

Community capacity building: Learning from the 2003 Canberra bushfires

*Winkworth, Healy, Woodward and Camilleri examine what helps
and hinders community capacity building.*

Abstract

Research into what happens to communities after disasters is one way of understanding the elements of community capacity building and the actions that help and hinder these processes. In recent years a number of large scale disasters both onshore and offshore have become the focus of Australian State and Commonwealth disaster recovery efforts. These have provided opportunities to reflect on successful elements of 'community recovery' including what 'communities' do themselves to assist 'recovery' and what governments can do to enable and actively facilitate the 'recovery' process. Through an examination of a recent study on the recovery of people affected by the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) bushfires (known as the Canberra Bushfires) (Camilleri et al, 2007), this paper examines what helps and what hinders community capacity building, including the role of social networks and supports and community engagement activities. It also contributes to a broader knowledge base about the importance of governments recognising and enabling the development of social networks which help people 'get by', and 'get ahead', and which foster a sense of control over their lives. This knowledge can usefully frame actions used in the pursuit of many other desired policy outcomes linked to community capacity building.

Introduction

Although disasters impact upon individuals, they do not happen to individuals per se (Hutton, 2001). Disasters more accurately represent collective stress situations occurring at a community level as a result of major unwanted consequences. It has been argued that one of the defining aspects of a 'disaster' is the sense that a group of people make of an event – the shared

identity that they, together, have been affected by major catastrophe. As Gist and Lubin explain, a disaster is inherently defined by its relationship to community –

a cataclysm qualifies as a disaster only to the extent that it overwhelms the capacity of a community to contain and control its consequences (1999, p. 352 in Hutton, 2001).

With most Australian disaster recovery literature tending to focus on the immediate aftermath and short term recovery phases after a disaster, questions remain about what happens to 'communities' affected by disasters in the longer term. What follows the initial upsurge of collective unity? Do the "social cleavage planes" which follow the initial phases (Gordon, 2004) invariably undermine the social fabric of communities? Can governments promote social cohesion by enabling the strengthening of the social networks that develop in the aftermath of disaster? How can governments ensure that vulnerable groups are actively supported and included?

Through an examination of a recent study on the recovery of people affected by the Canberra Bushfires (Camilleri et al, 2007), this paper examines what helps and what hinders community capacity building, including the role of social networks and supports, formal services and community engagement activities. It contributes to the broader knowledge base of community capacity building so that this knowledge can usefully frame the pursuit of other desired policy outcomes linked to community capacity building.

Disaster Recovery – an outcome and a process

Within the context of disaster management the terms 'recovery', 'resilience' and 'community capacity building' are often defined, interchangeably, in two broad ways: firstly as a desired outcome and, secondly as a process leading to a desired outcome. Within each of these broad conceptualisations it is possible to consider both outcomes and processes that apply firstly to the actions of individuals and communities and secondly, to the role of governments seeking to facilitate 'recovery'.

Recovery as an outcome

The notion that optimal recovery is restoration to an initial equilibrium point is increasingly being challenged (Maguire & Hagan, 2007). Concepts such as 'closure', so often referred to by the media and others, are regarded now as having very little, if any, useful place; instead, there is recognition that various aspects of grief alternate and re-emerge with unexpected intensity, particularly with anniversaries and other significant events (Rando, 1993) and that the challenge for people affected is how they reengage with a world which for most is forever transformed by loss (Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

The disaster literature increasingly focuses on the notion of increased community resilience after disasters as a desirable and achievable social policy goal. Resilient individuals and communities adapt to new circumstance, learn from disaster experiences and are capable of attaining higher levels of functioning (Maguire and Hagan, 2007). Berke and Campanella (Berke & Campanella, 2006), for example, consider the significant challenges of achieving resilience in the context of the catastrophic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita in the United States.

Resilience is the ability to survive future natural disasters with minimum loss of life and property, as well as the ability to create a greater sense of place among residents; a stronger, more diverse economy; and a more economically integrated and diverse population (Vale and Campanella, 2005 in Berke and Campanella, 2006).

Recovery processes – building community capacity

'Recovery' is also no longer only regarded as a desirable end point; it now signifies the active processes involved in integrating traumatic events and minimising their destructive impacts, so that individuals, communities and governments are able to move forward into a post-disaster future.

