

# Integration of Emergency Risk Management into West Australian Indigenous communities

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## Summary

The Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia (FESA) has developed a framework to coordinate the introduction of the emergency risk management process into West Australian Indigenous communities. The Framework evolved from an original project originally funded by the EMA Projects Program in 2000. The draft FESA Framework was distributed to key FESA Directors for consideration as it is not intended to replace or halt existing initiatives, rather to enhance their effectiveness and to consolidate the efforts of the various FESA divisions to ensure a common and economically sound outcome. The first project focused on the development of a training program that was culturally appropriate and effective for use with indigenous communities irrespective of their location within Western Australia. The Framework includes a strategic overview, roles and responsibilities, outcomes and evaluation strategies. The Framework was developed to be consistent with FESA's values while acknowledging the specific cultural needs of West Australian indigenous communities.

## Introduction

Emergency risk management has been progressively integrated into West Australian emergency arrangements since July 1999 with assistance from the Australian Government through Emergency Management Australia. Most of the effort to date centres on the provision of a one-day workshop in Local Emergency Management Committees and the selection of key personnel to attend further emergency risk management training provided by Emergency Management Australia and coordinated locally by FESA.

The Pilbara/Kimberley region is located in the north of Western Australia spanning an area of 926,451 square kilometres. The population of these combined regions is 75,705 and of that number there are 16,700 Indigenous people living in major towns and remote communities throughout the area. Between April and November, the coastline is subjected to tropical weather conditions and is in a high-risk area for natural disasters such as tropical cyclone, flood, isolation (due to road closures) and fire in the dry season.

During the late 1970's and early 1980's, missions were handed back to Indigenous people, and many family groups returned to their homeland communities. The population of the communities varied from 50 to 1000 people. Many of the communities were located on riverbanks or pastoral properties and during the wet season could be isolated from the major towns for extended periods of time. Access into the community was by road and only in some cases by air, which was usually poorly maintained due to lack of financial and physical resources. As a result during the tropical wet season the people found themselves either facing the threat of tropical cyclones, flood, isolation or fire.

Although, the handover was considered a positive move for indigenous people, they were faced with many obstacles, especially during the tropical wet season. Preliminary research undertaken by FESA showed that a risk assessment or an audit of the community was not carried out prior to handover of the land back to the people. The physical infrastructure was old, run down, damaged and the buildings were not built to cyclone or flood specifications. In the early days of re-settlement back to the lands, communities often weren't appropriately funded to cater for emergency situations. As a consequence people were unaware of the risks to themselves and the environment, therefore, no emergency management arrangements were in place. In the past Indigenous people were not required to manage their own affairs and these matters were taken care of by either the missionaries or the pastoralist. The people found themselves with no real knowledge or awareness of the risks that they would face, who they

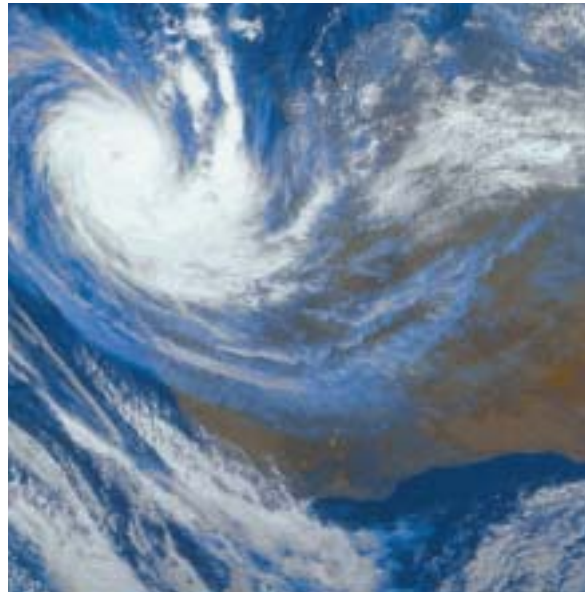
should contact for assistance, or what strategies they needed to put into place in the area of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery for the wet or fire seasons.

Over the past ten years, a number of these communities were forced to evacuate due to flooding and tropical cyclones and requests for assistance to resupply essential food and fuel supplies were common. The absence of an appropriate emergency risk management assessment was brought to the attention of FESA and other government services. The lack of awareness the people had on how they should manage and prepare for these events became an issue for a whole-of-government approach to emergency management. Evacuations and resupply caused an enormous amount of stress to the people and was extremely costly to the state government. FESA was contacted annually by the same communities requesting assistance for the transport of essential food and fuel supplies to those communities. As the housing and infrastructure were substandard and not built to appropriate building standards, it was too risky to allow people to remain in the community especially if there were Category 5 tropical cyclones or heavy flooding in the area.

During the wet season of 2000/2001, heavy flooding and a number of, Category 5 tropical cyclones threatened the communities along the Pilbara/Kimberley coast. Several Communities were evacuated and requests for assistance came to FESA to resupply communities with essential food and fuel commodities. The cost to the state government was extremely high and FESA embarked on a proactive approach to address the recurring problems.

In August 2000, FESA submitted an application for funding to Emergency Management Australia to undertake a natural hazard risk management assessment of remote Indigenous communities. The purpose of completing an assessment in the communities was to assist in the capacity building of community members so major risks to the community were identified and that the necessary treatment options for prevention of, preparedness for, response to and recovery from major natural hazard/risks could be put in place for the safety of the people and environment.

The proposal was funded and it was anticipated that the process would be done in twelve communities in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions. However, many obstacles and barriers were to arise during that period with extensive operational duties taking up a major portion of the project management team's time and FESA was forced to review the project to address delivery outcomes and propose a new timeframe. After reviewing the project timeframe FESA applied to Emergency Management Australia to decrease the number of communities. Once EMA endorsed the application FESA commenced the process in the Bidyadanga Community.



*The Pilbara/Kimberley region in Western Australia is subjected to tropical weather conditions and is a high-risk area for natural disasters such as tropical cyclones*

A community that was located in a high-risk area for tropical cyclones and had been evacuated on at least five occasions over a period of wet seasons.

The FESA Community Liaison Officers from the Pilbara and Kimberley regions worked with the Bidyadanga Community Council to commence the Emergency Risk Management process. Although they were able to go through the process they found that the training materials were too wordy, highly academic, not visual enough and the language was not consistent with that spoken by members of the community. During the workshop the project team spent a large amount of time interpreting the language to more commonly used words used by the people. After the workshop the project team again reviewed the project and process and realized that much of the time was spent interpreting the material and that it was not culturally appropriate for an indigenous audience. FESA identified a need to address this problem prior to commencing the process with another community so it was more user-friendly and easier to deliver.

An application was made to Emergency Management Australia to re-scope the project so that FESA could integrate and adapt the existing material and resources. This enabled the project team to modify the existing materials, including presentation, language and delivery strategies—this was developed and reviewed by an Indigenous reference group, with two people assisting as members of the writing team. The reference group is made up of Indigenous peoples throughout the state of Western Australia, who have either lived or worked, in remote communities.

## The FESA Framework

The Framework consists of four key elements including strategic overview, roles and responsibilities, action plan outlining key outcomes, and broad evaluation strategies. A number of key documents were referenced to during the development of the Framework including:

- the current FESA Strategic Plan,
- the *Statement of Commitment to a New and Just Relationship between the Government of Western Australia and Aboriginal Western Australians*, and
- Emergency Risk Management Manuals published by Emergency Management Australia, and other relevant emergency management documents.

Part of the project strategy included a brief literature review of other training support materials used in the delivery of community development and capacity building type programs to indigenous communities. The Framework has encouraged a whole-of-organisation approach to the integration of emergency risk management to Indigenous communities—it is anticipated that it will also provide the means through which best practice models can be identified and promoted through all government agencies.

## Strategic Overview

The overall aim of the Framework is to identify projects and opportunities which increase the capacity of West Australian Indigenous communities to integrate the emergency risk management process into their community management structure.

