

Making Government assistance responsive to community need

Namoi Floods, NSW, 1998

Introduction

In the North West of NSW the rain began early in June 1998. It rained, and it rained. July came and went, and it rained. Then August, and by September the Namoi Valley River system had experienced an unprecedented series of five floods. The Gwydir Valley River system had also undergone prolonged major flooding. By mid-September a number of towns, notably Mungindi and Walgett, had been isolated for periods of up to ten weeks.

On Wednesday, September 17th, 1998, at the urgent request of the Premier, Bob Carr, I began a series of emergency visits to towns in the North West of NSW, which were badly affected by flood. The express purpose of my visit was to talk directly with business people, farmers and families to gain a first-hand understanding of the specific nature of their difficulties. Both during, and at the completion of these visits, I was to make a series of recommendations to the Premier. By accessing information directly, and in a timely manner, the Government would be better placed to respond effectively.

Visiting affected communities

Over the next three days, travelling by light plane, I visited the towns of Moree, Mungindi, Lightning Ridge, Walgett, Wee Waa, Narrabri and Gunnedah. From the air, the extent of the devastation was immediately apparent. I flew over a sea of floodwaters. Every now and then some treetops, a farmhouse, or a few desperate cattle or sheep crowded on a rocky outcrop, were all that broke the surface.

At every location the meetings were very different, yet the issues common. In some towns, particularly the larger towns of Moree, Narrabri and Gunnedah, meetings had been arranged by local Council. These meetings were held in Council Chambers and were well attended by a broad cross-section of the community including business people, farmers, SES and emergency service workers, Council workers, and community members concerned for their families. High levels of frustration were apparent, but at no point did I feel that this was directed at either myself or at Government. In the smaller towns the

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meetings were quite different. In both Mungindi and Wee Waa, for instance, I was able to meet one-to-one with local business people and farmers. This opportunity to connect personally and to hear individual circumstances in detail was significant. Not only was I far better equipped to relate the reality of the impacts of the floods to the Premier, but it also gave me the opportunity to offer some immediate advice to people who had not yet had access to any financial or other counselling.

The key issues

The range of issues presented can be summarised as follows:

Loss of cash flow

Business owners and operators reported decreases in economic activity ranging from 30% to 100%. People couldn't get from their properties into the towns, and if they could, had no cash to spend. Most families were being forced to shop on credit. Isolated businesses were facing extraordinarily high freight charges as freight companies recovered the cost of damage to vehicles travelling on the extraordinarily dangerous and damaged roads. Those towns that had become isolated were suffering profound effects of loss of traffic both within and through towns.

Isolation

By the time of my visit Mungindi had been isolated for the best part of ten weeks. The situation here was quite desperate, with many businesses facing accelerating debt and possible closure. No relief was in sight. A bridge which had been under construction when the floods came needed to be finished urgently to help restore normal traffic flows. The situation here was extremely urgent. Wee Waa had been isolated for various periods of time over the past 8 weeks. Pilliga had been isolated for 8 weeks and remained

isolated. Lightning Ridge had been isolated at various times over past 10 weeks resulting in devastating losses in tourism related businesses. Across much of the North West students were unable to get to school, and people and equipment couldn't get to either to work or into towns to access shops and vital services.

Eligibility criteria for access to low-interest loans

Through the Rural Assistance Authority, low-interest loans for farmers suffering hardship had already been extended to include small business, and the interest rate had been reduced to 4%. At that time, isolation due to flooding was not on its own considered criteria for accessing low-interest loans. In many cases there may have been no direct loss of stock due to physical impact of floodwaters, however their isolation either from other centres, from normal through traffic, or from the surrounding properties (i.e. their normal customers), had resulted in the loss of business being just as devastating. It was difficult for these people, who were suffering extreme effects of isolation and general loss of business, to access these funds. The criteria needed to be examined closely and altered where appropriate to ensure that those genuinely feeling the effects of isolation were eligible. In addition, many of those eligible to apply were having difficulty with the 'red tape' attached to the applications for financial assistance.

Dam management

Some SES staff had expressed grave concerns regarding the possible risks involved in keeping dams at or near total capacity in terms of their ability to avoid further uncontrolled major flooding if dams remained full.

