Reimagining the Organising of Disaster Recovery: Balancing Time, Planning and Support

Louise Mitchell,[1] Dr Jodie Bailie,[2,3] Professor Emerita Gwynnyth Llewellyn,[2] Associate Prof Michelle Villeneuve[2]

[1] PhD Candidate, Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Sydney, NSW [2,3] Centre for Disability Research and Policy, Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Sydney, NSW.

When disaster strikes, the way we organise recovery efforts can significantly impact community healing. Following the extensive 2019/2020 fires in NSW, mentoring and resource support for recovery coordination were stretched thin, pushing local councils to innovate without the usual supports. This situation sparked a re-evaluation of how recovery governance could be restructured to better serve affected communities.

The research need

After a disaster, numerous agencies rush to help at the local level. These groups often form governance committees as outlined by pre-disaster plans, or they may come together organically to meet urgent needs. However, there's a critical gap in understanding how to effectively organise these local groups to enhance collaboration across agencies and truly meet the needs of the community.

What we did

In response to the devastating 2019-2020 bushfires, one of the worst on record, we studied recovery efforts over two years in a severely impacted area in NSW. Our research focused on workers involved in health, social, and community recovery, who were part of both **formal committees** and **spontaneously formed networks** that emerged after the fires for the recovery. We gathered insights through detailed interviews, using appreciative inquiry and Socio-Cultural Activity Theory (SCAT) to analyse how these groups collaborated.

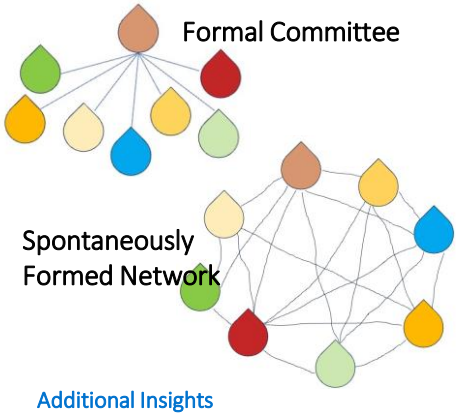
What we found

Our findings revealed that both structured committees and flexible networks played crucial roles but in different ways. They addressed ongoing and emerging tensions and found ways to work through systemic challenges.

Time: Despite the urgency of community needs, the Committee took important initial steps, together taking time to map out available support services comprehensively. The network invested time to build on this and develop an agreement about how they would work together.

Planning: The network navigated internal committee tensions by fostering deep, meaningful conversations about the work that enhanced joint ownership and adaptability—key during the unpredictable challenges posed by the pandemic. This approach led to the effective implementation of multiple support initiatives, ensuring that no community member was turned away.

Support: Network participants gained a deeper understanding of each other's roles, enhancing on-the-job learning and mutual support. This environment encouraged innovative solutions to complex issues.



Additional Insights

The network successfully broke down barriers between different recovery roles—such as recovery case management, disaster mental health services, and community development —allowing for the exchange of information and integrated service delivery.

Looking ahead

To better address the confusion and challenges faced by disaster-affected individuals, it is clear that the organising of recovery efforts need more than just formal committees.

Our study highlights the importance of including flexible and supported adaptive governance frameworks that legitimise emergent agency networks alongside traditional structures, ensuring a more effective response to community needs after major disasters.

Further information

For additional information scan the QR code or contact:
Louise Mitchell, PhD Candidate, University of Sydney
lmit8455@uni.sydney.edu.au

Natural Hazards Research Australia

Australian Government

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY