

Understanding conflict in disaster recovery collaborations

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What causes conflict between agencies working together in recovery?

In disaster recovery, collaboration between different agencies, including levels of government and NGO's, is essential. Yet working together can be difficult and is often characterised by conflict. This research investigates the causes of conflict so it can be managed more effectively.

Background

Despite being touted as a "magic bullet" for addressing complex societal issues like disaster recovery, collaborative partnerships can be fraught with challenges and conflict. Paradoxically, collaboration can increase the potential for conflict by bringing together organisations with divergent interests, knowledge, practices, and values to contribute to decision-making. Conflict can be constructive. However poorly managed conflict can stall decisions, cause harm, and lead to the community missing out on funding, resources or support.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 recovery practitioners from five Australian jurisdictions. Participants were concentrated in areas that had experienced recent or frequent disasters. Participants represented diverse organisational types: local government, state government, local NGOs and community organisations and large national NGOs. Many had worked for various organisations in recovery.

Participants were asked about their experiences of conflict in recovery collaborations before, during and after disasters, and to take an 'organisational perspective' that did not limit responses to specific events or individual grievances. Each participant was asked to describe how eight categories influenced the conflict they described. The categories were based on conflict analysis and existing disaster recovery research.

Selected findings

The research found that recovery workers have a shared goal of supporting the community and a deep commitment to collaboration.

However, four interrelated primary factors cause conflict within disaster recovery collaborations:

- Perceived value differences.
- The structure of the recovery system, including governance, role clarity and funding.
- Organisational interests, including organisational reputation and survival.
- Relational dynamics, including history and stereotypes.

Workers from different types of organisations described similar causes of conflict, but from different perspectives.

Some of these factors exist pre-disaster, while some are exacerbated by the complex environment and stressful nature of working in recovery.

Next steps

Based on this research, tools will be developed for disaster recovery practitioners to better understand conflict in their collaborative relationships.

Future research will investigate how conflict in disaster recovery collaborations can be better managed.



Further information

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