The active processes involved in building community strength and resilience in this context involve actions, firstly, on the part of individuals and communities helping themselves, and secondly, a set of interventions on the part of governments to build more resilient social, economic, physical and natural environments.

Through an analysis of the research into recovery after the 2003 Canberra Bushfires in the Australian Capital Territory this paper considers the practical meaning of these processes in relation to the social environment, that is, enabling and strengthening the social networks and community development activities which can positively impact on individual and community capacity.

The Canberra Bushfire research

Canberra, Australia's capital city, is also its largest inland city with a population of 332,000. The city, located at the northern end of the Australian Capital Territory, has a planned layout and urban landscape reflective of the city's major role as the seat of Federal Parliament and home to the national institutions that support it. Often called the "Bush Capital" Canberra covers an area of 805.6 square kilometres and the bushland within and surrounding it is a mixture of dry eucalyptus forests, scrubland, swamp, eucalyptus savanna and open grassland.

On January 18, 2003 Canberra experienced a devastating 'firestorm' in which 4 people died, 3 people were treated for serious burns, 49 people were admitted to ACT hospitals and 440 people received outpatient care. Within the space of a few hours, 488 houses were destroyed in both urban and rural ACT. Nearly 160,000 hectares were burnt including over 16,000 hectares of plantation forests and 31,000 hectares of rural leases. More than 5,000 people were evacuated to the emergency centres and many more fled to safety with family and friends (ACT Government, 2003).

Three years later research undertaken by a multidisciplinary research team¹ and funded by Emergency Management Australia and the ACT Government investigated the process of individual and community recovery. With a focus on the intermediate and longer term recovery the project investigated:

What individuals and communities did themselves to facilitate recovery and resilience:

- The role played by formal government and community recovery programs;
- Mental health outcomes for individuals; and
- Communication and information provision.

Two main strategies were used in the research. A questionnaire administered as a postal survey was distributed at the beginning of April 2006 to approximately 1600 households registered with the ACT Bushfire Recovery Centre. The survey comprised 126 questions enabling respondents to provide quantitative and qualitative responses on a range of topics related to the impact of the bushfire. It included multi-item ratings and a number of open-ended questions designed to elicit brief personal narratives concerning people's responses to the disaster, their stage in the recovery process and their perspectives on what people did to bring about 'recovery'.

Where possible standardised measures were incorporated into the survey and questions were based on those used in population surveys to enable

comparisons with epidemiological data. Care was taken not to include questions that might be considered too intrusive for a community postal survey or beyond the scope of issues relevant to the research. Surveys were sent out by the ACT Government's Bushfire Support Unit which held the data base of names of people registered as affected by the fires. Participation in the research was naturally voluntary and responses were returned, anonymously, in the reply paid envelopes enclosed with surveys. Data sets were obtained for 500 respondents who were 15 years of age and over (Camilleri et al, 2007).

The second strand involved follow-up face-to-face interviews with forty individuals selected from among those survey respondents who returned a separate form indicating interest in being interviewed. Many more respondents were interested in being interviewed than project resources allowed, so the research team was able to select a sample of interviewees on the basis of obtaining equal numbers of males and females and a good representation of ages, households with and without children, and varying locations of current residence (Camilleri et al, 2007). Interviews were focused around seven main topics:

1. Pathways since the bushfire
2. Personal well being
3. Social relationships
4. Local neighbourhood and community
5. Services received
6. Media and communication
7. Children (if relevant)

The findings discussed in this paper are primarily concerned with three of these areas: how family and social relationships, relationships with local neighbourhood and links with government assisted the 'recovery' process.

Ethical considerations

The research was approved by the ACT Health and Community Human Research Ethics Committee, and the Australian Catholic University and University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committees.

Given the possible adverse or unforeseen effects associated with research on survival of trauma, the team was aware of the 'duty of care' to participants and identified strategies for dealing with any adverse consequences of participation. Specific risk management/harm minimisation strategies were employed. For example, interviewees were experienced in working with people who have suffered trauma; they also had referral options for further counselling on hand if required.

