

Just add trust: implementing diversity and inclusion in emergency management

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Trust is just one of the themes running through emergency management diversity and inclusion and resilience policies in Australia and New Zealand. However, are diverse communities often seen as problems rather than as trusted partners with agency to design their own outcomes?

Diversity and inclusion policies have been published for almost 20 years. Resilience policies have been in place for over a decade. Emergency management agencies in Australia and New Zealand have long recognised the importance of policies on diversity and inclusion both for workforces and in how to partner better with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The work by emergency management agencies on diversity and inclusion and disaster resilience is connected by the need for communities to be involved in making decisions about issues that concern them. These policies reveal that success depends on the trust existing between agencies and communities.

It has been almost 20 years since the first edition of the *Guidelines for Emergency Managers working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities*.¹ As was pointed out by Mitchell²:

...diversity considerations need to be integrated into the corporate management processes of the service agency and organisations. Other key points include the need for a local approach and the development of ongoing relationships, and/or formal or informal partnerships involving trust, credibility, respect for diversity and a willingness to connect.

The 2007 edition of these guidelines makes it clear that ‘establishing credibility and generating trust amongst CALD community groups are essential parts of effective community engagement’¹. This link is made in the Northern Territory’s

resilience strategy³ that states, ‘Collaboration with communities builds trust, leading to more resilient communities’ (p.5).

The findings by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre Diversity and inclusion: building strength and capability project backs this up. A paper by Young and Jones⁴ found that ‘authentic actions, a diversity of people at leadership levels, long-term programs and trust were all seen as critical for effective diversity and inclusion’. In addition, Young and Jones⁵ concluded that among the principles for practice is ‘building trusted relationships through acknowledging, respecting and valuing different knowledge, talents and attributes’.

Similarly, the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*⁶ sets out that one characteristic of a resilient community is that:

...people work together with local leaders using their knowledge and resources to prepare for and deal with disasters. They use personal and community strengths, and existing community networks and structures.

It also states that empowering individuals and communities ‘requires the availability and accessibility of transparent, accurate and trusted sources of information in various forms’.

Why trusting is a problem

For almost 2 decades diversity, inclusion and resilience policies have clearly identified that trust is needed to bring about desired change. However, progress has been slow because of a

lack of understanding that trust involves a reciprocal relationship between governments and communities. Trust is based on emotion, experience and evidence. It includes characteristics such as predictability, reliability and confident expectation of future action. Trust is also risky and requires those involved to open themselves up to a degree of vulnerability.

As noted by Parker and colleagues⁷, trust is:

...ultimately a kind of gamble, a risky investment that we make every day to manage our lives in a complex and unpredictable world. It is also an emotionally charged investment, because to trust someone is to expose ourselves to the possibility of betrayal'.

Trust can be broken when one party does not act in accordance with expectations. For emergency services organisations to establish trust with communities it requires both the agencies and communities to be willing to be vulnerable. It is not enough that emergency services organisations be trusted by communities. Trust must flow both ways. Agencies must trust communities too. It is a challenge for organisations established to work in a command-and-control environments to be willing to open up to this type of vulnerability. However, a real relationship of trust is not possible without it. This reciprocity has been called 'the alchemy of mutual give and take over time turning to a golden trust'.⁸

Grossman⁹ raised that the traditional approach has the problem that:

...by emphasising cultural difference as vulnerability rather than as resource or asset, it fails to acknowledge the varieties of resilience capital that many culturally diverse individuals and communities may bring with them.

A European Union project, Public Empowerment Policies for Crisis Management¹⁰, states that 'the community approach to crisis management, citizen groups are not merely seen as targets, but instead as active co-actors in response to emergencies'. Therefore, while many communities have been building support networks, emergency management organisations have sometimes continued to regard communities primarily as receivers of services, rather than as trusted partners jointly working towards shared outcomes.

'We have trust issues'

One issue may be that government officials trust different communities in different ways. A recent study (Kennedy 2020) of trust in data indicated:

...what is generally missing from these debates around trust is how structural inequalities shape the extent to which people trust and what people deem to be trustworthy.... It has been found that the wealthy and well-educated have higher levels of trust than more disadvantaged groups. For example, a review of research into public attitudes to health data sharing...found that ethnic minority groups are less likely than ethnic majority groups to trust that their health data will remain secure.' Therefore 'trust can be seen as a privilege enjoyed by majority groups.... [and] distrust is logical for many disadvantaged groups.'¹¹

This is particularly so in Australia where the Edelman Trust Barometer¹² identified 2 different trust realities. It stated that Australia 'again recorded the largest trust inequality anywhere the world' having a 28-point gap 'between the trusting informed public (well-informed adults in the top income and educational brackets) versus the...mass population.'

