**Strengthening community led recovery from extreme weather events: case studies from the frontline.**

Abstract

This paper looks at community led recovery and collective self-help efforts during and after the 2022 floods in the Northern Rivers of NSW as models of care that support greater societal resilience to extreme weather events. Through key case studies of adaptive, collective, community-led self-help during and after the disaster the case is made for a best practice recovery framework that encompasses notions of power and empowerment that sits with disaster affected people and groups. Community led recovery is seen as the ability for communities to be cared for, and to care for themselves during and after disasters. It examines gaps and misunderstandings between official State based approaches to managing disaster rescue and recovery and community-led adaptive, collective self-help efforts. It highlights the opportunity costs both material and psychosocial to communities and democracy in the disconnect between the officialdom of State disaster response and disaster care delivered by de-politicised grassroots community groups. It further proposes that long term planning and resourcing of community groups to develop recovery solutions based on local knowledge, preferences, priorities, and values is key to building social infrastructure and engendering community resilience. The paper will draw on the words and views of flood affected people in the Ballina electorate expressed though submissions to State and Federal Flood Inquiries, as well as conversations with constituent groups. The paper will extrapolate the ways that governments, elected representatives, and state agencies can co-partner with disaster affected communities to provide critical care during and after disasters in ways that improve relational networks, support collective self-help, and strengthens community resilience.

Introduction

Kia ora koutou! I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Māori custodians of the land and pay my respects to the Iwi of Wellington and all Māori people here today. I would also like to acknowledge the Aboriginal custodians of the land on which I work and live – the Bundjalung people and pay my respects to elders’ past, present, and emerging.

It is my absolute privilege to be here today and to take part in this important Australasian Study of Parliament Group conference on “Parliament’s Resilience in a Changing World”. This is a rare opportunity to examine both the resilience of our democracies and democratic institutions, as well as how we can best support the resilience of the communities we serve.

I realise that we are a very diverse conference in terms of attendees and presentations and that much of what I raise here today in terms of the way we support community to lead in their recovery from disasters needs to be resourced and enacted by governments and elected representatives of the day. However, Presiding Officers and the executive of our Commonwealth Parliaments, as well as Parliamentary staff play a vital role in safeguarding the democratic processes and procedures that are the hallmark of our highly successful Westminster system. And the bottom line is that when these sudden onset disasters or Mega disasters hit communities, government and institutional systems break down and communities are left to fend for themselves. It is therefore important in my view that we try to understand the effect of government approaches to disaster management and recovery through the lens of impacted communities – so that it better informs all our work.

I am a law scholar but today I speak from the heart and my methodological framework is lived experience and firsthand observations as a political leader supporting my constituency through the worst floods in Australian living memory. The worthwhile ideals of governments supporting and strengthening community resilience before and after disasters is in real danger of being unattainable around the globe as we cycle through one climate fuelled extreme weather event after the other. Surely there are limits on how well any single community or region of communities can recover long term if mega disasters are regular and ongoing. Heatwaves are predicted to affect most communities around the world from 2030 in addition to climate fuelled storms, cyclones, floods, and bushfires.

It is shocking to reflect that here in the Pacific communities are already locked into cycles of extreme weather events with no real end in sight. We are in completely uncharted territory in terms of the speed of global warming, and the ways that climate and weather systems are responding to growing temperatures on land and in our oceans. The Director of NASA’s climate science and modelling program Gavin Schmidt said about last year that, “no year has confounded climate scientists’ predictive capabilities more than 2023 has.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

What is Community led recovery?

There is obviously no settled or uniform definition of what community led recovery means in the context of extreme weather event disasters. For the purposes of this paper, I propose that community led recovery from the perspective of those community organisations and key people standing up rescue and recovery operations means that THEY have a voice in what happens through all stages, they are part of the formal governance model of disaster response and recovery, they have agency to operate during disasters and during “peacetime”, and they are resourced and empowered to deliver direct results on the ground.

By contrast, rescue and recovery in disasters from the perspective of elected representatives, governments, bureaucracies, and hegemonic institutions and agencies appears to be more about budget and resource constraints, procedural checks and balances, responding to political pressure, delivering results, and optics and messaging. The lived experience of community and the narrative of governments are almost always in conflict in the context of disaster management and recovery.

