

# Working with the community in emergency risk management

## Introduction

In recent years the emergency management (EM) sector in Australia has been gradually adopting the risk management framework as a way of more comprehensively dealing with risks likely to lead to emergencies and disasters. Emergency risk management (ERM) is becoming a key tool for organising the full range of activities emergency managers undertake.

ERM has been the result of a translation of the risk management process, as outlined in the risk management standard (Standards Australia 1995), into a form that is appropriate for the emergency management context. The main issue in this translation has been the adoption of a process that was designed for managing risks to *organisations* in a context where the focus is on risks to *communities*. There are quite fundamental differences between fairly 'bounded' entities like organisations that have clear goals compared with multi-layered and unbounded entities like communities. Without going into detail about the differences here, an important facet of working in the community context is the greater number and range of 'stakeholders' involved in the process. Communication and consultation is a central part of any risk management process, and this is even more the case with ERM. As a consequence, the ERM process as espoused by emergency management practitioners, places great stress on working with the community through 'communication and consultation' (EMA 2000; Qld Dept of Emergency Services 1999).

As part of its role in assisting the EM sector implement ERM, Emergency Management Australia has been involved in a number of 'case studies' around the country. These case studies provide a way of gaining insights into how the process is actually working and valuable learnings for those who will undertake it. Most of the case-study projects are still in their early stages, as are many of the ERM projects being undertaken throughout Australia. One key theme that is already emerging from the case studies however is the complexity and difficulty of doing community consultation.

In this article, I want to briefly focus on

by Mark Scillio, Senior Education Officer,  
Emergency Management Australia  
Institute

one aspect of community consultation—the issue that ERM practitioners face in deciding what is the right 'level' or 'degree' of working with and involving the community. I do not want to give any didactic directives about how they might do this. There is a mountain of texts and resources on the topic (which *are* by the way very important and need to be drawn upon). What I want to do instead is briefly reflect on this issue using the case studies and our experience at EMA as a springboard. In this way I hope to stimulate further debate about the meaning of working with the community in the ERM context.

## Community

One issue in deciding how to work with the community is the problem inherent in trying to define *who* the community is. This is not a new problem, and certainly not confined to EM. In a recent issue of the Australian Journal of Emergency Management, Marsh and Buckle (2001) argue that emergency managers tend to use an oversimplified and essentially false notion of 'community'. This notion has the effect of obscuring the mixed composition and complex layerings of actual community life, which thus ultimately leads to a failure in targeting services to community needs and concerns. The authors argue that we need to start employing a more sophisticated understanding of community.

In a related way, the complexity of communities has ramifications for how we involve people in the ERM process. If the standard notion of community misses the mark, then likewise for our common notions of community consultation. If we are not taking *who* we need to involve seriously enough, then we may not be able to know *how* to involve them adequately or *why* it will be of benefit. Therefore, as a follow on to the issues raised by Marsh and Buckle (2001), we also need to

broaden our understanding of community involvement.

## The objectives of practitioners

A good place to start in prising open this issue is to look at different reasons for working with the community. The case studies are providing some interesting insights into the range of reasons practitioners are citing for engaging the community. These reasons include:

- we want political support for the project—we want to legitimise the process
- we want to provide information and knowledge to the community—to inform, to 'educate' them
- we want the community to support our project
- we want to know what the community members' views are—eg. what they think, their perceptions of risk, their expectations of us
- we need people to provide us with their local knowledge about the area—we need people to tell us things we don't know
- we want people's 'buy in', and for them to have some 'ownership' of the project
- we want people to participate in the project—we want people to work on things with us, to do things for us
- we want people to change their behaviour in relation to risks

As this list shows, there is a range of reasons for consulting. It could be argued that all of these reasons are part of genuinely and successfully working with the community. But at the same time, a focus on one reason can lead to ignoring the others.

