

ABSTRACT

The national recovery principles state that disaster recovery should be community-led. However, reports from various recovery processes in Australia and overseas consistently identify that governments too often, in practice, do not support this. This research examines ways in which governments can enable communities to lead their recovery after emergency events. This is a preliminary report of a continuing study. To date, semi-structured interviews have been held with over 20 experienced individuals about their involvement in community recovery. Participants are community members from disaster-affected communities, government employees from all levels of government and across departments, and representatives from community sector organisations. These preliminary results show the complex interplay between communities, governments, and community sector organisations in disaster recovery, and the varying expectations and experiences of those involved. These initial findings show potential to influence policies, processes and systems across governments and communities, and better support community-led recovery.

How can governments enable and support community-led disaster recovery?

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Introduction

Community recovery is complex, involving multiple players with competing priorities and expectations acting in highly stressful situations (Mooney *et al.* 2011, Ryan, Wortley & Ni Shí 2016). Archer and colleagues (2015) found that there is little peer-reviewed literature relating to recovery; the bulk of material relating to 'good recovery' is in the grey literature, is difficult to find and is not comprehensive. While it is common practice for governments to release reports evaluating specific recovery efforts, there is a sense that these are often sanitised. Candid contributions by all parties, including government employees, are rare.

Both Archer and colleagues (2015) and Winkworth (2007) identified the importance of community-led recovery. However, tensions remain between government-led and community-led recovery activities. Further consideration needs to be given to the relationships between these approaches (Archer *et al.* 2015, Drennan, McGowan & Tiernan 2016)

The national recovery principles state that disaster recovery should be community-led (Community and Disability Services Ministers Advisory Council 2009). This is echoed by most state and territory emergency management frameworks and plans. While frameworks and emergency management plans can provide overarching principles and directions, the underlying assumption is that these documents exist in a government and political system that is unified, coherent and stable. In reality, such static documents exist in an environment that is influenced by ever-changing contexts, political imperatives and the experiences, expectations and priorities of those involved.

This paper gives a brief synopsis of some of the themes emerging from the research to date. A larger study will contextualise and test the concept of community-led recovery and examine ways in which governments can enable and support community-led disaster recovery. The study will consider the complex interplay between governments, community sector organisations and affected communities. To date, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 20 individuals who are, or have been, involved in community recovery from a number of Australian events over several decades. The primary concern of this study is the subjective experiences of participant understandings and knowledge of community recovery.

Palmer (2001) states that much of the academic literature in emergency and disaster research uses a positivist approach and ignores the complexity, power relationships and ambiguities that exist. Using qualitative methods