My thesis is that we need to look deeply at this disconnect and the consequences of that disconnect, including threats to democracy and democratic institutions in the future as the cycle of climate fuelled extreme weather events becomes more ferocious and unpredictable, and the real likelihood of societal collapses in the latter half of this century - if not sooner.

I put forward a model of community led adaptation and recovery that is trauma informed and one where our democratic systems embrace citizenry as co-partners in engendering greater resilience to disasters and systems collapse. With the caveat that there will be limits to human resilience in a world where sudden and unforeseen extreme weather events are the norm.

What happened to us in the Northern Rivers was a Sudden-Onset disaster[[2]](#footnote-2). A disaster “… triggered by a hazardous event that emerges quickly or unexpectedly.” With a sudden-onset flood disaster of the magnitude of the 2022 floods we saw flood waters escalate all known records of heights in places like Lismore, unprecedented magnitude across the Northern Rivers region affecting multiple locations at once, as well as multiple infrastructure failures and breakdowns – we saw many dozens of towns and villages completely isolated and cut off with no electricity or running water or sewerage, no telecommunications, no capacity to call police or ambulance, inaccessible roads and bridges, and extremely dangerous conditions for rescue including aerial. These types of climate fueled disasters are being coined “Tera” or “mega” disasters. These are disasters that have, “society-altering potential”[[3]](#footnote-3)and
“ overwhelm the very systems designed to respond to disasters”[[4]](#footnote-4). In the wake of the 2022 Northern Rivers floods in a 20,000 square km radius we saw an estimated 14,500 displaced people and over 4000 homes rendered uninhabitable. The estimated cost of rescue and recovery is around $1.1 Billion and counting.

Who you gonna call?

The lived reality in regional areas such as mine is that towns and villages are immediately isolated and either people are trapped in place for prolonged periods without outside assistance, or they must evacuate quickly due to risk to life and need to be rescued. We had both scenarios across our region. And in these scenarios, we have seen around the world and in my region that it is people in those communities in towns and villages – neighbours and nearby residents, who are the ones that rescue themselves and each other.

Here is a snapshot of our community rescuing and initiating recovery efforts in the days, weeks, and months after the 2022 floods; The town of Mullumbimby – which has a population of around 4000 people was completely flooded and for the first 3 days nobody could get in or out, most telecommunications went down, and formal evacuation centres could not be set up. We saw the publican and staff of the Mullumbimby RSL Club sheltering hundreds of flood affected residents and their children and animals who fled their homes in the evening and early hours of the morning. It was days before outside agencies could assist.

We saw HHUG (Holding Hands Underground) – a group of very experienced community organisers stand up a sophisticated emergency rescue and recovery centre in the heart of Mullumbimby, and who coordinated relief and rescue for landslide affected people in the hills, as well as feeding and providing dry clothes and bedding for people unable to return home. HHUG had Starlink satellite communication and were better equipped than many of our emergency services in the rescue phase.

People in the townships of Ocean Shores, South Golden Beach, and New Brighton whose homes were inundated evacuated to Ocean Shores Country Club and were supported for over a week by staff and members of the community before outside agencies could get in. Hundreds of community members who were not flooded billeted stranded families and all of this was coordinated by the Country Club staff in the days before formal government agencies could get in.

Residents affected on Ballina Island evacuated to the Cherry Street Bowls Club for 48 hours before a formal evacuation centre was stood up. In the township of Wardell, local Rural Fire Service volunteers and community members supported the entire town for over a week without outside assistance. A group of incredible people (known as Wardell CORE) stepped up at the Wardell Memorial Hall and provided food and supplies to flood victims from day one and are still operating social supports nearly 3 years later! Ballina-on-Richmond Rotary club and dozens of their volunteers (with an average age of 80 years old) took to boats and on foot to assist in Wardell and other isolated towns – delivering care packages and helping with rescues. In the recovery phase they fundraised millions of dollars and doorknocked entire towns to deliver aid, and they facilitated the building of temporary accommodation faster and about 100 times cheaper than government.