Community capacity building after the Canberra bushfire

The terms 'capacity building', 'social capital' and 'social cohesion' are often used interchangeably in the literature. While acknowledging the subtle theoretical differences between these concepts, all have in common a reference to factors which contribute to the well-being and social and economic stability of a community (Dwyer, 2005) – such as levels of trust, support and the social networks or lack thereof which are critical to wellbeing, recovery and indeed 'resilience' after major adversity.

Woolcock and Narayan's 'synergy' model of social capital, for example, incorporates several dimensions which are useful in the analysis of how individuals and communities help themselves and each other after a disaster and how governments can enable or impact negatively on these processes. Three elements of the synergy theoretical model: - 'bonding' networks with family and friends, 'intra community bridging' to other networks and 'linking' to sources of formal power are considered in more detail here within the context of individual and community capacity building after the Canberra bushfires (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) (Healy, Hampshire, & Ayres, 2004).

Bonding Networks

These informal networks which refer to the connections that people have with family and close friends are considered important because they help people 'get by' and deal with the normal adversities of everyday life.

Approximately half (50.8%) of the 482 respondents to the question about lasting impacts of the fire indicated that it did not have a lasting effect on their relationships with family. Twenty five percent said the fires had a lasting effect for the better; 22.4% said the fire had a lasting effect for the worse (Camilleri, 2007p. 47).

However, when people were given an opportunity in the survey to list those factors that they felt had helped them recover, qualitative responses to the survey question clearly indicated the importance of family, friends and neighbours. They described this help in a variety of ways which indicate the importance of these groups helping people "get by" (Healy, Hampshire, & Ayres, 2004).

The practical and emotional support was important, as was talking with family, expressing feelings and sharing emotions with them. Simple acts of kindness by family members were important and remembered. The corollary of this was that family and friends were also mentioned frequently in the context of factors that delayed or hindered recovery. Hurt and disappointment and tension that can occur in relationships in the period after a disaster, or simply the gap that people feel if this kind of support is not available to them was evident in the interviews with some participants.

“Recovery” was hindered by “lack of close support and people who will listen to your pain” and “friends not understanding your situation”.

The interviews revealed it was often the person’s partner whose love and support was crucial to “getting by”, with a number of participants considering that sharing the experience of the fire and all the difficulties that resulted from it actually brought them closer and strengthened their relationship, which in turn helped them in their recovery.

In a few instances, people identified this as an unexpected positive outcome of the fire, which they felt on balance, outweighed all the negatives. Similarly, several commented that the loss of all their material possessions had made them more intensely aware of the importance of their family relationships and that this helped give them perspective as they came to terms with their losses and re-established their lives.

This kind of strong emotional support and understanding was mentioned frequently in interviews as coming from sources other than family as well. Survey respondents and interview participants commonly cited the importance of talking with friends and the helpfulness of friends who were able to be patient and not judge or hurry them, who understood that this was an experience from which it might take a long time to recover fully. It is clear that recovery for many people was facilitated by the opportunity to share the practical aspects of rebuilding with neighbours along with the ongoing social contact that occurs naturally with neighbours and that is all the more important when you have survived this kind of disaster together. The following quotes illustrate this:

Since the fire, the immediate area seems to have had a stronger bond. We have helped each other, been closer. Neighbourhood seems like a positive part of life after the fire.

There was always someone there. Even in my lowest periods, someone would just walk in... The help from friends and family was tremendous. They got me through. People I hadn’t heard from in ages were ringing and donating things to us. I knew I had a fairly large support base and they came forward quickly.

The importance of family and friends and their understanding of the impacts of disasters is a clear theme in this study. While most received support from both, there was also an element of disappointment expressed about those who clearly did not appreciate the medium and longer term impacts of trauma and loss. Community education is needed to help family and friends in these circumstances know how to respond, including realising the unintended negative impacts of some of their well meaning actions.

Intra-community bridging

Intra community bridging refers to the networks within a particular community or neighbourhood or across the borders of local communities which provide a basis for shared identification and support (Healy et al, 2004) and may enable increased access to resources and opportunities. These ties are especially important to disadvantaged groups because they can provide information and knowledge to deal with adverse circumstances that are outside the scope of their usual networks. They have been called, *ties that help extend people’s capacity to ‘get ahead’, rather than just ‘get by’* (Healy, et al, 2004).

