

Rebuilding community: considerations for policy makers in the wake of the 2011 Queensland floods

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In 2011, Queensland was inundated by the worst flood since 1974. Over 70 communities were affected by flood waters, 75% of the State was declared a natural disaster area, lives were lost and thousands of homes were destroyed. As a formal Commission of Inquiry gets underway, and these events resonate through the media, we are reminded of the emergency needs of individuals, families and communities around us. However, the slow process of recovery and community rebuilding is now beginning and it is timely to consider the scope of the task.

Natural disasters, such as this, live on in the memories and cultures of our communities forever, passed down to the next generations, often gaining in intensity as they move through time. They become defining points in the narratives of our places, with some place names becoming so closely associated with a specific event, such as Gallipoli, Haiti, Port Arthur, King Lake, that a visit to that place can only mean a full recounting of the disaster. The effect of the disaster is intrinsically linked to specific places within the community, enshrined in symbols such as flood-markers on walls or stories that become part of the local culture. Across the world, disasters usually become known by colloquial nicknames, such as Katrina, 9/11, '74, or Tracey. This naming process implies some type of familiar and permanent bond between an event and the people it affects. It signifies a common reference point that often needs no explanation. Mention of the nickname is sufficient to rejuvenate lucid memories of all that occurred during that period of time.

In such a short space of time, a disaster can galvanise the type of collective action that has been the long-term focus of planned efforts in vulnerable communities. Ironically, disasters can actually result in significant personal and social growth.¹ However, if not managed well, disasters can also result in a collective sense of helplessness, isolation and loss of social pride.² The difference between recovery and destruction can be some simple strategies applied at multiple levels. Most strategies focus on either individuals in isolation or an impersonal State-wide or regional

response. Although both levels of effort are needed, there is a level of response that is generated between these two extremes, but is often neglected; that of the local community.

Following a natural disaster, it is important to think locally, at the level of the street, or some other meaningful geographic entity or population group. As a collective, it is important that sub-communities retain or develop a sense of governance and a belief in their ability to exercise control. During the recent flooding in Queensland, we have seen several examples of communities gathering together to coordinate relief efforts and make sure all their residents understand their rights. These efforts are essential to the social fabric that builds communities and must be valued or recognised at higher levels of government. The opportunity for political influence is important, but requires collaborative leadership by those who are in a position to mobilise energy and put structures around our actions.³ However, at a local level, the natural leaders in the community may be equally traumatised by the event and may have temporarily lost the capacity to lead a local initiative. Further, self-governance of this kind is most likely to be found in affluent or educated communities, leaving vulnerable communities less able to broker their own recovery.⁴ Thus, it is imperative to encourage, support and enable local leaders who can then energise and organise others. By engaging citizens in the process of rebuilding their local environment and culture, local leaders can create a shared vision for the future of the community.⁵ This shared vision can sustain people through the tough times to come.

For some people, disasters can eventually be recast as an opportunity to create something better.⁶ For this reason, it is important to re-establish routines as soon as possible. It is also important to remove major evidence of the disaster to avoid re-traumatising people or branding communities as 'neglected'. However, there is a difficult balance to achieve between throwing out all memories of the old, damaged life and retaining a continuous sense of identity, which is usually found through our

connections to objects and places.⁷ Although discarding flood-affected property and remodelling of flood-affected homes may be cathartic, the fresh start should not come at the expense of our social foundations. Communities may need to find ways of remembering the place that existed before the flood, but in ways that do not continuously open up old wounds.

Our response to a disaster must focus on local capacity to rebuild social connections, economic prosperity and pride in the damaged community. Some communities will be able to do this more easily than others.⁸ Early efforts naturally and importantly focus on basic needs, such as infrastructure, essential services and access to safe food or drinking water. However, there must be equal focus on the 'personality' of the community. The aftermath of a disaster can leave communities in a liminal state – no longer what they were, but not yet something new. It is somewhat surreal in that time seems to be suspended, but is not entirely negative. During this time, communities can experience a temporary loosening of the social norms and rules that ordinarily keep us organised.⁹ Paradoxically, this chaos enables people to step outside the bounds that normally restrain them, allowing them to undertake acts of heroism or extreme generosity.¹⁰ Without these extraordinary acts, community recovery would be delayed or even prevented – it is an essential part of healing. However, following this period of chaos, the structures that organise our lives need to be rebuilt, enabling a sense of control, agency and certainty to re-emerge.⁹ During the immediate recovery period, we have seen excellent examples of efforts by our authorities and the media to impose this structure, for example, organising volunteer efforts, matching demand and supply, restricting volunteers to manageable shifts, coordinating donations and providing mobile information booths.

