

Notes from the Field

Establishing a Children and Disasters Community of Practice

Over the last several years the focus on children's needs in emergencies and disasters has increased dramatically, both in Australia and internationally. As a result, the number of professionals working within this space has also increased. In early 2012 it was recognised that there was no forum for these professionals to share their knowledge or expertise and that such a forum would facilitate the development of better research, policy, and practice. To address this need a children and disasters community of practice¹ (CaDCoP) was established in Melbourne in May that year.

The initial CaDCoP meetings focussed on setting terms of reference regarding what the members of the group saw as the primary reasons for establishing the community of practice. The group agreed that guiding documents used as reference material for CaDCoP members should include:

- *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 2013)
- *Hyogo Framework for Action* (UNISDR, 2007)
- *The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* (Sphere, 2011)
- *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* (Governments, 2011), and
- *The Children's Charter: An action plan for disaster risk reduction for children by children* (UNICEF, 2011).

The group acknowledged that the CaDCoP could provide a platform to connect people and facilitate dialogue, stimulate learning, provide a shared context, capture diverse knowledge, and introduce a collaborative process to generate new information.

Key areas of the CaDCoP focus

Using the *Community of Practice Design Guide* (Cambridge, Kaplan & Suter 2005), the group came to a consensus on four key areas to focus on:

- Building relationships of trust, mutual respect, reciprocity and commitment which encourage a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully.
- Learning and developing practices based on existing bodies of knowledge and acknowledging that successful practice depends on a balance between the production of 'things' (eg documents or tools) and the deep learning experiences of community members.

- Taking purposeful action as a community by undertaking small group projects to help members create personal relationships and produce the resources for developing best practice (eg cases, effective practices, tools, methods, articles, lessons learned, databases, heuristics, models, web sites).
- Creating information in the domain and going beyond current practice to innovate. The CaDCoP may redefine its boundaries and membership and foster boundary-crossing opportunities, possibly working with people from other communities, to explore emerging technologies, practices, and ideas.

These key areas were supported by the generosity of members being willing to collaborate and share their knowledge and experiences freely with other group members.

The CaDCoP members

Members of the community of practice work in a wide range of professions and contexts. Although the group is based in Melbourne, group members work in many locations across Australia as well as internationally. From the small number of people who initially met to establish the CaDCoP, current membership has grown to 70.

Membership of the CaDCoP currently includes:

- academic institutions
- education departments
- emergency service organisations
- federal, state and territory, and local governments
- health providers (child psychologists and paediatricians)
- humanitarian organisations
- not for profit organisations, and
- schools.

Membership of CaDCoP is open to anyone who has an interest in any aspect of children in emergencies and disasters.

Keeping in touch

The group communicates via an online closed forum on the Australian Emergency Management Institute Knowledge Hub website, a web-based Diigo² group, and regular email correspondence. Email has proved

¹ A community of practice brings people together who share a common concern, set of problems or interest in a topic (Cambridge, Kaplan & Suter 2005).

² Diigo is a social bookmarking website which allows signed-up users to bookmark and tag web-pages (see <https://www.diigo.com>).



Community of practice members participated in the children and emergency management paper-in-a-day workshop in August 2013.

to be an effective way to keep in touch with group members to share information and ask questions. This has allowed those from farther afield to participate in the CaDCoP and make connections with others who share the common interest. There are also face-to-face meetings in Melbourne a few times a year with a guest speaker at each meeting.

In the first 12 months since the establishment of the CaDCoP there has been substantial progress in the group's key focus areas. For example, there is now a connected community of professionals who have a common interest in children and disasters. This has been achieved by reaching out to those who have an interest in the field using the existing networks of group members. In addition, purposeful action and sharing of knowledge has been achieved with many CaDCoP members participating in the 'Children and Youth Paper in a Day Workshop' in August 2013. The workshop provided a valuable opportunity to make a positive contribution to the literature on children and emergency management in Australia.

Future focus for the CaDCoP

Some of the initial objectives established by the group which members are keen to develop include:

- advocacy for the needs of children when disasters and emergencies affect their communities
- re-defining children's roles in emergency management activities (children are not passive members of the community and should be engaged in emergency management activities)
- building capacity for child-centred disaster risk reduction within Australia, and
- promoting the engagement of children and young people in emergency management to give them a voice in this field.

The establishment of the CaDCoP has provided a forum for many professionals with a common interest

in children and disasters to connect with each other, share their knowledge, and build collaborative partnerships. Many CaDCoP members are willing to connect with emergency management practitioners to provide technical advice to ensure that the unique needs of children are addressed in appropriate ways in future emergency management practice in Australia. As such, CaDCoP represents a major step forward in addressing the needs of children in emergency management.

People interested in finding out more about CaDCoP can contact Dr Briony Towers, briony.towers@rmit.com.au.

References

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