There were numerous examples cited by respondents and participants of coming together with people they did not know, to organise community events and activities, to support each other socially and emotionally and to provide information to assist people to make the many decisions confronting them. New organisations such as the residents groups from the Mt Taylor estate, Chapman, Stromlo, Pierce’s Creek and Uriarra and the Phoenix Association arose out of the disaster.

Existing groups based around schools, churches, service groups, business, peak groups and other communities of interest such as the Weston Creek Community Council also played a strong role in increasing peoples’ access to resources and support. Organisations not previously aligned and not used to working together, such as Australian Capital Territory Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS), the Chamber of Commerce and charities came together in remarkable alliances to organise assistance for the bushfire-affected community.

These formal and informal groups, with the ACT Government, often in partnership, organised a number of social, commemorative and information events for bushfire-affected people and the wider ACT community. Events were for geographic communities such as streets and neighbourhoods, as well as for communities of interest such as children, older people, rebuilders and people interested in the regeneration of the environment, or parents who had babies close to the time of the disaster.

Figure 1: Examples of helpful or very helpful social activities.

Activity	Number of respondents who attended	% of respondents who found activity helpful or very helpful
Events organised by local streets and neighbourhoods (eg: street BBQs)	61% (n=292)	91.7% (n=268)
Commemorative events	39.1% (n=191)	86.4% (n=165)
Information sessions on the emotional effects of disaster	14.8% (n=72)	87.5% (63)
Rebuilding information events	30.4% (n=152)	79% (n=120)
Children's events	6.4% (n=30)	93% (28)
Events for particular age or interest groups	6.6% (n=32)	81.25% (26)

The most popular of these events were those organised by local streets and neighbourhoods (and in some instances by the Canberra Bushfire Recovery Centre) to assist people to get back in touch to share experiences, discuss common issues and get information on help available. 61% (n=292) of respondents attended these events, and 91.7% (n=268) found them helpful or very helpful.

Interview participants commented that they found these events more helpful than talking to a counsellor. Others spoke of the importance of the street parties and barbecues where people could exchange stories; get things off their chests and have a bit of fun. Even where the disaster was not discussed, they said, it was good to be with people who had been through the experience and understood. These events were said to be excellent in cementing neighbourhood relations. One woman interviewed gave this account of an initiative she was involved in:

We ran a recovery walk through [the Canberra Bushfire Recovery Centre]. We must have had about 200 people up on Coleman Ridge. The aim of the thing was to see [the environment] recovering but it turned into some kind of fast walking race I don't know who came up with the idea... We made contact with the Recovery Centre – and said we'd like to do a walk. The Recovery Centre ... organised flyers. Then in the Spring following, we all organised botanical walks – we had four or five botanical walks – we had great fun.

Linking with government and other institutions

'Linking' social capital - which refers to networks which have access powerful formal institutions such as government and non-government agencies are important for social and economic development and can assist in enhancing the overall level of trust in governance systems (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000 in Healy et al, 2004, Healy et al, 2003; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Within the recovery context 'linking social capital' refers

to directly engaging with government officials or joining political advocacy groups which set up to lobby for additional resources and planning decisions.

One study found that the perception that local government and local business in Western Sydney were working in the interests of the community contributed to people's sense of life being manageable. (This contrasted with family and friendship bonds which contributed to feelings of optimism but not necessarily that life is manageable). The same study found that the absence of inter-community bridging capital and 'linking' to the decision makers (especially government and business) led to a strong sense of stigma and isolation from surrounding communities and a sense of fatalism, that is a lack of a sense of control over forces shaping their lives (Healy, et al, 2004).

Although the scope of the studies is different and a comparison can only cautiously be made, these findings are in contrast to the views of participants in the Canberra Bushfire Recovery research. Residents' associations played an important role for many in contributing to a sense of empowerment and self determination among residents.

There are many examples of how such groups, which developed only after the fire, formed successful partnerships with government to organise social, commemorative, and information events for bushfire affected people and the wider community. At these events, government officials mingled with community members so that they could be close to 'communities' and better monitor their needs. Similarly the Community and Expert Reference Group, which was set up in the immediate aftermath of the fire, not only played a valuable advisory role with the Recovery Task Force, it enabled community representatives and those whom they represented to reclaim a sense of the control that had been lost in the cataclysmic events of January 18.

