



Get Ready for Flood Community Housing Sector Project (Hawkesbury Nepean Valley)

**Action research insights Briefing Paper
Emergency Management Agencies**



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



INNER SYDNEY VOICE
regional social development council



The Get Ready for Flood Social Housing Sector Project was a joint initiative by Inner Sydney Voice and Infrastructure NSW, and was funded under the Hawkesbury-Nepean Flood Risk Management Strategy. The University of Sydney was the Project Research Partner co-ordinating Participatory Action Research throughout. The Project utilised a sector capacity building approach and was implemented in two stages.

During Stage 1, a Disaster Resilience Network was formed to map key issues facing social housing tenants in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Floodplain, bringing major stakeholders including community housing providers, local government, emergency management agencies, local community services organisations, government and social housing tenants. Gaps in disaster preparedness in relation to social housing tenants and strategies to build tenant and sector support and resilience capacity were identified.

Stage 2 of the Project enacted strategies from Stage 1 including training and development in disaster preparedness with community housing providers, local community service providers and tenants. Flood preparedness information in the form of a flyer was developed collaboratively with tenants. In Stage 2 a number of opportunities for ongoing network and capacity development amongst stakeholders were identified as part of long-term flood preparedness for vulnerable populations in the Hawkesbury-Nepean Floodplain.

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) process which ran throughout the Project provided real time data to Project Leaders and stakeholders as the Project progressed. This meant that refinement, based on research evidence could be undertaken to ensure learning was translated immediately into project design and implementation. Use of PAR in this Project ensured quick and practical feedback loops for each activity and for Project objectives overall. This supported a process of adaptation and responsiveness throughout.

Project processes and outcomes are reported in a series of Briefing Papers focused on different aspects and stakeholder groups. This Briefing Paper is one of a set which cover all key elements of Project design, implementation and outcomes.

Emergency Management Agencies (EM Agencies) have a clear and uncontested role in the crisis response phase of disasters. In contrast, their involvement in community resilience at a community level is an evolving discussion, and so their participation in the Project provides important learning. The NSW State Emergency Service (NSW SES) was a Project Leader and actively involved in Social Housing Community Resilience Network (CRN) together with other EM Agencies, as well as the training (see separate Project Leaders and Training Insights).

EM Agencies' representation on the CRN was integral to the Project from its commencement. Network meetings were attended by representatives from Police, Fire, Ambulance and the NSW SES. The level of active participation across these services varied, from occasional Network attendance to regular and active involvement. The SES, a key stakeholder in the Project, played valuable additional roles in implementing network initiatives such as workplace training of NGO staff and advising on the preparation of a flood preparedness flyer for people in social housing.

Interviews with CRN members indicated a distinction between EM Agencies' effectiveness in crisis and response to a disaster/emergency versus the preparedness and recovery phase.

"I think when emergencies come, they work brilliantly. I think they do. I think in Australia, we handle emergencies pretty damn well. It's the aftermath that always seems to bog us down."

Community member

Over the course of the Project, it became evident that EM Agencies' routine ways of interacting with communities during a crisis event were problematic in other phases of the preparation-response-recovery disaster cycle. Differences in structure, function, and discourse distinguished these services from other stakeholders. These differences seem to reflect deeper layers of meaning around power, purpose, and hierarchy. This was both overt (such as the "command and control" approach of "combat agencies") and implicit ("if we ask you to get out, you get out": EM Agency representative). Notably,

we saw little if any change in this language and thinking over the course of the project.

The unchanged discourse, and the crisis-response structures and functions it represents, may reflect the size and complexity of the EM Agencies. While small community agencies may arguably have greater capacity for flexibility in response to changing circumstances, it was apparent that EM Agencies representatives were bound to some extent by organisational constraints that limited their capacity to adapt to local community cultures and idiosyncrasies.

It is important to acknowledge that some EM Agencies face an additional complexity in building trust with some parts of the community as a result of previous legal interaction, leading to community fear or antagonism that may be deeply entrenched.

"If there are some trust issues hopefully we could go to one of these forums even if it's with the community itself and eliminate those. We're here for a totally different reason. We're not here for whatever reason we may have to visit in the past or the future."

EM Agency

The impact of lack of trust is important not only in terms of day-to-day goodwill and community relationship building, towards a strong and cohesive community, but has impacts for effective messaging and response in disaster events. In other words, effective relationship-building in non-crisis times could be expected to enhance shared responses in the event of a disaster.

