

# Community recovery: six ideas to close 'intent-to-capability' gaps

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The information in this paper draws on the experiences in 2011 as Chief of Operations and Plans at the Queensland Reconstruction Authority and in 2017 as State Recovery Coordinator for the Queensland Government. Deployments to Malaysia, Syria, Lebanon, East Timor, Kuwait, Iraq, Solomon Islands and Afghanistan also inform the six ideas on community recovery from natural disasters presented.

This paper is based on two interrelated issues common to community recovery. First, community recovery is optimised when communities lead and take credit for community achievements. Second, community-based recovery may include a mismatch between a community's recovery *intent* and a community's recovery *capabilities*. This mismatching creates an 'intent-to-capability gap'.

The following six ideas can help close community recovery intent-to-capability gaps. These ideas can:

- sustain vulnerable communities
- enable leadership-seeking collective effects
- align boundaries
- develop relationships in Phase Zero (the time encompassing all community activities prior to the beginning of a disaster event)
- enable charities and volunteers in response and recovery
- build compatible communications networks.

Community intent-to-capability gaps led recovery operation decisions in Queensland during 2011-2013 and 2017-2019. What was identified was that recovery is best when state-enabled and community-led. In other words, leaders at all levels of government and non-government organisations should employ resources and work collaboratively with stakeholders to support and enable community recovery, thereby closing community intent-to-capability gaps.

## Community recovery defined

Smith and Wenger (2006)<sup>1</sup> suggest applicable conditions when designing, implementing and reflecting on community recovery. In 2011, the Attorney-General's Department adapted the ideas of Smith and Wenger; that the design and success of community-recovery programs depend on:

- pre-disaster community-level variables, such as local capacity and previous disaster experience
- characteristics of the disaster, such as intensity, scope, speed of onset and duration of impacts
- facilitators of disaster recovery, such as leverage of resources, self-reliance and self-determination
- impediments to disaster recovery, such as viewing disaster recovery programs as an entitlement and over-reliance on recovery programs.

## Summary

These six ideas may help future leaders and planners to understand post-natural disaster response and recovery environments. The two interrelated issues common to community recovery are that community recovery is optimised when communities lead and take credit for community achievements and that community-based recovery includes mismatching between a community's recovery intent and a community's recovery capabilities; the intent-to-capability gap.

Intent-to-capability gaps can be addressed using six ideas to assist community recovery. These ideas are designed to sustain support for vulnerable communities, enable leadership-seeking collective impacts, align boundaries, develop relationships prior to disaster events, use charities and volunteers in response and recovery and build and maintain compatible communications networks.

<sup>1</sup> Smith GP & Wenger D 2006, *Sustainable disaster recovery: operationalizing an existing agenda*, in H Rodriguez, E L Quarantelli & R R Dynes (eds), *Handbook of disaster research*, Springer, New York, pp. 234-57.

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