There are difficult messages for governments in this; encouraging and empowering the social activism of these groups is important for the greater good but often means sustained and highly vocal criticism of government's role in both disaster response and recovery.

Adverse responses to Government's role in capacity building

Activities not sufficiently inclusive

Some people did not attend events organised by government or agencies specifically funded by government. A few who had not lost their home but whose homes had been damaged and lost gardens felt that these activities were not pitched in a way that included them. Others felt that it was unhealthy to dwell on the past and that people needed to concentrate on moving on, objecting to the dedication of the memorial three years on. Others said that there was still a need for community organised commemorative events, and commented on the importance of the continuity of activities arising out of the disaster, - such as Community Fire Unit Training.

Lack of preparedness of some institutions

While the Canberra Bushfire research referred to many examples of government facilitating mutual self-help there were also some criticisms that reservoirs of skills, expertise and energy were not sufficiently tapped into by some government institutions. Whereas the Territory human services agencies, for example, those that staffed the Bushfire Recovery Centre, demonstrated sophisticated understandings of the importance of volunteers, other institutions were regarded as less well prepared and committed to invest time in volunteers. For example, some participants were critical of a number of Commonwealth and Territory Government environmental and arts institutions for not being prepared for the roles they could play in a major natural disaster of this kind. There was a perception that some institutions regarded offers of help as obstructive and that others slavishly adhered to policies and procedures which did not allow for creative ways of working in the face of large scale emergencies.

Anger about lack of mitigation activities and response

Other government-related aspects of the fire and the recovery process prompted adverse comment and were mentioned by a number of survey and interview participants as factors affecting their recovery. The first of these refers to the mitigation and response phases of disaster management: in particular the issue of a perceived lack of warning to the general population about the approaching fire. For many of those who were surveyed and/or interviewed, this aspect of

the disaster became an ongoing source of anger and helplessness about the whole event, and one that was identified by a few respondents and participants as having delayed their recovery.

The judicial process

A second aspect was the ACT Coroner's Bushfire Inquiry, with the extensive delays and perceived interference in the judicial process being cited by many as a factor delaying their recovery. Some spoke of a feeling that they could not 'move on' from the fire and the losses they experienced until there were official findings about causes and people who could be held to account for those causes. Yet another aspect of government activity that was seen negatively was the delay in decisions about the rebuilding of the small rural communities that were destroyed or extensively damaged.

Tension between government and role of community activism

The significant community activism that developed around each of these aspects was identified by some individuals as important in their recovery. For some, for example, their involvement in the fight to have their local rural community re-established helped them to channel their anger about the fire and to maintain contact with the members of that community even though they had been dispersed across Canberra in replacement housing. In the case of Tharwa, one tangible result from their activism was being given new replacement fire-fighting equipment, a significant improvement on what they had before the fire. One interviewee, who has been prominent in activity directed at making the government and public officials more accountable for what happened in the lead-up to the fire, considered that his activism and involvement in the overall recovery effort have been important to his own recovery.

Another person spoke of the helpfulness of activism engaged in on a lesser scale, having become closely involved with a small group of others (some former residents and some looking to buy blocks and move into the street) in the re-establishment and re-development of their fire-ravaged street. She spoke of this kind of involvement as 'a therapy' which helped her overcome her sense of loss and her reluctance to be part of a new 'community'.

This kind of satisfaction accords with the findings of a number of studies, which indicate that public participation, can foster a sense of community ownership in the recovery process (Pettersen, 1999p. 16). Interestingly, there is evidence that self-determination may in part be enhanced by the financial position of communities and individuals, where those with greater wealth are likely to have greater choice and capacity to organise their recovery needs. This fits well with the socio-economic profile of the most severely affected suburbs in the Canberra bushfire, where the demographic

characteristics of the areas which were affected show a community that is likely to have a relatively low rate of unemployment, a relatively high income and relatively low levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

Differing views about government's performance among disaster affected people

As with almost every other aspect of the research, there were also many participants who felt quite differently about these matters. They considered that some people in the community had politicised and prolonged the inquiry process and focussed on blame at the expense of acceptance and recovery. Some felt upset or annoyed by what they saw as the outspoken and negative position taken by some more prominent activists; they put the view that this kind of negativity was of no practical value and actually delayed the whole community's recovery.

