Background & Rationale

A natural disaster occurs. People and communities are affected, often in the worst imaginable ways. But what happens next – and how are citizens of disaster-affected areas engaged in decision-making regarding rebuilding their communities and recovering their lives?

Disaster response and recovery is composed of a number of stages; from the immediate response to the crisis at hand, through to long term planning in rebuilding communities. Often people in the middle of a disaster want immediate information, assistance and support, but may encounter many obstacles.

Each stage of disaster recovery has its challenges and raises its own questions. People want to return to life and have things return to normal – but does it mean that the community will be able to emotionally weather the next storm? Are members of communities affected by disaster emotionally ready to contribute to collective policy decision-making? How does the effect of trauma on individuals, the de-bonding that occurs and the loss of structure impact on the capacity of communities to make decisions? If so, when are communities emotionally ready, and how can this capacity be developed? Equally, there may be pressures on the recovery system to rebuild "fast and dirty" instead of responding to community aspirations.

The 24 hour news cycle driving political behaviour may also mitigate against planning processes that work in the best interests of communities. Yet immediate media focus also builds public interest and momentum – how can communities work together to capture given short term capacity limitations?

In light of the probability of more frequent of extreme events in the face of climate change, it will be essential to consider how best to support communities and community organisations to make decisions with a view to the future. There is great potential to rebuild for the long term and create more sustainable communities than before. But this won't happen without community engagement, because engagement enables people to deliberate about options – rather than government managing recovery based on reinstating pre-disaster structures and without community involvement. Without deliberate option planning, impacted communities will not necessarily see what their future options could be, or may feel any new reconstruction ideas compete with existing designs which are reinforced by existing planning systems.

Participating organisations:
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Australian Emergency Management Institute

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Deliberative processes can provide essential means for assisting communities, agencies, government to create the best possible decisions and planning processes. Deliberative processes involve:

- weighing up information and the development of multiple alternatives;
- enabling stakeholders to understand the perspectives of others through dialogue; and
- imagining community futures, as opposed to simply infrastructure solutions

Research Questions

This research into the role of deliberative democracy in disaster recovery seeks to investigate the following:

- How is community engagement currently framed in Local, State and Federal funding and implementation policy? What are the barriers to implementing deliberation after natural disasters in current policy settings? What are the barriers to evaluating the costs and benefits of "betterment", or building back more resilient and sustainable infrastructure than was previously there?
- Are deliberative processes already occurring and in what way are participants influential, representative and inclusive?
- Can informed deliberation happen quickly or does it always take time?
- How could we embed deliberation into disaster recovery such that it is fast and effective?
- How can we measure the financial and community wellbeing returns of investments based on effective deliberation compared to other consultative processes?

Research Outcomes & Impact

The research will consider the potential for deliberation to create better communities than before, exploring the "betterment" concept and how we may build 21st century resilience to climate change.

Key findings will be drawn from a qualitative and quantitative literature review, interviews with practitioners and stakeholders, and a workshop to be held in November 2011. The workshop will be informed by case studies gathered for the literature review and will provide an opportunity for practitioners to give feedback on their experience, challenges and successes in disaster recovery processes.

The findings will be made available to a broad audience interested in more effective disaster recovery through deliberative methods.

More Information

Contact Frankie MacLennan frankie.maclennan@dse.vic.gov.au 03 51839130 if you would like more information or to share experience relevant to this project.

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