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

Action research insights Briefing Paper
Methods

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

INNER SYDNEY VOICE
regional social development council

NSW GOVERNMENT

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 Hawkebury-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.

This Action Research Insight outlines the methodological approach adopted for this research. It demonstrates the effectiveness of action research in building knowledge about supporting communities to prepare for disasters. In doing so it engages with debates concerning what constitutes 'evidence', which (we argue) traverse the broader terrain in disasters of power, expertise and knowledge.

Evidence and measurement

The catastrophic personal and community wide impact of disasters has rightly generated a sense of urgency in understanding 'what works' to reduce those impacts. The disaster field is awash with efforts to measure, many of which aim for generic and reductive approaches comprising simple and replicable indicators. This simplicity, unfortunately, renders invisible the layered and complex array of structures, processes, relationships and context, which in reality, shapes the impact of any disaster.

These measurements, as is the case in many other fields, are often understood as signaling 'objectivity and efficiency' (Mosley, Marwell & Ybarra, 2019 p. 326). However, contextually rich evidence available in local communities and their local knowledge grounded in experience are overwhelmed by generic data and often viewed as less legitimate (Rawsthorne, Joseph & Howard, 2021). Data-driven interventions are portrayed as scientific and politically neutral however they allow targeting of 'at risk' communities, which can inadvertently harm disadvantaged communities through labelling, stigmatising and blame (Mosley, Marwell & Ybarra, 2019, p. 326; Bakker, 2021).

In stark contrast to an action research approach, evidence-based research based on 'scientific measurement' is fundamentally top down. As Mosely, Marwell & Ybarra (2019) argue

> *"The evidence in question is created, legitimated, and disseminated by elites, such as scholars, philanthropists, and federal funding bodies – not by local agencies or community members themselves."*
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> Mosely, Marwell & Ybarra (2019), p. 327

> *"... top-down efforts that are agnostic to organizational contexts are seen as likely to lead to dissent at the ground-level, ceremonial implementation, and long-term inefficiencies, not to mention reduced trust and staff morale"*
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> Mosley, Marwell & Ybarra (2019), p. 330

Unlike traditional research approaches, action research is based on collaboration between researchers and project participants (agencies, tenants etc) throughout the research process (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2013). Action research follows a process where planning, action, reflection/ evaluation and refining cycles are repeated over the life of a project. This means that new knowledge from each cycle can be incorporated into the next phase of a project enabling applied learning in real time. Action research is ideal where the scope of a project is complex, where outcomes are embedded in the real-world experiences of those involved and where learning can be implemented during the life of a project rather than only at the conclusion.

In developing a research design for this project attention was paid to contextual factors impacting on social housing tenants and providers both broadly and in relation to disaster preparedness. While those living in social housing in the project areas were included in broad based community preparedness activities, little was known about the specific barriers, questions or issues which were likely to impact on individual and community capacity to respond to disasters given existing disadvantage and exclusion. Increasingly research is highlighting the uneven effects of disaster with those already experiencing disadvantage, disproportionately impacted during response and recovery phases. (Mayer, 2019). Accordingly, the research focused on the complex and intersecting factors that impacted on the capacity of individuals, organisations and systems to prepare, respond and recover from disasters. The research needed to support and build knowledge from the ongoing process of discovery, adaptation, testing of ideas and practice refinement which shaped the project itself. Gathering detailed data as the project unfolded would provide insights into the less visible but fundamental problems needing attention to better support social housing tenants in disaster preparedness.

In response, an action research approach offered a way to build knowledge, test strategies and initiatives, refine ideas and solve dilemmas in relation to supporting disaster preparedness for and with social housing tenants in the Hawkesbury-Nepean region in a way which looked closely at structures and processes which were assisting of inhibiting information flow, capacity to prepare, resource allocation and links between tenants and Emergency Management Agencies (EM Agencies).
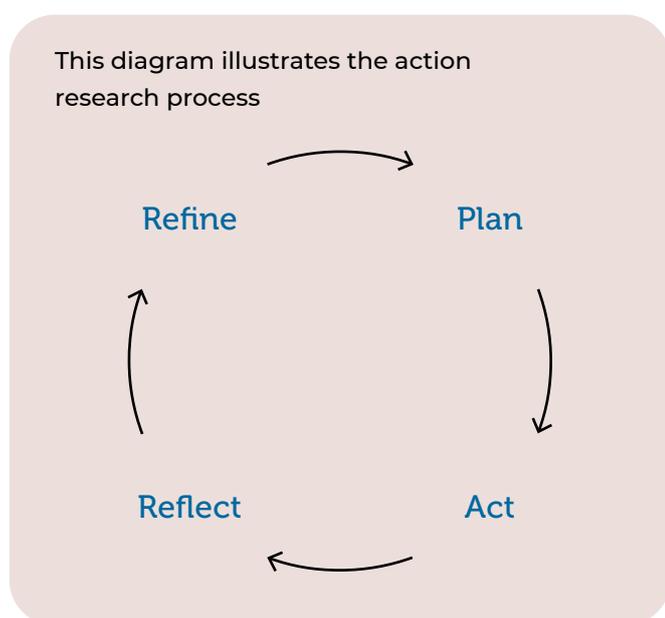
Action Research

