Community: the concept of community in the risk and emergency management context

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Emergency management is clearly and deliberately moving along a path defined by the risk analysis process (Standards Australia 1999) and by its derivative process, community emergency risk management (Emergency Management Australia 2000). 'Community' is a key element of Victoria's emergency management arrangements as well as of those of, in greater or lesser degree, other States and Territories and the Commonwealth (Hodges 1999).

Therefore understanding the concept of community is of obvious importance within the context of risk, emergency management and community recovery; but it is a most abused and misunderstood term. The purpose of this article is to start the debate on the manner in which the term community is used within these circles.

Too often community is used in a sweeping fashion without the recognition that all the people in the community in question may have in common is that they live or work in the vicinity of the risk; here community is defined implicitly by proximity. Community is also used to describe everyone living in the whole state e.g. the Victorian Community as well as at any other given spatial unit, for example the rural community or the East Gippsland community. Too often, a basic assumption exists on the part of planners and managers that there *is* a community living in the affected area that can be rebuilt or re-bonded. The assumption is that there was a definable group of people present who had something in common, who were bonded together in some positive form and equally that they were not in conflict with each other or may have had very little contact prior to the event.

It needs to be recognised that for a number of people there is no feeling of affection or attachment to an area, or even to their housing that they may be simply using as a dormitory with the intention of moving on when convenient. We, the authors of this article, recognise that in some areas, particularly rural settings, the geographic area may be the setting closest to the traditional view of 'community'; that is 'community' as shared space or as growing from close proximity. However, even there one cannot assume that the residents are of like mind and are not in conflict with each other or are not apathetic to each other's needs.

This article challenges the assumption then of there being such a thing as an easily defined and discoverable *single* community. It is our view that such a belief is based on a fallacy and we offer an alternative set of definitions, placing the need to understand the concept of community firmly in the risk management context.

The most important things to be said then are that firstly, there is no such thing as an all-embracing 'community'. Each of us belongs to a number of communities that may or may not be geographically based. These communities are defined in a number of ways, for example, by our interests, relevant demographic features as well as by location; but even location (that is a defined area) will be defined in part by a common interest that, in itself, may be, more important than the spatial unit itself (Ife 1995).

We can better understand this if we incorporate traditional spatial concepts into a definition of community as 'those people (groups whatever) sharing a common characteristic'. This allows us to incorporate notions of space (where we must acknowledge space is not the critical factor but something defined or influenced by space—e.g. access to resources, transport systems, government)

This notion also moves us away from the idea that a community is necessarily cohesive and self-aware; for example all 5 year olds have common interests (says the education system) and in that sense they are a community but they are not aware of themselves as forming a community.

It also allows us to introduce the notion of the 'mosaic of communities' to which people belong. They belong to a community defined by access to municipal services, by recreational interest (Tottenham Hotspur supporters), by age group (over 65s), by ethnicity (Greek immigrants) by religion (Uniting Church members) and often by many other factors. We share similar interests with many other people but rarely are all our interests with all the same people.

Secondly, despite having stated that there is no such thing as 'the community' we still need to define what we mean by the term.

It is very difficult to categorise what is a community. Some researchers interested in this matter have characterised community in the following ways. Community is diversity (Bell and Newby (1971) and Willmott (1989). For Max Weber: community equalled 'belonging together... sharing a common culture, interaction & institutionalisation of central activities' (Ife 1995). Going beyond the mere geographic description—it involves a sense of belonging & commitment. Time is involved in developing a community—it is a process not a passive never changing concept.

Community may equal shared solidarity; its source being a common set of interests, values & attitudes. Although community is usually taken, and this certainly applies in the emergency management context, to be a cohesive, more or less homogeneous group, it may in fact arise as a confluence of external, sometimes conflicting, pressures. Communities may also exhibit elements of conflict between different interest groups (Ife 1995) Membership may also not equal obligation. Ron Wild's belief was that 'people are often not aware of the communities to which they belong.' People simply exist within a certain context the boundaries of which may not be clear to them (Ife 1995).

Community is such a loose term and we often use it interchangeably with friends, networks, recreational groups, voluntary associations, pressure groups and even social movements.