Agriculture/industry

Most of the existing cotton crops had been lost. The next planting needed to occur by late October early November and was totally dependent on weather conditions. Many cotton growers had forward sold, consequently they needed to produce either cotton or cash. Most of the existing wheat crops had also been lost. It was

unlikely that surviving crops would be harvested, as it was impossible to get machinery onto farms. If harvesting were possible there remained problems with getting wheat to silos due to the state of the roads and bridges. Wheat farmers were consequently unable to finance their next plantings. Wool growers were unable to shear, leaving them with potentially no income until November or December depending on weather conditions. Opal miners in Lightning Ridge were unable to access mines due to badly damaged roads, and road closures and negative media coverage resulted in hundreds of tourists avoiding the North West of NSW. This had a particularly devastating effect on towns like Lightning Ridge where tourism and mining are the two main producers of income.

Labour/employment

Thousands of people across the region had little or no income and were either ineligible for assistance through Centrelink, or were being forced to wait a stipulated period of time before any assistance could be made available. This in turn forced people to either utilise their savings, or to access any accumulated leave provisions. Employers were therefore facing a double burden while continuing to carry staff as skilled labour would be needed when conditions improved. This situation was not sustainable.

Public health

Large amounts of water lying around for such long periods of time, and many sewage systems backed up, would no doubt result in a number of public health risks including higher numbers of mosquitoes as the weather rapidly warmed, consequently higher risk of Ross River Fever and other vector-borne diseases.

The recommendations

The next step was to consider all of this information and make recommendations to the Premier.

Eligibility criteria for low-interest loans needed to be revised urgently. The criteria set in the past suited the needs of farmers during times of drought, but needed now to address the issue of loss of cash flow as a result of isolation. Should criteria be altered, there remained the issue of those newly eligible people needing to access financial assistance as a matter of urgency. Some businesses were facing end-of-month closure.

As a result, the Premier announced on the final day of my visits that the criteria for accessing low-interest loans would be

temporarily extended to include 'isolation'. While this relieved many of the concerns expressed by small business people, criteria still needed to be reviewed in some detail to ensure that definitions of isolation were not too restrictive, and to ensure flexibility in their application.

Rural Financial Counsellors or equivalent would now be needed to visit isolated towns (Mungindi, Wee Waa, Pilliga, Lightning Ridge, Walgett) to assist people with completion and lodgement of application forms. It would also be necessary to ensure that applications were then assessed as quickly and efficiently as possible. As well as providing urgent assistance to isolated towns, information regarding financial and other forms of assistance also needed to be made more accessible, as did the access to practical assistance in completing and lodging applications. For example, information could be made available through Local Councils and Banks as well as Rural Financial Counsellors, and local media could be better utilised to make general information available to communities.

The loss of the tourist dollar had been enormous throughout the region, particularly in towns which depend on tourism for their existence (e.g. Lightning Ridge). An aggressive and targeted advertising campaign would need to be developed and launched to encourage people to use the Newell Highway as an alternative Melbourne to Brisbane route.

It would also be necessary to consider a range of integrated responses with regard to public health issues.

It was also vital that the Federal Government be petitioned to recognise the current situation as being one of 'Exceptional Circumstances'. Access to this status would give eligible applicants financial assistance in the form of interest relief and assistance with general household expenses, rather than forcing them further into debt. Letters of support for this petition were collected from each of the Shires in the flood-affected area during this exercise.

The response

Quick and thorough examination of all of the information I had gathered, as well as the recommendations in their entirety, was now vital, and recommendations needed to be made to the Premier which were practical and achievable in the short term.

In short, we had to recognise the fact that while we weren't able to stop the rain, we might at least be able to ease the

situation for some people. If we were to achieve any useful outcomes at all, Government Departments would need to consider all of the information and recommendations in a whole-of-government environment.

A report was compiled for the Premier by Monday 21st September 1998 which contained all of the information gathered during the three-day consultation, along with a summary of the situation and the series of recommendations I have just described. As much as possible, the language used to convey this information to the Premier was the language of the people I consulted. The Director-General, NSW Premier's Department, immediately called an urgent meeting of Chief Executive Officers of the relevant government departments to discuss the contents of the report and its recommendations.