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946, 1952), inventor of the term action research in English usage, described action research as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, acting, observing and evaluating the result of the action. In practice, the process begins with a general idea that some kind of improvement or change is desirable. In deciding just where to begin in making improvements, a group identifies an area where members perceive a cluster of problems of mutual concern and consequence. The group decides to work together on a 'thematic concern' (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988a). The purpose of action research is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus in resolving problems that confront them (Stringer, 2007).

In this Project, we had two parallel action research cycles: one with staff from the key stakeholders (Inner Sydney Voice and Infrastructure NSW) involved in the Project; and the second with people involved in Project activities across the region. In both cases, decisions about what information is collected and how are being made collaboratively. The role of the academic researchers is to support and facilitate participation in the research process by others (co-researchers) (Stringer, 2007). Action research enables all stakeholders (EM staff, councils, NGOs, residents) to develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the problems and issues that confront them. As they rigorously explore and reflect on their situation together, they can clarify misunderstandings and misrepresentations. Action research results not only in a collective understanding but also in a sense of community. It operates at the intellectual level as well as at social, cultural, political and emotional levels (Stringer, 2007).

Information is collected in the usual naturalistic

research ways, for example, participant observation, interview, the compilation of field notes, logs, document analysis, and the like. Validation is achieved by a variety of methods, including triangulation of observations and interpretations, participant confirmation, and testing the coherence of arguments being presented (McTaggart, 1997). To be effective, those involved in an action research must be prepared to honestly reflect on their own practice with a view to improvement and to open to critique (Stringer, 2007). Action research involves people in theorizing about their practices, that is, being inquisitive about circumstances, action, and consequences and coming to understand the relationships between circumstance, actions, and consequences in their own lives.

This diagram illustrates the action research process

Refine → Plan → Act → Reflect → Refine

In this Project, action research allowed Project leaders and the research team to systematically build knowledge about a question where intersecting layers of complexity, and significant real-life impacts coalesce: how can social housing tenants living in a flood impacted area (the Hawkesbury-Nepean) be most effectively supported to be ready for floods and other disasters which are likely to impact on their safety and capacity to respond and recover? What impedes the preparedness of this group? How effective are current planning and support systems placed to provide disaster focused action? How is communication and integration between EM Agencies, housing, health and welfare and planning systems impacting on resilience building capacity with social housing tenants? What 'on the ground' factors are currently not included in disaster planning in relation to social housing tenants? What are the assumptions in the system currently which may have

dire consequences for disadvantaged community members including social housing tenants in the event of a disaster?

Project leaders (Infrastructure NSW, Inner Sydney Voice and NSW SES) and University of Sydney researchers made up the Action Research Team (ART), meeting monthly (and fortnightly during COVID – 19 restrictions in 2020) to plan, reflect on action and refine the Project over Stages 1 and 2 between 2019 and 2021. Other stakeholders joined the Action Research Team at particular times during the Project to provide strategic input, expand networks or contribute subject expertise (these included local government and local community service providers). The ART provided a forum for action on the ground to be designed, data gathering strategies to be devised and for reflection, analysis and refining of outcomes in response to work on the ground during each cycle.

The focus for action included:

• Network building between organisational stakeholders and with social housing tenants via the Community Resilience Network (CRN) established early in Stage 1 of the Project and also with other relevant stakeholders including local community groups and NGOs, peak and policy bodies, EM Agencies staff and volunteers outside the CRN and Community Housing Providers (CHPs).

• Engagement with tenants, Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) members, Department of Communities and Justice and Community Housing Providers.

• Information gathering and mapping regarding roles, priorities, communication and disaster response channels, safety planning and available resources in the Hawkesbury Nepean Valley relevant to disaster preparedness for social housing tenants.

• Training design and implementation for Community Housing Providers, local NGOs and tenants.

• Communication and information provision regarding preparedness and flood impact for social housing tenants. This included flyer design and SES information distribution.

• Clarification of roles and support systems available to build and sustain disaster preparedness amongst social housing tenants.

