

Summary

Community capacity building: learning from the 2003 Canberra bushfires

Outline

- Whereas most Australian disaster recovery literature focuses on the immediate aftermath and short-term recovery phases after a disaster, the Canberra study (see reference details at the end) explored the longer term issues of what happens to communities affected by disasters.
- Using the aftermath of the Canberra 2003 bushfires and other relevant Australian research, this study set out to investigate:
 - the initiatives taken by individuals and communities to facilitate recovery and resilience,
 - the role played by government and community recovery programs,
 - mental health outcomes for individuals, and
 - communication and information provision.
- The two main sources of data were:
 - a 126-question postal survey questionnaire distributed a little over 3 years after the fires to approximately 1600 households registered with the ACT Bushfire Recovery Centre (with a response rate of about one in three); with
 - follow-up face-to-face interviews with 40 volunteers from the survey sample.

Main findings

- Community capacity building (also called in the literature ‘social capital’) was investigated in terms of the following three main areas:
 - informal bonding networks (e.g., family, close friends and neighbours)
 - semi-formal networks within a particular community, established to represent the collective interests of a particular group(s) of citizens
 - links with government and other institutions
- **Informal bonding networks:**
 - Informal bonding networks were important because they help people ‘get by’ and deal with the normal adversities of everyday life.
 - Even comparatively minor social interactions often had an effect beyond what would normally be expected: e.g., simple acts of kindness, being non-judgemental, indifference and neglect, and so on. There was an element of disappointment expressed about those ‘outsiders’ who clearly did not appreciate the period required to recover from trauma and loss.
 - The interviews revealed it was often the person’s partner whose love and support was crucial to ‘getting by’.
 - About half of the respondents to the survey said that the fire did not have a lasting effect on their relationships with family. The remainder were approximately equally divided between having had a lasting effect for the better and a lasting effect for the worse.
 - For many people, recovery was facilitated by the opportunity to share the practical aspects of rebuilding with neighbours, together with the ongoing social contact that occurs naturally in such circumstances.

- **Semiformal networks**, established to represent collective interests:
 - There were numerous examples of these. Their main benefits were in terms of organising social events and commemorations.
 - Some interview participants commented that they found these events more helpful than talking to a counsellor.
 - The effects of a MATDG-type organisation could not be assessed, because it seems that there was no such equivalent.
 - In some cases, there were adverse effects associated with such semiformal networks engaging in too much ‘activism’.
 - The success and sustainability of such semiformal networks depended very much on the willingness and resilience of a comparatively few citizens. Most people didn’t have the energy to get engaged very much at all; a few did, but ‘ran out of steam’; and the few people who continued to be engaged in to run things were described as being ‘like saints’.
- **Links with government and other institutions:**
 - Successful engagement with government and local business working in the interests of the community gave people a sense of ‘life being manageable’, whereas strong links with family and friends contributed to feelings of optimism, but not necessarily to feelings that ‘life is manageable’.
 - Lack of confidence in government led to a strong sense of stigma and isolation, and a sense of fatalism.
 - Although there were many examples of supportive assistance from government and other institutions, the study was particularly critical of such assistance in terms of the following:
 - the feeling by some people that activities were not sufficiently inclusive
 - lack of preparedness of some institutions
 - the judicial process (which dragged on interminably for some years)
 - tension between government agencies and some semiformal community networks that were representing collective interests.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The study stressed the importance of the middle level of community capacity building/social capital: the semiformal networks of citizens (MATDG-style) set up to represent the community.
- The study concluded that:

... government needs to be aware of the importance of engaging beyond traditional welfare sector institutions especially to those concerned with the arts and environment... disaster recovery plans [need to] articulate strategies for engaging government and community institutions...

Winkworth, G., Healy, C., Woodward, M., Camilleri, P (2009). Community capacity building: Learning from the 2003 Canberra bushfires. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 24(2).