Disasters that have resulted in loss of human life represent a greater challenge for communities. In these cases, there is considerably more grief to be addressed, including that caused by the vicarious trauma in those who have not directly lost a loved one, but have witnessed the destruction in their immediate environment.¹¹ In addition to all the factors that will need to be addressed in these communities as they grieve their loss, people may need to feel that the loss has been meaningful in some way – maybe it has resulted in changed laws, new ways of managing floodwaters, building codes, new products, lessons that have been taken on board fully by the authorities.¹² Failure to learn from disasters can invalidate the experience of damaged communities, generating a sense of betrayal and exacerbating grief.¹³ Thus, it is important for authorities to clearly communicate the lessons that have been learned to the communities and demonstrate responsive action.

In cases where community loss is not managed well, anger and antisocial behaviour can occur, which then has enormous ramifications for community recovery in the long term. It is also not uncommon for alcoholism and substance use to increase significantly following a disaster, so those who already faced difficulties in this area become particularly vulnerable.¹⁴ If we are to rebuild communities successfully, we need to support all people, particularly those for whom this event might be a catalyst – the final straw – usually those who were already vulnerable, coping with other significant events, suffering from depression or anxiety, or without support systems. All our actions need to be based on an understanding that some people are more disadvantaged

than others, including those who are less educated¹⁵ or have a lower income.⁴

There are several factors that will enhance the coping capacity of individuals in devastated communities, including the resources that are available to them, the support they have from friends and family, their attitudes and beliefs about seeking and receiving help, the relative threat they perceive as a result of their loss and their experience of managing disasters in the past.^{16,17} We cannot assume that everyone will cope in the same way. Different groups may cope with the disaster very differently, depending on their cultural and religious beliefs, their social context, their resources and their immediate environment. People will do whatever they can in the way that best suits them at the time. They will draw on familiar strategies and existing skills and, for some, this will work effectively. However, for others, they may be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the disaster, finding that their traditional ways of doing things are not sufficient, but not knowing other ways to manage. During a disaster, communities need to keep an eye out for these people – those who have few supports of their own, are uncomfortable being helped, are confused about what to do next, or are showing signs of stress, fatigue or extreme distress, particularly if this continues for some time.

As a community, we will be judged, and will judge ourselves, by the way in which we have supported those who are less able to fund or manage their own recovery. In the weeks following the flood, we have heard so many people refer to the 'Aussie way' or the 'Aussie spirit', which is a reflection of our need to view ourselves and our actions with pride. There is no evidence that we are any different to other nations in terms of courage, altruism or resilience, but it will be important to our recovery that we can speak confidently about our humanitarian actions and our collective integrity. Thus, the ongoing documentary we are witnessing about acts of heroism, kindness and compassion are important to the collective recovery.¹⁶

In conclusion, although disasters are experienced at a personal level and are addressed through policies at State or National level, rebuilding communities is a local collective effort. Rebuilding requires connections, support, information, hope and vision at the level of a meaningful group (i.e. family, street, suburb, social group, town). This local response can only be achieved through synergistic effort by individuals, local collectives and State-wide or national programs working in unison. As citizens, we each have a responsibility to do what we can to rebuild communities, even if it is only through messages of support and caring for those who are in worse circumstances than ourselves. How to best facilitate this level of response is a significant challenge for our policy-makers. To address the needs of individuals is important, but it must be recognised that individuals do not live in isolation. Similarly, to develop State-wide protocols is essential, but not in a way that overrides, ignores or disrespects the efforts of local groups and the value of local know-how. According to Norris *et al.*, communities can adapt in the aftermath of disasters,⁹ but this will depend on the extent to which they can mobilise four local capacities; economic development, social capital, information exchange and communication, and local competence. Thus, to facilitate community resilience and recovery, we should focus our policies on the ways in which we can rebuild localised features such as equity, social connections, networks, social supports,

local organisation and planning structures and processes, and strong channels of communication.

As the floodwater snaked its way down and across our State, politicians were forced to focus on local collectives. They attended local community meetings and used local forms of transportation. They relied on social networks and social media to spread information. They sought local knowledge or expertise and witnessed firsthand the different 'ways of being' that characterised different places. In some communities, they were also personally affected by floodwaters, helping and being helped alongside people they may not have otherwise met. What will be the effect of this experience on future policy-making? Could it mean a renewed focus on the promotion of strategies to build and support local capacity?

Competing interests

The authors declare that no conflicts of interest exist.

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