We acknowledge that participation in the Network occurred in the context of other demands on EM Agencies representatives' time. It was not uncommon for EM Agency representatives, particularly Police and Fire representatives, to be interrupted during CRN meetings. This sometimes impacted on their capacity to engage fully with discussions and to cement developing relationships within the network.

Interviews with EM Agencies representatives suggested a dominant view that their role in community resilience is primarily a one-way interaction based on providing information and direction.

"I think the communities are really the only ones that can build their own resilience. We can give them the frameworks and the guidance but the community members and especially the community leaders are the ones that really have to take the forefront because they've got the community ties. We're very close to our community."

EM Agency

As the work of the overall Project and CRN progressed, however, the complexity of its shared task became more apparent. The ambiguous relationship between entities such as statewide and nationally coordinated agencies and local communities has important consequences for the extent to which an external service can, or should, adapt to community characteristics. The complexity of this task was identified by a Community Housing Provider representative:

"I sort of felt like the intention was about developing this map, and it all sounded very straight forward, let's map where everyone is, then we come up with a plan, then we can do some communications. But I think it's a lot deeper"

CHP

This has important implications for the potential of EM Agencies as equal participants in building and sustaining relationship-based resilience, in contrast to the more distant and top-down approach of established ways of working.

The comment above that "they've got the community ties. We're very close to our community" also reflects the ambiguity of relationships between local community and crisis services, in which EM Agencies might be connected to, but not part of, a community. In the CRN meetings we observed considerable diversity in this respect. SES volunteers, for example, are often drawn from the local community; a common thread in discussions with a range of stakeholders was

the dilemma that occurred when local community members were simultaneously residents (service users) and responders (service providers), and possibly also employees of local support agencies.

Over all, the involvement of EM Agencies in the cross-sector Network was greatly valued by community members. In an interview early in the project, a community member noted:

"I think the ambulance gave the medical [perspective], it was really good to have her input. The police would have been good, but I think that's a work in progress, so I'd like to see all the sectors come together and just hear what they've got to say."

Community member

Interestingly, evidence emerged from interviews and training conversations that challenged assumptions about EM Agencies as unequivocally strong, knowledgeable, and the source of a "single truth", and community members (particularly those in social housing) characterised as vulnerable, helpless, and on occasion actively resistant to assistance. In a training session, a community agency staff member noted that when a disaster event was anticipated, the community agency was approached by EM Agencies for information about local demographics and people in need. This comment highlighted a different dynamic, in which EM Agencies are dependent on local knowledge held by groups within the community that may otherwise be underacknowledged. This is not to question the value of the knowledge and expertise of EM Agencies. Rather it is to suggest that residents and community organisations may have specific local knowledge that will be valuable to EM Agencies. Tapping into this knowledge however relies on ongoing relationships of trust.

Recommendations

Observation of both the value and the challenges of Emergency Management Agencies participation in the Project has led to the following three recommendations.

1. We recommend that EM Agencies representatives be resourced to continue to build upon their participation in community-based resilience-focused discussions, and that resourcing be of a level that enables representatives to step away from competing demands for the duration of meetings. In this way, they will be well placed to develop strong and mutually respectful relationships with community stakeholders. Frequent interruptions to attend to other matters were observed to limit EM Agencies representatives' ability to fully engage with activities during the CRN meetings, despite the evident goodwill and commitment shown in their attendance at these meetings.
2. While acknowledging that hierarchy and authority are crucial to EM Agencies' effectiveness in a crisis situation, our research found that the "command and control" culture of combat agencies was inherently at odds with the grassroots nature of community development. There is no doubt that significant steps forward have been made in recent years towards developing community liaison programs within these agencies, resulting in educational programs in schools, for example. However, we recommend that EM Agencies consider development of models in which community liaison and crisis response arms of the organization can be closely integrated and work towards a more reciprocal relationship with communities. This may lead to benefits not only in day-to-day interactions but also in a more effective and mutually informed response in the event of a disaster.
3. We recommend that EM agencies and EM bodies (like LEMC's) create established and identified roles for community leaders/social services sector to contribute to planning discussions. This would allow for a defined voice at the table in EM structures and help embed community resilience/ community preparedness into EM culture and assist knowledge and capacity of EM staff in understanding the nature of their local community in a more nuanced way.