

Disaster resilience indicators: the connectedness of communities

Valerie Ingham, Rabiul Islam, John Hicks and Oliver Burmeister, Charles Sturt University

Can community organisational connectedness be a measure of community resilience? Our proposition is that the strength of a community's resilience is a function of the connectedness of local community organisations.

There is a strong government policy focus on building community resilience through an individual and organisational understanding of 'shared responsibility'.¹ In Australia, local community and emergency services organisations are directed to cooperate in building local disaster resilience.² How do we assess our success in meeting this directive?

The Disaster and Community Resilience Research Group within Charles Sturt University highlights issues concerning local disaster preparation and support for local leaders before, during and after disasters. The group works with community organisations to help them prepare people and communities for connected daily living; a strongly connected community is more resilient.³ The unique contribution of community organisations to building resilience (building social connections) contrasts with the traditional emergency management approach (hazard reduction and information delivery). Our aim is to reconceptualise the notion of community in the disaster context to include social cohesion, community participation and integrated connections between all local community organisations.⁴

The simplest measure for community resilience involves an assessment of household preparedness. Our previous research was focused on the individual household as the unit of analysis (e.g. has a fire plan been devised and practiced?).⁵ With some distance from the completion of a number of our research projects aligned with the 'individual' as a measure of resilience, we are reconceptualising this perspective. We now posit the strength of community organisational connectedness as an indicator of a community's resilience. Thus, rather than assessing a community's resilience on a household-by-household or postcode basis, we are investigating whether the strength of a community's resilience can be better determined by examining the strength of connectedness between local community organisations such as sporting clubs, neighbourhood centres and local emergency services. Exploring this perspective has important implications as funding changes for local community organisations, especially neighbourhood centres, have placed them in highly competitive funding environments. By demonstrating a nexus between

community organisational connectedness and building community resilience, we create a case for the continued and increased funding for local community and emergency services organisations.

In previous research, a community that had been disaster-affected was likely to have stronger and diverse community organisational networks and connections than prior to the event. This raised the possibility that a community that has not experienced a recent serious disruption may be less resilient. Therefore, we are exploring whether the strength of community organisational connectedness could be a function of experiencing a recent disaster and how to strengthen community organisational connections before disaster strikes.

We want to extend current resilience research to examine the role of local community organisations in facilitating general community resilience as a contributing factor to emergency preparedness. We also want to explore the role of organisational relationship strength as a possible antecedent to community resilience (in general, and in times of disaster) to understand how organisational relationships might be strengthened without waiting for emergencies to occur. We are triangulating our findings with other disaster experiences in various Australian communities as reported through inquiries, research articles and lessons-learned documentation.

- 1 Lukaszewicz A, Dovers S & Eburn M 2017, *Shared responsibility: the who, what and how*, *Environmental Hazard*. doi:10.1080/17477891.2017.1298510.
- 2 COAG 2011, *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience: Building our nation's resilience to disasters*. At: www.coag.gov.au/sites/default/files/national_strategy_disaster_resilience.pdf.
- 3 Redshaw S, Ingham V, Hardgrove P, Quigley T & Harrison K 2015, *Community Connections: Vulnerability and Resilience in the Blue Mountains*, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst.
- 4 Redshaw S, Ingham V, McCutcheon M, Hicks J & Burmeister O 2018, *Assessing the impact of vulnerability on perceptions of social cohesion in the context of community resilience to disaster in the Blue Mountains*, *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 14-19.
- 5 Redshaw S, Ingham V, Harrison K & Quigley T 2016, *BSAFE. Blue Mountains Sustainable Approaches to Fire and Emergencies: A Community Action Model to build resilience, improve preparedness and enhance self-responsibility*, Charles Sturt University.