these consultations to explore and validate the principle 'using community-led approaches'. The inclusive and participative process of review was integral to its outcome and engaged recovery experts, groups of practitioners and communities. It also included findings from recent academic literature.³

Agency forum findings

A broad range of organisations was represented in the forums and all agreed the six Principles should be: understand the context; recognise complexity; use community-led approaches; ensure coordination of all activities; employ effective communication; and recognise and build capacity.

In particular, the meaning, validity and suitability of 'use community-led approaches' was explored. Numerous groups considered alternative terms such as 'community focused' and 'community centred'. At the end of the discussions, there was no clear resolution to this question.

Community forum findings

Communities sought a sophisticated and mature discussion about disaster and community-led recovery. Community members want community-led recovery while also acknowledging they need timely support. This requires a change in the relationship between affected communities and governments and organisations seeking to support them. Engagement must include authentic listening before, during and after a disaster event. Communities advocated for recovery processes that build the self-reliance and resilience of the community.

Community members emphasised the diversity of community identity and experience, both within and between communities. Community recovery must be

flexible and adaptable, be based on common sense, with a willingness and ability to respond to emerging issues, ideas and problems. The communities recognised the complexity of community recovery and leadership including identifying and engaging with leaders and supporting them immediately after a crisis and into the long-term. They identified that recovery begins in the planning stage and continues for many years.

It became clear during the forums that the Principles could be adopted more broadly than simply by governments and other large agencies. While the primary audience for the Principles is recovery workers, community members and representatives from community organisations expressed a desire to include the Principles in their own work. The language of the Principles has been adjusted to reflect this desire.

These findings from agencies and communities began a process of adjusting language so that the Principles speak to both organisations and communities. In this way, they are validated by lived experience and may create opportunities for partnership.

The changes reflect:

- modernised language that 'speaks' to both communities and agencies
- a greater emphasis on community strengths-based approaches, resilience and pre-event planning
- a recognition of the centrality of community; necessary if the outcomes being sought by emergency management partners are to be achieved

The Principles were validated as relevant and of great utility to those engaged in recovery.

The 2018 National Principles for Disaster Recovery

The 2018 National Principles for Disaster Recovery were endorsed by the SRRG, align with the 2011 *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* and apply to all phases of recovery. In fact, with a central focus on community and public value, they also provide guidance to an approach to emergency management more broadly.

The Principles are available as a brochure at www.knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-disaster-recovery. The Principles are also expanded on in the *Community Recovery Handbook* at www.knowledge.aidr.org.au/community-recovery-handbook.

³ This has included incorporation of relevant research-based principles for community engagement in post-disaster recovery and findings from Beyond Bushfires examining the impacts over six years of the fires that occurred in Victoria in 2009.