Within local councils generally it is often applied to the citizens living within the confines of their city or to neighbours

who may not even know or talk to each other. But in many situations neighbours may have no sense of belonging to, or connection with the city or neighbourhood; in fact there is no 'glue' as an intrinsic and inseparable element of their geographic areas which bonds the residents together, which creates a unified force.

And why should there be when all they may have in common is the closeness in proximity of their dwellings?

We must also recognise that 'community' should apply, when emergency management is involved, not just to the domestic residents but to industry, businesses, schools, services etc.

Any local area will also be composed of residents who vary from those most able to cope due to age, wealth, resources both physical and intellectual and with adequate access to information to those most vulnerable, with limited access to these resources, and most at risk if a disaster or crisis occurs.

It is essential then for emergency managers to ensure that they have accurate, up to date community profiles available at the time of a crisis and during the recovery period. These profiles will include not simply traditional elements such as proximity to known hazards or traditional demographic groups (aged, young etc.) but also analyses of other social features, inventories of environmental and infrastructure assets and liabilities and profiles of economic and business activity.

For many people a 'feeling of community', of a common cause, of meaningful relationships with one's neighbours is lacking as their value systems, interests and activities differ. Occasionally the promise that residents may be empowered through uniting with their neighbours is realised, but in many cases, even that promise fails to lead to continuing, long-term participation in community development, concerns and activities.

One last point on this would be that even when the neighbours and people living in proximity do communicate with each other, feeling a common bond, this does not necessarily lead to participation in local issues or to even to taking part in community emergency management processes.

Mabileau, Moyser, Parry and Quantin (1989), in their research in France and the United Kingdom, discounted the idea that individuals live in communities which are characterised by 'a certain sense of solidarity and common identity' which are formed simply by living in a

particular locality. They questioned this 'community identification' theory which holds that in 'such 'communities' residents are likely to have an intention...to act in certain ways towards one another, to respond to each other in particular ways, and to value each other as a member of a group' (1989).

Mabileau *et al.* (1989) believed that 'a person's notion of a community is inextricably related to that person's ideological stance on a range of other values. Thus, the attributes of a community will be significantly different for a person on the political left compared to someone on the political right; this will apply also to any strongly held value or ideological position, political, environmental, religious. Of course, strongly held views may often be counter-poised by opposing but equally strongly held counter-views which may militate against community cohesion.

Potentially, this may in turn affect the types of issues and actions taken in pursuit of community values'. They also suggested the 'possibility that locality and community are entirely irrelevant in the modern era...that people are moved by interests that transcend locality, with class, status or profession. Indeed, some may regard these as non-spatial communities'.

Within any one neighbourhood or city there may then be many diverse communities and within each of these there will be many diverse opinions. Each individual may belong to a number of unconnected communities even within the local council boundaries or, for example, within their ethnic group and yet have no meaningful relationships with their neighbours. The observations of one of the authors of this article, as a participant observer, led him to draw the following conclusions:

Despite the best of intentions, policies and publicity on the part of councils and local activists, communities will not form, nor will citizens participate, unless the circumstances are such that individuals will recognise the necessity of joining with other residents in a common cause and will be enabled in doing so.

Within the boundaries of local governments many potential 'communities of interest' exist, as the citizens have similar interests at stake that are often under threat from their local and other authorities. This could be particularly so following involvement in a disaster or crisis. However, this potential to come together as a community with a common cause is,

too often, not realised even when the residents have similar ideologies. Conflict is often present, as is the opportunity to compete for scarce economic, political and social resources, all of which would otherwise normally assist in the development of the community.

Examples of types of communities

- **Communities of affection or function:** may be based on ethnicity, class or gender when they have emotional ties with each other, where there's a group sharing something together. (Ife 1995)
- **Communities of competition:** where groups come together as they compete in temporary alliance for economic, political &/or social resources; even these temporary alliances may generate some community cohesion.
- **Communities of interest:** are based not on area but on the basis of industry, labour, social or recreational interests as we may find with union members, industry associations or primary producers associations.
- **Communities of status groupings and interest:** are based on occupation, income level and type and level of skill may co-exist within a given local government area; e.g. manual workers, professionals, farmers, service workers, non paid workers (retired, unemployed, home duties).

