

Natural hazards: the future of learning is already here



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The global phenomena of floods, fires, heatwaves and droughts (to name a few natural hazards) have given rise to capacity and capability challenges for emergency services organisations as well as communities. In recent times, natural hazards, as noted by the AIDR Major Incidents Report¹, have been ‘concurrent, consecutive and compounding’. This creates complex challenges for preparing for, responding to and recovering from the losses and damages that inevitably arise from such phenomena.

While many of the challenges that surround such events are known, there are always novel unknowns that will make it difficult to prevent damages and losses from their effects. This is rarely acknowledged in public commentaries surrounding hazard events, which continue to suggest that there ought to be ways of learning from such events in ways that prevents them.

A balanced approach would recognise that there is little by way of agreed definitions about what learning actually means beyond a focus on addressing a need for improvement from a standpoint of what went wrong. Despite this framing of failure, the arrangements for emergency management have remained stable with a focus on prevention, preparation, response and recovery (PPRR). This suggests there may be more right than wrong in terms of the policies, procedures and practices to operationalise the PPRR framework. An analysis of public inquiry reports related to natural hazards shows that recommendations have remained stable across decades and even recur.

This is good news insofar that we know what the future might be in terms of findings and recommendations that reviews and inquiries will recommend to emergency management organisations after such events. These will most likely be recommending improvements relating to:

- leadership
- interagency and governmental collaboration/partnerships

- interoperability across jurisdictions
- capacity and capability of aerial management of hazard events
- review of emergency management arrangements at local, state and national levels
- warnings and information to communities
- evacuation and sheltering arrangements for displaced communities
- land management, use and development
- safety policies of the states and territories
- relief and recovery
- education related to community planning for hazard events.

In an era where public and media commentaries are quick to frame high-risk hazard events as ‘unprecedented’ and call for lessons to be learnt, these areas of focus show that emergency management, as a discipline, continues to learn how to learn from the challenges it faces. They provide an important foundation for collaborative learning between state, national and local governments across Australia, the emergency service agencies, our volunteers and for industry. More importantly, they offer pathways towards keeping our communities safe as hazards continue to be concurrent, consecutive and compounding.



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1. Major Incidents Report, at <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/major-incidents-report/>.