The Understanding Communities Project (C1) was established as part of a Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre program - Community Self-sufficiency for Fire Safety. The overall objective of the project is to increase community safety and resilience to bushfires.

COMMUNITY, RISK, VULNERABILITY AND CAPACITY

Initial activities within the Understanding Communities project were developed to identify and examine existing knowledge about communities in bushfire prone areas. Stakeholder consultation identified limited community capacity to prepare for and respond to bushfires and reliance on fire services as the most significant issues in local bushfire management. While these issues were confirmed through related Australian case studies, the research also demonstrated that key concepts such as community, risk, vulnerability, and capacity, are often confused and unclear.

Community

Examples of community in the context of bushfire management include geographical location, physical boundaries, local government administrative areas and fire services areas of responsibility. For populations living in bushfire prone areas, community may equally refer to locality, social networks, a sense of belonging, or shared values. Fire services tend to operate on a definition of community as being those people living in the area that they are defined as serving. Communities are not just the individuals who live there, but include the organisations to which they belong and the networks they have. These organisations and networks can be used to increase capacity in the community and reduce vulnerability to bushfires.

Risk

In practice, apart from issues of physical exposure and threat of bushfires, survey information collected in several peri-urban regions reveals a diversity of individual values, attitudes, and needs, in relation to bushfire risk and management within communities. Local understanding of the issues remains very important. The research indicates that the bushfire risk is not always seen the same way by fire service providers and the communities they serve. Of particular concern is that many people who live in the urban interface think they have adequate plans for dealing with bushfires, but when we delve into those plans they are clearly not enough.

Vulnerability and Capacity

In general hazards and disasters literature, vulnerability reflects “the degree to which a population, individual or organisation is unable to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impacts of disasters” (Blaikie Cannon, Davis and Wisner 1994:9). Although vulnerability is often associated with specific groups of people such as the poor or disabled, research in this project has demonstrated that vulnerability to bushfire hazards can be variable and dynamic. Migration patterns, environmental conditions, town planning decisions, and housing characteristics each influence aspects of vulnerability. Therefore, initiatives to increase coping capacity and operational services should be based on familiarity, knowledge and resources of the locality.

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While the Understanding Communities project continues to examine community resilience to bushfires, progressive research efforts are intended to develop a systematic process to assess local community capacity and vulnerability to bushfire risk. Any model or framework to enhance bushfire management needs to be based on a thorough understanding of local issues, needs and practices. Consequently such a framework should be flexible and adaptable enough to enable regular review and reform. This Community Profiling Framework represents a practical method to identify likely issues and support local capacity building and resilience. Many brigades already use this type of information to a greater or lesser extent. The Understanding Communities Project has the task of systematically integrating the types of information used.

References

Further details are available through the Understanding Communities website, Centre for Disaster Studies James Cook University at:

http://www.tesag.jcu.edu.au/CDS/Pages/bf_home.html

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Numerous presentations and poster sessions have been conducted at national and international conferences.