The different reasons ERM practitioners cite for involving the community raises the question of what is an appropriate 'level' or 'form' of working with the community? There is no definitive answer to this question. I would like to touch on three reasons why this is the case. The first one relates to the variability in ways of undertaking ERM, the second to the nature of the ERM process itself, and the third to the ways we define consultation.

## The variability of projects

To some extent there is no definitive

answer to this question because ERM can be conducted in an infinite range of ways. How ERM is undertaken will shape the kinds of community engagement necessary for it to work. The case-study projects for example exhibit a diversity in ways of conducting the process, and it is not easy to type-cast any of them. One of the projects for example is being conducted at State level. The ‘community’ of interest in this case is the entire population of the State. This has definite implications for consultation and how much one can actually involve the public in the process. It is obviously completely impractical to discuss the issues with all the members of the State. Some other level of ‘representation’ or ‘sampling’ is needed. At the other end of the spectrum, another of the case studies is being conducted in a small semi-rural local government area. This project has been able to directly involve a range of community members in its implementation and draw on the views of the majority of households within the Shire. The scale of the project therefore is one factor in shaping its implementation and the possibilities for working with the community.

### The nature of the ERM process

This variation and flexibility in undertaking ERM brings us to the second point—the nature of the process itself. ERM can be done in so many ways because it is an *abstract* process. By this I mean that it is an intellectual framework for solving problems (ie. managing risks) at a very general level. It is not related to any particular problem or risk, but a series of steps to deal with any problems. To this extent it is a ‘big picture’ management process, technically able to draw into its ambit anything that practitioners are prepared to grapple with. In addition, ERM is a process designed to deal with multiple problems (multi-hazard, multi-risk, diverse communities) at the same time.

Where the complexity comes in is that implementing ERM involves handling the overall management of a range of problems at a general level, as well as managing particular problems in very specific ways. This introduces the issue of a mix of different goals and objectives within the process. On the one hand the goal of ‘managing risk’ at a general level is fairly intangible. It is a goal that you are never sure you have reached. In fact, there is no stated ‘endpoint’ in the process. The guidelines stipulate that the process needs to be worked through and revisited constantly.

On the other hand, ERM also involves doing something about or *treating* particular risks. This entails identifying, choosing and implementing solutions to particular problems. In this case, its goals are quite tangible and familiar to practitioners. Our experience of teaching ERM at the Australian Emergency Management Institute bears this point out with practitioners very often impatient with early stages of the process, the ‘big picture stuff’, and eager to ‘get to the real nuts and bolts stuff’ of treating risks.

This mix of tangible and intangible goals has implications for how to work with the community. For example, in the ‘establish the context’, and ‘identify risk’ stages, there is a need to discover the community’s perceptions about what risks exist and how important these are regarded as issues in their lives. This stage is about establishing what the problems really are and making sure that the project is relevant to the community. Working with the community here could be focused on asking people what they think.

Later in the process when it comes to doing something about particular risks—implementing solutions—practitioners often want community members to do things themselves, to take on responsibility for risk reduction, for changing risky behaviour. Here the focus is squarely on community members taking control of the issues for themselves.

In short then, practitioners have different immediate objectives in relation to working with the community at different stages of the process. This is one reason for the broad range of practitioners’ responses given in the case studies.

### Definitions of consultation

A third aspect of the difficulty in determining the level of engagement with community relates to our concepts. We have a problem of definition. For instance, when we use the term ‘consultation’, what do we mean? A glance at the Australian Oxford dictionary (Hughes, et al. 1992) shows that ‘to consult’ means variously:

- to seek information or advice from a person
- to refer to a person for advice, an opinion
- to seek permission or approval from a person for a proposed action
- to take into account, to consider feelings and interests.

The term itself therefore contains a range of possibilities. It is a bit like ‘how long is a piece of string?’ *Where* a practitioner, committee or organisation chooses to cut the string depends on values,

commitments, perceptions, practicalities, politics et cetera.