One man expressed strong disapproval of this kind of activism in terms of the impact it had on children. Having worked hard with his own children to help them come to terms with all their losses and to move on, he was upset by the publicity given to those intent on finding someone to blame for the fire. Yet another person, who lost his house and almost his life as well in the fire, came from a suburb where relatively few houses were destroyed. He spoke of feeling like an outsider at one or two meetings of community advocacy groups he attended, which sprang up in suburbs where large numbers of houses had been destroyed, but said he observed over time that involvement with these kinds of groups seemed to make some people feel 'stuck', unable to move on and come to terms with what had happened.

Yet another perspective suggested by some people was that local activist groups were 'a good thing' overall but were not appropriate for everyone, for a variety of reasons. One woman interviewed described her experience as follows:

We were really keen and got involved [in a local group] in the first few months and then our energy ran out. The two people who ran it were like saints. They worked so hard for everybody. My husband and I also wanted to work hard for everybody but we ran out of steam. I think that's where you have to be really sensible ... when you run out of steam, you need to take a break, sit back and reflect... otherwise that's how you get sick. We needed that like a hole in the head. We both felt it and neither of us said anything, but we both just kind of backed off.

Discussion and recommendations

The sphere of government responsibility known as 'Disaster Recovery' provides opportunities to reflect on community capacity building generally and the actions that help and hinder these processes.

The Canberra Bushfire Research provides useful messages about 'enabling' people affected by disasters to rebuild their lives and strengthen their communities. In addition to the well established role that family, friends and neighbourhoods play in facilitating recovery and resilience, the study also highlighted the role of governments and their funded agencies in community capacity building. Critical processes include the use of information about recovery; actively structuring opportunities to bring people together; active use of volunteers, commemorative events; and engaging institutions that have functions beyond an overt welfare focus.

Information

The study specifically recommended that

- information about how recovery, including medium and long term recovery, takes place be made available to individuals and families to help them understand their own responses and/or those of others in the family.
- detailed information about resilience strategies provided by participants in this research should be incorporated into a set of information guides for people affected by disasters.
- the community generally be provided with information about the nature of recovery to facilitate greater understanding and tolerance of the feelings and experiences of disaster victims, in particular that individuals experience recovery at their own pace and in their own way.

Structuring opportunities to bring people together

Street barbeques and parties are clearly popular events for people affected by disasters such as bushfire and the study recommended that government notes the value in actively structuring local opportunities to bring people together for contact and support immediately after disasters and at particular points afterwards.

The positive effects of volunteering

There are advantages in supporting the ongoing development of groups which form after disasters. Support should be provided to the development of self-help and mutual help groups, with a particular focus on volunteerism to harness the energy and creativity and increased sense of control that seems to result from this kind of involvement.

Commemorative events

The positive effects of commemorative events such as memorial services and anniversaries to mark losses were noted; also that losses are not confined to loved ones, loved animals and personal assets; lost environments should also

be commemorated and conscious attempts should be made to help people look forward with hope to rejuvenation and the part that can be played by all in assisting this.

Engaging institutions beyond traditional welfare

Of particular significance in this research are the 'linking' networks that develop between individuals and groups and powerful institutions such as government and business in the aftermath of a disaster. There are many examples of how such groups, which developed only after the fire, formed successful partnerships with government to organise social, commemorative, and information events for bushfire affected people and the wider community and contributed to the sense of empowerment and self determination that is an essential part of capacity building. To do this successfully government needs to be aware of the importance of engaging beyond traditional welfare sector institutions, especially to those concerned with the arts and the environment. There is an argument for all disaster recovery plans to articulate strategies for engaging government and community institutions with a particular emphasis on those concerned with the arts and the environment.

Conclusion

In examining what helps and what hinders the process and the outcomes of disaster recovery, including the development of resilient communities, this paper contributes to a broader knowledge base about the importance of recognising and enabling the development of social networks which help people 'get by', 'get ahead' and which foster a sense of control over their lives. This knowledge can usefully frame actions used in the pursuit of many other desired policy outcomes linked to community capacity building

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