



Charles Sturt
University

Resilience Issues Confronting the Local Community Services Sector in Serving the Vulnerable during the planning and recovery phases of a disaster



Authors: Val Ingham, Australian Graduate School of Policing & Security | Mir Rabiul Islam, School of Psychology, Charles Sturt University | John Hicks, School of Accounting and Finance, Charles Sturt University | Oliver Burmeister, School of Computing and Mathematics, Charles Sturt University



Background

The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (COAG 2011) encourages local emergency service and community organisations to cooperate in the building of local disaster resilience.

We examine the application of this strategy through the lens of community organisations engaged in the 2013 Blue Mountains fires.

2013 Blue Mountains Fires

- State of emergency declared which transfers control of fire-fighting and recovery from local authorities to the State.
- Local community services sector engaged through an interagency meeting.

Aspiration

Shared responsibility for the building of disaster resilience in the community.

Reality

Prior to the 2013 fires:

- Community organisations (neighbourhood centres, schools, childcare centres) lacked information on emergency management plans and evacuation procedures.
- Little formal interaction between emergency services and community organisations.
- Emergency services unaware of the extent of the engagement of community organisations with vulnerable and at-risk residents.
- Emergency service organisations did not see education as a core activity.

Issues

Inequality of voice

- Community leaders marginalised through exclusion from briefings, failure to be consulted and lack of invitation to participate in networking events.

Inequality of funding

- Whilst emergency services participating in an event obtain backup from other regions, this is not the case for community groups who are expected to abandon their normal roles to participate – often resulting in them taking on two jobs and their health suffering from the stress.

Role confusion

- The appointment of recovery managers from a particular emergency service often resulted in that service being regarded as 'in charge' of the recovery – and left little room for community leaders to contribute.

Health issues

- Emergency service workers are governed by statutes, protocols and guidelines. The workers from local community organisations live in the community and are constantly in contact with their clientele – substantially increasing their stress.

The blurring of personal and professional boundaries

- Community workers are often also victims of the event as a result of the fact that they live in the community.

Needs

- Appropriately plan and resource community organisation participation in building local disaster resilience, e.g. funding to backfill some worker positions
- Enhance the status of community leaders in the process of building local disaster resilience.