So far, I have been using the terms ‘consultation’, ‘involvement’, ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ interchangeably. This slippage between terms reflects the overlap between the meanings and the fact that there is a broad range of possible levels of working with the community contained within them. Referring again to the reasons given by practitioners for consulting, it is apparent these different degrees of working with the community are implied in their responses. Some reasons are simply about asking people what they think, others are about wanting to give people some control over an issue.

The question again then is how does one decide on the degree of engagement? Here the risk management standard itself or the ERM guidelines do not offer us many insights.

A useful typology to introduce is one developed in another area of public policy—that of community health. Smithies and Webster (1998) outline a ‘ladder of participation’ (Table 1). This ladder has its origins in American social planning circles (Arnstein 1969). Depicted are the degrees of participation that a health organisation may elicit from community members (participants) in regard to a program or decision-making process.

This table is very useful because it defines, in this case ‘participation’, as a continuum of activities. ‘Consultation’ has a fairly circumscribed place on the ladder in this reading, but we could equally see all of these as degrees of consultation, or degrees of working with the community. The theme running through this continuum, however, is about how much *control* community members have in the decision making process.

Whatever words we use to describe working with the community, the issue therefore is about the power to make decisions. An important point to emphasise is that power will always be shared. A practitioner or committee facilitating ERM will always have some power over the process. The issue is the extent to which this power might be shared with members of the community at any particular stage of the process.

Interestingly, there is a degree of similarity between the different levels of participation depicted in the table above and the reasons for consultation provided by practitioners in the ERM case studies. We can construct a table, similar to that of Smithies and Webster, linking practitioner’s reasons for consulting with different degrees of power sharing (Table 2).


Degree	Participants' action	Illustrative mode
Low  High	None	The community is told nothing
	Receives information	The organisation makes a plan and announces it. The community is convened for informational purposes; compliance is expected.
	Is consulted	The organisation tries to promote a plan and seeks to develop the support which will facilitate acceptance or give sufficient sanction to the plan so that administrative compliance can be expected.
	Advises	The organisation presents a plan and invites questions. It is prepared to modify the plan only if absolutely necessary.
	Plans jointly	The organisation presents a tentative plan subject to change and invites recommendations from those affected. It expects to change the plan at least slightly and perhaps even more subsequently.
	Has delegated authority	The organisation identifies and presents a problem to the community, defines the limits, and asks the community to make a series of decisions which can be embodied in a plan which it will accept.
	Has control	The organisation asks the community to identify the problem and to make all of the key decisions regarding goals and means. It is willing to help the community at each step to accomplish its own goals, even to the extent of administrative control of the program.

Table 1: Ladder of participation (Smithies & Webster 1998).


Degree of power sharing	Reason for consulting
Low  High	We do not want the community to know
	We want to give the community information
	We want the community to support us in this project
	We want some limited input from the community; we want to 'hear' their views
	We want the community's input to help us make decisions; we want to use some of their local knowledge
	We want the community to make some decisions in parts of the process
	We want the community to take major responsibility for key parts of the process; we want them to significantly take control of risk reduction activities

Table 2: Practitioner's reasons for consulting with different degrees of power sharing.

Although this is a rough sketch, Table 2 provides a tool for practitioners to think about their reasons for working with the community in terms of the amount of control or power they are prepared to share with others. It brings to light a dimension of the issue of decision making which was hidden in their original list of reasons.

Returning to a remark made earlier, these points are not intended to provide directives on how to work with the community. Rather, that different ways of working and involving others are not only about the articulated reasons for doing so — ie. what you are trying to achieve in the process — they are also about a dimension of power that is often overlooked.

### Final note

I have briefly touched on some issues

related to one aspect of working with the community — determining the level or degree of involvement to pursue. There are of course many other aspects of working with the community that need to be debated.

What the points raised here attempt to do is stimulate further discussion about the issue in the emergency risk management context. The ERM case studies are providing useful material for this purpose. Ultimately, I want to stress the importance of being clear about what we are doing when we say we are 'consulting the community'.

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