The achievable responses likely to have the most impact in the short term were agreed as follows.

In line with the Premier's announcement of the previous Friday, the criteria for access to low-interest loans would be temporarily relaxed to include 'isolation' as valid criteria. It was also recommended that applications be assessed on a case-by-case basis, and that criteria remain flexible enough to accommodate those who were genuinely in need.

Within a week of the meeting three Flood Relief Workers were appointed and arranged emergency visits to the worst affected areas. These workers were appointed through NSW Agriculture who already had the structure in place from the time in the not-so-distant past when Drought Relief Workers had been appointed. The Flood Relief Workers liaised closely with existing Rural Financial Counsellors to ensure best possible coverage of the flood-affected areas.

A submission was subsequently made to the Federal Government's RASAC by the NSW Minister for Agriculture urging assessment of the current circumstances as 'Exceptional'. Unfortunately, this application was ultimately refused.

There was also the need to consider those issues which required longer-term responses. Tourism NSW, through the Big Sky Country Tourism regional body, undertook to formulate a marketing strategy aimed at attracting travellers back through the flooded areas. NSW Public Health, the Environment Protection Authority and Local Councils undertook to establish a whole of government strategy which would include both preventive and reactive measures to address public health issues.

The result

As a Government, were we able to achieve the kind of practical response we had hoped for? While we weren't able to stop the rain, we were at least able to listen directly to advice from those closest to the issues and act as a whole Government in our response, rather than reacting on minimal advice in a piecemeal fashion. By a relatively simple and temporary alteration to the existing criteria for accessing financial assistance, we were able to help some people who would otherwise have fallen outside the guidelines.

The real result, however, was the establishment of a degree of trust within a working relationship between the State Government and the communities and individuals worst affected. This relationship has lasted for over a year, and now provides a solid foundation for ongoing consultation.

The lessons

We have learned some very important lessons from this exercise.

It was vitally important to provide these communities with direct access to Government at the decision-making level. It was important that as a representative of the Premier's Department I took the time to listen first-hand and to gain some useful level of understanding of the nature and complexities of the problems people were facing. In doing so, I was then able to make effective representation direct to government at the decision-making level. This was vital to enable government to respond in a meaningful way.

It was also important to be realistic from the outset about what can and cannot be achieved. I needed to take care to be honest about the level of response possible at the State Government level and not to raise unrealistic expectations, particularly while people were in such a vulnerable state. For this reason it was also important that the report to the Premier was written as much as possible in the language of the consultation. Direct consultation with these communities would have been pointless if it comprised

the only-too-familiar holding of chin and concerned nodding of head!

During follow-up it was vital to maintain constant contact with all relevant departments to ensure that agreed responses were carried out efficiently and in the spirit of the original recommendations. In this respect, the ability to respond as a whole Government was of enormous benefit.

I also believe that this exercise was an opportunity to genuinely present the human face of government. The fact that I had an opportunity to personally connect with victims of this disaster at a relatively early stage was instrumental in stemming some of the panic and frustration.

The final, and most important lesson? The Premier might not be able to stop the rain, but that doesn't mean we can't get out there and *ask* what we can do to help, provided we are honest both about our management of expectations and our capacity to respond.

Columbia University; Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health; Center for Population and Family Health;
Program on Forced Migration and Health

in partnership with International Rescue Committee and World Education

Public Health in Complex Emergencies Training Course 2000

Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development
Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance

Course announcement

What does the course offer?

This course is a two-week training course that focuses on critical public health issues faced by NGO/PVO personnel working in complex health emergencies.

The goal of the course is to enhance the capacity of humanitarian assistance workers and their organizations to respond to health emergencies.

Who should attend?

This course is best suited for professional staff with previous field experience as health workers, program managers and/or decision-makers in complex emergencies. Participants are expected to apply what they learn during the course to their immediate work in the field.

Medical Coordinators, Health Coordinators, and Program Managers from international and indigenous health organizations, are typical candidates for the course.

Foreign health ministry or government officials working in health emergency situations may also apply. All applicants should have a strong command of English, i.e. daily working knowledge and usage.

What will participants learn?

The course combines what is scientifically optimal with what is operationally feasible in