In the city of Lismore that saw 12 plus metres of inundation many hundreds of people risked their lives and used their boats to rescue people from their roof cavities. Known as the “tinny army” these members of our community literally saved thousands of people’s lives.

What happened once formal agencies could get in?

Sadly, we saw a brittleness and an inability to work with the community structures that were established in the absence of government aid. People were told to get out of the way, that they were no longer part of governance about their lives, that they no longer had a say, and in many cases, people were re-traumatised by the very social supports that purported to be in place to support them. As time has gone on elected governments have tried to repair those mistakes but certainly damage was done.

The consequences of these kinds of mistakes repeated across vulnerable communities around the globe are serious. People re-traumatised by formal state sanctioned recovery processes represents a serious safety and wellbeing issue. This disconnect also runs the risk of bringing democracy itself into disrepute – if we do not do better, we may see the breakdown of democratic institutions and loss of public trust that means when Mega disasters take place (as we know they will) we could see civil society completely break down as well as widespread death and suffering.

Trauma Informed Community partnerships

It is my view that 3 core elements are needed to engender community resilience before, during, and after a disaster.

1. Trauma informed support
2. Ongoing community led adaptation work, and
3. Community partnerships.

After a disaster occurs, survivors face numerous challenges—like finding stable housing, meeting basic needs, taking care of their families, and managing the complex emotions of their lived experience. On top of this, many survivors are navigating complex systems and other aid to get crucial recovery assistance. Unfortunately, these systems often don’t consider the role that public services can have in helping either resolve or exacerbate trauma-related issues an individual may be experiencing. At its core, a trauma-informed care approach is about changing the way agencies work to be aware of the trauma that people have experienced. This includes doing everything possible to make sure agencies are not making circumstances worse for the people they are helping. It’s about being able to recognise and respond to disaster survivors – and that includes those members of the community that are volunteering to serve, in ways that are sensitive to their emotional, physical, and psychological state.

Communities need to influence and shape their own recovery because their long-term resilience depends on it. Communities are made up of social connections and networks. Social connections and networks increase resilience and promote recovery. We know that one of the best predictors for how well a community will recover after a disaster depends on how strong social infrastructure is and how well-connected community members are with each other. People in communities will lead their community recovery processes in informal and practical ways. Governments and officials must plan to support and co-partner in a way that is reflexive and has co-governance structures already in place and ready to engage once an event is occurring.

With several degrees of global warming sadly already baked in for humanity adaptation that is led by communities in situ and resourced by governments is imperative. Obviously, the global community must lower carbon emissions but communities – particularly the poorest citizens around the world, are sitting ducks in terms of the consequences already in train for heat, floods, cyclones, storms, and fires. It is estimated that in Australia governments spend 97 % of disaster budgets after an extreme event, and only 3% on adapting communities to be prepared for the next disaster event, including heat. As Clive Hamilton and George Wilkenfeld point out in their work, *Living Hot: Surviving and thriving on a heating planet*, “…we must make sweeping plans to prepare Australia for life in a hot world, wherever climate change might land on the scale from bad to very bad indeed.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This metric applies to all of the other climate fuelled disasters that we must start preparing communities to adapt to, and that we are collectively ignoring as a nation.

Conclusion

Ultimately communities need to be empowered to develop their own adaptation goals and strategies, seen as co-partners when a disaster hits, and to be recognised as leaders in regaining a sense of control after a disaster. There is a desperate need for community organisations to be resourced and included as key local players at all phases of the emergency management cycle, the recovery cycle, and in adaptation. Resilience is not something that individuals or communities can achieve on their own. It is achieved through the combined and intersecting structures, processes, formal and informal networks and supports where they are co-partners with their elected governments.

1. Gergis, J, Highway to Hell: Climate Change and Australia’s Future, *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 94, 2024, p17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [**Sendai Framework Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction**](https://www.undrr.org/drr-glossary/terminology), United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, [Disaster | UNDRR](https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster)

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Ibid

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3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hamilton, C, Wilkenfeld, G, *Living Hot: Surviving and thriving on a heating planet*, Hardie Grant Publishing, 2024, p 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)