Communities are not static entities and they may disintegrate rather than develop. For instance changes in the industrial or commercial base such as due to factory closure, failure of industry to maintain its position may lead to population losses, changes in community priorities or even the fragmentation of the community into competing and antagonistic groups. One industry towns are very vulnerable. Stagnant towns means youths move that leads to more stagnation. Changes in technology affects a town e.g. banking technology means fewer staff are needed which leads to closure which leads to unemployment of youths and the loss of bank families and of professional talent in the community and the cycle continues. Government decisions on railways, freeways, schools, disaster management and relief packages along with regionalisation all lead to growth or decline in rural and regional cities in particular.

Community formation and participation

From the research of one of the authors on participation at the level of local government (Marsh 1997) the actual circumstances present at a particular time

within a person's life-cycle and in a particular local area determined:

- who the participants in local issues were at the level of local government
- how many people gathered, understood what was in their perceived best interests and contributed to individual and group goals and directions
- what their responses would be and the effectiveness of these responses.

Different responses were present in neighbouring streets, not only due to conflict over ideological views and to support or non-support for proposed development, but because differences existed in the residents' commitment to activism.

In some neighbourhoods a single community formed centred on a particular issue; in others, separate communities often at variance with each other formed despite the issue being the same for both neighbourhoods; while in others there was a complete lack of any cohesive response to a particular threat or issue.

What was evident from the surveys in the three cities[1], was that not only did the majority of residents not form or join a community group to address an issue, 58 per cent of them had never taken up any issue individually with their council. This was despite the fact that in many of the areas surveyed there were substantial issues needing to be addressed.

The St Kilda residents surveyed were the most likely to have taken up one issue or more, perhaps because they were the most highly educated of the respondents from the three cities. The implications of such findings for emergency managers needs to be taken into account in any recovery programs. Many residents just do not have the skills necessary to participate in such programs nor do they have access to information that would help them in the understanding of such processes.

From the research in these three cities, circumstances, including the mechanisms established by the council enabling participation and information dissemination, determined:

- the composition, if one was formed, of a group of like-minded citizens at any one time
- how residents viewed their neighbourhood (was it a temporary abode, a dormitory to go home to?)
- the degree of conflict and competition for scarce resources present which

might aid community formation

- whether empowerment of the less privileged existed
- whether any residents were aware of policies and proposals that may have affected them
- if residents who were aware subsequently contacted fellow residents
- the commonality of the residents including the ideological approaches present (for example conservative or altruistic or Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY)
- the degree of community concern, competence and the effectiveness of any submission presented by them
- the skills available to the community; the level of access they had to the council; and, how comfortable residents felt in their dealings with the bureaucracy in particular

While the composition of the community was important, it was not simply the 'haves' who formed communities and participated while the 'have nots' did not. While the haves are the most likely participants, and are therefore most likely to be positive beneficiaries of the recovery processes, these people also have often been excluded from the participatory processes or they may have excluded themselves. Prior to the most effective participation of any citizen occurring, the long-term, full development of the citizen particularly in the area of skills development needs to be present and many of the haves also feel that they are lacking in this field.

To summarise then, proximity does not always equal community in fact in many geographic areas there may be a number of communities often in conflict with each other. Even outside threats e.g. development or response to a disaster may not lead to a community developing or to re-bonding as there may not have been any community togetherness prior to the event.

Implications for emergency management

We have indicated that while there is no single community that embraces all citizens and represents a coherent and cohesive expression of all their beliefs, opinions and aspirations there are multiple communities that co-exist in time and space. We have also suggested that within the community as defined by a given geographical area there may be groups that compete with each other for limited resources.

This suggests three issues to us:

- Emergency management planners need

to be more astute and sophisticated in the ways in which they analyse communities. They can no longer assume simply that there is a single, unified community that is all that has to be engaged in planning and management of hazards, risks and emergencies.

- We need to be more shrewd in how we develop strategies for engaging the various communities that co-exist within a given government area and how we mediate between competing interests.
- We need to develop skills and techniques for including diverse and sometimes differing groups and their aspirations in the planning and management processes. Moving from unity to diversity will require us to apply skills of negotiation and conflict management that we have rarely applied previously.

Dealing with these issues therefore necessitates re-skilling, to a greater or lesser extent, of agencies involved in emergency management. We therefore have to meet our own challenges first and then move on to provide better support to the community in planning and management.

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