The Framework seeks to establish a unified FESA approach for the integration of emergency risk management into West Australian Indigenous Communities through the Community Safety, Fire Services, State Emergency Service and Emergency Management Services divisions. The Framework consists of two key projects that require input from all FESA divisions as well as other government agencies. The key outcomes of the Framework include:

- Development of a culturally appropriate training program and support material to facilitate the introduction of the emergency risk management process into Indigenous communities.
- Development of a planning strategy for the integration of community-centred emergency risk management projects into existing management structures and processes.
- Development of key indicators that measure indigenous communities' acceptance of the emergency risk management process.



*As the only access to some communities is via road or air, the wet season can isolate people from the major towns for extended periods of time.*

- Strategies to enhance the Framework by capturing best practice and lessons learned from community based projects support by FESA.

### Roles and Responsibilities

The Framework incorporates the existing (including statutory) roles and responsibilities of a number of organisations. The following list is not exhaustive and has been developed acknowledging that flexibility is required in order to achieve the specific outcomes identified in the Framework.

- The Australian Government specifically Emergency Management Australia (funding for Project 1, establishing the Indigenous Communities Committee, undertaking research on emergency management issues and Indigenous communities) and ATSIC (providing a direct link to regional and community governance structures and identification of sources of funding to continue the work involved in the Framework)
- FESA Divisions including Community Safety (Project Manager and community liaison), Emergency Management Services (project administration and coordination, emergency management issues) State Emergency Service and Volunteer Marine Rescue Services (community liaison and consultation, ongoing monitoring and review of the process within indigenous communities), and Fire Services (community liaison and consultation, on-going monitoring and review of the process within Indigenous communities.)
- Other state government agencies who are members of the State Mitigation Committee—Senior Officer's Working Group.
- Associations and Community Groups who are members of the Project Reference Group and represent organisations including the vocational education and training sector (TAFE), Jigalong Community, Kimberley Language Resource Centre, Pilbara Women's Action Committee and Wilerguthar Training and Development Group.

### Outcomes

The outcomes of the project have been identified over the period commencing July 2002 and concluding in June 2007. The outcomes for 2002-2003 included:

- Development of a FESA Framework which included consultation with FESA senior management, endorsement
- Complete Project Fund (funded by EMA)
- Development and implementation of Project 1

### Evaluation

The Framework is continually evaluated to ensure it remains relevant, effective and culturally sensitive. Through informal and formal consultations the Project Managers collect feedback on the effectiveness of the Framework and its associated projects.

### Project 1

During May 2003, the Project Reference Group met with the Project Team in Perth to workshop the key concepts identified in the Framework. The workshop aim was to extend partnerships with indigenous representatives to identify messages and develop materials for the integration of the emergency risk management process into Indigenous communities. During the workshop, the facilitators called upon the ideas and suggestions of the representatives to inform the outputs of the project, and to ensure it meets the needs and the end user—WA's Indigenous communities.

The objectives of the workshop included:

- Providing an overview of Project 1 and presenting any work completed to date by the Project Writing Team to the Project Reference Group to review.
- Identifying key messages and concepts for inclusion in the emergency risk management workshop delivery strategy:
- Identifying culturally appropriate contemporary images and messages to increase interest in emergency risk management communities.
- Identifying and debate text-based and multi-media learning strategies for the delivery of emergency risk management messages into indigenous communities and:
- Reviewing the current project plan for Project 1 and determine the next stage of the project.

The participants at the May workshop identified a number of principles that must be considered when working with Indigenous peoples on projects within their communities. In summary, Indigenous peoples:

- Should be given the freedom to take care of the land and have access to the land, as this is what they had done prior to settlement.
- Need to be prepared within their communities, so that they know what to do during a natural disaster.
- May not be living on their traditional land therefore the degree of perception of risk from within a community's traditional practice or 'Western ways' may be difficult to determine.
- Experience problems understanding what non-Aboriginal people are saying, (this also includes educated Aboriginal people).
- Need to understand that there are consequences associated with not engaging in emergency risk management.



- Have a governance system that will impact on the way in which the emergency risk management project is implemented within individual communities.
- Would be more likely to move away from an area, including their homeland, when there is an impending natural disaster.

That there is an assumption that Indigenous people do not understand what is meant by risk and what should be done in terms of treating the sources of risk. Indigenous peoples have undertaken community based risk management practices for hundreds of years using 'aboriginal science'. The participants at the workshop identified the importance of combining aboriginal science with new approaches to community-based risk management in order to create a safety culture within the communities. People who propose to work with Indigenous peoples in the area of emergency risk management must be prepared to be flexible with the traditional business of the communities.