The pandemic has made this worse and over the last 2 years, governments and the private sector have expressed concern over declining trust. In August 2021, the World Economic Forum¹³ concluded, 'Let's face it: We have trust issues'. It stated: 'Trust builds, distrust destroys' and set out 5 concrete steps to build trust:

Make a conscious decision to trust; be trustworthy; be transparent and honest; set standards through collaboration; define your values – and act upon them.

Is 'radical transparency' the way?

Most diversity and inclusion policies already set out the approach needed to build trust between government and communities. Indeed, page one of the *Guidelines for Emergency Managers*:

...recognises that emergencies and disasters occur in a social context and have social consequences... It is therefore pivotal that the sector has a strong understanding of the social structures and communication processes within Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and develops sound engagement opportunities with community leaders who represent the diversity within those communities.¹⁴

In Victoria, *The Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework* makes clear:

Cultural and religious practice needs to be understood and considered....

Listening and learning requires a new sector-wide approach to working with the community. It also requires humility and recognition that the community may have a clear understanding of what is required and can guide the way. Listening and learning therefore also depends on a willingness to follow, as well as a readiness to lead.¹⁵

The consequences of not following this approach became evident in the Victorian Ombudsman's *Investigation into the detention and treatment of public housing residents arising from a COVID-19 'hard lockdown' in July 2020*. Its recommendations include that agencies:

...work with community leaders and public housing residents to strengthen trust and engagement, and develop and implement measures to: ...

(c) establish and maintain partnerships with community leaders and residents to support timely communication with people living in public housing

(d) increase participation of multicultural communities in policy, planning and project activities relating to public housing.¹⁶

In response, the Victorian Government took strong action on issues identified with new measures and funding.¹⁷

The New Zealand *National Disaster Resilience Strategy* that specifically emphasises how ‘diversity brings richness, innovation, knowledge and experience’ takes this further by stating that organisations ‘can build trust among stakeholders through a combination of ‘radical transparency’ and by demonstrating a set of social values that drive behaviour that demonstrates an acknowledgement of the common good.’¹⁸

If the necessary guidelines are already published, why they are still not being fully implemented? New Zealand has done better in developing these reciprocal relations than Australia. In part this may be because of a more civil political and media environment.¹⁹ There are several other possible explanations for the gap between the policy and the practice:

- Is there a view that communities are not experts? How is the knowledge of communities valued compared to that of subject-matter experts?
- Are the benefits of resilient communities more difficult to measure? Investing in communities may be seen as less easy to justify than in equipment or other tangible things.
- Does this new approach challenge traditional structures? Governments tend to work as hierarchies. Does a network challenge conventional concepts of leadership?
- Is trusting communities too risky? Government officials may have problems with trusting communities because of the risks involved in letting go of control. A community may come up with an approach not consistent with the already approved government or agency plan. The media or political opponents may exploit a process that is going ‘off message’.
- Is this part of the relative lack of investment in mitigation and prevention? Fully implementing diversity and inclusion policies involves taking the time to build relationships. Devoting resources, before disasters strike, to listen to and understand how communities work and what they have to offer can be resource intensive. This also requires investing in capability development. Sometimes these investments have been made, but compared to physical infrastructure and equipment, the resources have been limited.

These questions require further research and analysis. This is why the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (a consortium of 8 academic, community and industry partners including the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation and the Australian Multicultural Foundation) is investigating trust flows between governments and communities. This is not about criticising governments or their agencies. Rather, among the many issues it explores are:

- how best to achieve the objectives set out in strategies for diversity, inclusion and resilience
- how the resilience capital in Australia’s diverse communities can be better valued
- how fully realising these depends on trust relationships between governments and communities being based on reciprocity.

Australia and New Zealand have a robust set of emergency management diversity, inclusion and resilience policies. Many of these policies set out the benefits of harnessing the knowledge, talents, structures, and networks existing in diverse communities and identify trust as central to successful implementation. Benefits flow to both service providers and communities when diverse communities are trusted partners in designing the solutions to their own issues. There have been some successful partnerships between agencies and communities, but the change is not yet systemic. Some people may see reciprocal relationships based on trusting communities as too risky. However, the risk in not doing so means ignoring one of our greatest assets.

Endnotes

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