• Co-ordination of key stakeholders across sectors in the Hawkesbury-Nepean to plan for mitigating disaster impacts on social housing tenants living in the floodplain.

Action research data gathered and analysed as part of the Project included:

• Meeting recordings and notes – these included Action Research Team meetings, Disaster Resilience Team Meetings, Stakeholder consultations and meetings

• Observations – at training sessions, CRN and other meetings.

• Survey – Pre and post survey conducted during the training action cycle

• Interviews – Stakeholder interviews at each stage and at the Project conclusion

• Documents – Information flyer, community information, planning and policy documents, meeting minutes and notes.

• Process recordings during each action research cycle. These tracked decision-making processes, learning during each cycle, the ways in which action was refined and reflection regarding individual cycles and the Project overall.

During the Project 14 action research cycles were completed. Cycles lasted for different durations but on average were two months long. The shift from broader networking to more focused activities such as training reflected both the relationship building which was a hallmark of the Project and an increasing emphasis on concrete strategies with specific organisations. For a detailed account of Action Research Cycles see the briefing paper titled, Action Research Cycles and Project Progress.

Recommendations

It is recommended that future projects which include an Action Research component undertake this component in partnership with academic researchers. The responsive and adaptive structure of action research require flexibility in terms of time and lead to more robust results when deep collaboration allows the project to pivot in response to new learning rather than being constrained by prescriptive project structures. University based researchers are well placed to work with partners in this adaptive way and bring a depth of research knowledge and practice to the process.

Data was collected and analysed across 14 research cycles where the research team and stakeholder researchers met, planned the data collection strategy, collected data before meeting again to reflect on learning, analysed the data collected, adapted the data collection plan, then went into the field to collect the next data set. Ripple effect mapping techniques were used with communities and stakeholders to map some of the important moments (Emery, Fey & Flora, 2006). The benefits of this participatory and community-led approach included:

• a comprehensive data set collected over time,

• a data collection process which was refined and adapted throughout the project in response to challenges, observations and suggestions from the research team and community researchers,

• capacity building in communities and agencies as well as increased disaster resilience,

• community ownership of data and the research process which increased sustainability

• a flexible, robust framework and tool for evaluation.

Key Learning from the Action Research and Recommendations

Using action research for this project enabled us to develop a multi-dimensional understanding of the context, challenges and issues which currently shape the capacity of social housing tenants to prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster. Action research cycles including diverse perspectives enabled a shift over the project, from a broad understanding of the need for resilience building in relation to social housing tenants, to a much more nuanced knowledge base regarding critical barriers and enablers of that process and what is needed to practically support resilience building in policy and practice. For example,

- the intersecting factors of policy, funding and sector flux directly shaped the capacity of CHPs to engage with social housing tenants regularly and to develop ongoing support systems for disaster preparedness with tenants. The role of CHPs as landlord created potential structural barriers which inhibited engagement in resilience building which requires equality and relationship building over time. Stressors and systems challenges for CHPs revealed themselves over time during the Project with strategies able to adapt and respond to increased knowledge about the context in which CHPs were operating.

- Limited ongoing communication between some EM Agencies, CHPs and community services organisations revealed significant gaps in understanding the practical challenges regarding evacuation for social housing tenants with no transport, experiencing mental health issues, with physical disabilities or living in isolated circumstances. While ongoing collaboration with NSW SES during the project enabled the development of ongoing positive relationships, practical knowledge building between SES, CHPs, local government and community organisations and effective action to support information provision and training, engagement with other LEMC members was occasional and instigated by the Project, revealing both the size and depth of work still required for practical collaboration between those closest to disadvantaged community members (including social housing tenants) and decision-makers during response and recovery, particularly. Again, action research cycles provided an effective strategy for these very different iterations of network building, practical action and communication to emerge.

- Another key learning from the action research design was the importance of regular, rigorous and adaptive discussions in shaping a project with the complexity of this one. Action research provided a process for making these discussions between Project leaders, researchers and key stakeholders visible and revealed the critical role they played problem solving, planning and implementation throughout the life of the Project. Rather than rolling out a fixed blue print and assessing effectiveness at the end, the Project was able to respond to changing dynamics, challenges to assumptions, new dilemmas and growing network connections using systematically collected real time data. Collaborative analysis and planning through the action research process worked very effectively to mirror and support the rigor of the Project as the landscape changed, including through three disaster events.

- It is recommended that future research in this area include a more wide-ranging action research team, or multiple teams including social housing tenants as co-researchers. This would enhance both the depth of available knowledge and support testing of learning from this Project directly with those most impacted.