Engaged and Resilient Communities: An overview of workshop rationale and structure

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A three-day workshop was conducted from May 17-19 2011, with a focus on community engagement and resilience in the emergency management context. The workshop, funded by the Attorney General's Department under the auspices of the National Security Capability Development Division, was conducted at the Australian Emergency Management Institute at Mt Macedon, Victoria.

The drivers of the event included the following:

- The Black Saturday Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, and other disaster inquiries, identifying the need for an increased emphasis on community engagement and resilience.
- The release of the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience in February 2011.
- The formation of the Community Engagement sub-committee of NEMC in 2010.
- The release of the ISO 31000 in 2010, emphasising the importance of stakeholder engagement in the risk management process.
- The AEMI 2009 think tank entitled 'Business as Usual or Unusual Business?' which explored issues of how to improve national capacity to respond to disasters that are increasing in scale and severity.
- Recognition that the complex, time consuming, process-oriented and resource intensive nature of emergency management creating challenges for community engagement.
- More frequent, more intense and more large-scale, longitudinal events making a lack of community engagement untenable and actively dangerous.
- The consistent research finding that community engagement leads to better outcomes.

Participants were engaged in a number of rich conversations using Socratic Circles.

A number of organisations provided visual display materials based on community engagement, strategies and events.

Over sixty people representing government, non-government, private enterprise and community members, attended the workshop. The goal was to interrogate issues of resilience building and community engagement at all points of the disaster management cycle, and to learn from best practice in community engagement in other sectors.

Participants were presented with two 'big questions' at the outset, and they were asked to present their responses on day 3.

- If we had a magic wand and community engagement in emergency management was working perfectly, what would be different?
- Imagine we are looking back at how we arrived at this perfect engagement. What happened along the way (steps, milestones) that helped us get there?

The workshop structure attempted to model good practice in community-led engagement by requiring the smaller break out groups to be self-determining. These groups mimicked the complexities of communication and leadership in the context of community engagement in a disaster; groups had to work through issues of power and personality in the same way that a disaster-affected community might.

Participants were also asked to be a part of a series of 'rich conversations' which encouraged exploration of the issues of resilience and community engagement through listening and dialogue.

Sixteen of the participants were tasked with presenting sessions on specific issues, from which a number of papers and articles have been drawn:

- defining engagement and resilience
- engaging diverse groups
- community indicators of resilience and engagement
- social networks, behaviour and well-being: mapping community connectedness
- community engagement in other sectors in routine times
- community led engagement and resilience
- measurement and evaluation of resilience

The first paper from the workshop, in the session led by Alison Cottrell appears in this edition. Others will be published in future editions of AJEM or as occasional papers, recognisable by the origami logo.