Indigenous people are known to be multi-sensory learners that is they relate to, and are stimulated by pictures, videos and diagrams relating to the subject matter. The participants at the workshop supported the concept of using multimedia where possible and appropriate to deliver the emergency risk management messages. Community Elders are seen as the keepers of knowledge and the people within a community. Any project working with a community must first identify. The Elders and who has the authority to speak on behalf of the community. This will enable a facilitator to speak to the people as a collective group and source their opinions on matters relating to the community.

The key messages of the community-centred emergency risk management process must relate to practical living situations and identify with the protocols of the community. Examples of some of the changes to the text of the conventional approach includes:

#### **Establishing the Context**

- What are the strengths of the Community?
- What is the daily business of the people in the Community?
- Who are the leaders of the Community? What are their shared roles and responsibilities.
- Who would be the best person to be the communicator of the messages to the people of the community?

#### **Identify the Risk**

- What are the dangers?
- How much danger is there to the community?
- Is there a danger of something happening in the community?



*Risk management processes must relate to practical living situations*

#### **Analyse Risk**

- What is the worst thing that could happen to the community? (Consequence)
- Has it happened before (likelihood)?
- How many times has it happened before? (Likelihood)
- Will it happen again (Likelihood)?

#### **Evaluate Risk**

- Are there any dangers, which are acceptable to the Community?
- How dangerous are the dangers to the Community?
- What problems can the danger cause to the Community?
- What dangers are we going to fix or prevent first?

## Treat Risk

- Which is the best way to solve the dangers to the community?
- What are the options for solving the danger?
- What can we do about the danger?
- Are there any negatives and/or positives for the way we look after the danger?
- How much is it going to cost to fix the danger?
- Does the way create any danger/problems for any neighboring communities?

## Field Trials

The first visit was conducted in August 2003 in the Bardi-One Arm Point, Lombadina and Djarindjin communities. The purpose of the field trial was to pilot the community-centred emergency risk management process that has been redeveloped using a consultative process. The two objectives of the visit were to trial the redeveloped materials with the communities and the development of a risk register and risk treatment schedule. The approach adopted for the visit included using the concepts and words that were developed during the first workshop in May, to deliver the emergency risk management message to the communities. Secondly, flexibly integrate emergency risk

management processes within the community's existing hazard management structure. Most importantly was to follow the community's lead on the implementation of the key concepts by undertaking a risk assessment of the community using a 'walking tour/story telling approach.'

## Next Steps

The first project within the Framework is scheduled to conclude at the end of September 2003 with the output informing future projects and developments for the integration of emergency risk management into indigenous communities.

## References

- Emergency Management Australia (2000) *Emergency Risk Management Applications Guide*
- Emergency Management Australia (2002) *Guidelines for Emergency Managers working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities*
- Statement of Commitment to a New and Just Relationship between the Government of Western Australia and Aboriginal Western Australians*

## New Member of Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum

In the November 2003 edition of the Australian Journal of Emergency Management (AJEM) there was an article entitled: *Volunteerism in emergency management in Australia: directions and developments since the National Volunteer Summit of 2001*. On page 32 of that article, the membership of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF) was listed. Unfortunately, the names of two agencies were missing from that list – the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul. Both of these organisations have an important role in Australia's emergency management arrangements and make a significant contribution to the AEMVF. AJEM apologises for this omission.

Since the last edition of AJEM, another organisation has also been added to the AEMVF—the Australian Institute of Emergency Services (AIES). The AIES operates nationally, providing a common forum to both professional and volunteer emergency service members. Membership is open to bona fide members of emergency services and associated support services; after completing a qualifying period. The Institute provides its members with an open forum for discussion, debate and the exchange of ideas. It provides regular dinner meetings with informative guest speakers, conferences, newsletters and the quarterly magazine, "National Emergency Response", which features articles on current trends, policy, training issues and new products. The aim of the institute is to maintain the highest level of service to the community through its emergency services and supporting services. The AIES representative on the AEMVF will be Mr Allan Holley.