

# SHARING POWER TO ACHIEVE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

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Sharing power is imperative to achieving shared responsibility in emergency management, an important new report suggests.

Based on interactive research on the aftermath of Victoria's February 2009 bushfires, the report provides valuable insights into the struggles, politics and issues experienced by local governments, community sector organisations, and community recovery committees following a major disaster. It also highlights the successes and opportunities provided through the recovery process.

Compiled by Daryl Taylor and Helen Goodman, ***Place-based and community-led specific disaster preparedness and generalisable community resilience***, was informed by participatory action research funded by CatholicCare Bushfire Community Recovery Service. The report provides in-depth analysis of systemic power relationships and politics at play during a time of extraordinary demand, need and change. It provides a new model for future emergency management that is place-based, community-led and centred on a shift to building general community resilience.

The report highlights the importance of local government's role as the leader and coordinator of disaster recovery, stressing that this is the level of government closest to people and communities. It explores the difficulties local governments found themselves in with the advent of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, which made redundant the long-held state government policy that local government is the authority in relation to emergency management and recovery.

The report argues for better resourcing for local government to play its prevention, preparedness, response and recovery roles, so it can play a stronger role for communities in the event of major disasters. Importantly, it also calls for state government to move beyond incremental, instrumental or centralised changes, and to invest in shifting power to local governments and communities.

Wider process roles for community sector organisations are also discussed, including roles as advocate, mediator, negotiator, interpreter, influencer, facilitator, partnership broker, social entrepreneur, and capacity and capability builder. These are all alongside the more traditional contracted clinical service and welfare-provider roles.

The report considers whether community organisations could have played a stronger role in assisting people and communities to find their voice and be heard by various authorities in the aftermath of the 2009 bushfires. The funding environment for community organisations is found to have negatively affected their capacity to work collaboratively. Organisations that were tied to contractual arrangements also found they were limited in their capacity to explore community dynamics and adjust their services in response.

One participant noted:

*"When you take on a tender or contract from government, you become an arm of the government, you are doing their bidding."*

Another stated:

*“Vertical reporting on service delivery output statistics is not program evaluation. Contracted services end up reporting only on inputs and outputs, not on processes and outcomes, and not on learning and innovation.”*

Community organisations stressed the need to work collaboratively to ensure all voices within communities are heard and acknowledged as they move through recovery.

The role and experiences of community recovery committees are also explored. Some participants saw the onset of a new ‘disaster politics’, with the disaster recovery space becoming a site of competition and conflict within and between communities, as well as the emergence of what the report calls ‘structural violence’ between various levels of government, agency bodies, and political representatives.

Community recovery committees stressed the negative effects of working to state government imposed timeframes. It was generally acknowledged that the recovery period after a major disaster would be considerable, but that timeframes set by the state government did not allow for longer-term thinking; to the detriment of both community recovery and long-term resilience.

The report argues that we need to prepare for disasters by taking a whole-of-community approach to building and maintaining community resilience, and that disaster preparedness should be viewed as a common or public good, rather than as a private individual or family responsibility.

Highlighted throughout are what the authors call ‘disaster dynamics’ – impacts operating across all scales. The challenge of dealing with long-term traumatised organisations and communities was another theme raised.

Overall, the study findings emphasise the need for systemic change in emergency management and disaster preparedness, and community recovery.

It encourages continued advocacy for a state government role of enabling, empowering and resourcing communities vulnerable to, or struck by, disasters, as well as service provider agencies and local governments. It suggests new opportunities for local governments, community organisations and community recovery committees, encouraging the state government to better support and enable local initiatives, leadership, decision-making and responsibility-taking.

While shared responsibility is acknowledged as a positive goal, achieving it is argued to require significant investments in shared understanding, shared commitments, shared resources and importantly, shared power. The report authors conclude by stating:

*“We believe that the now well-honed notion of interoperability – especially given its centrality to the evolution of immediate response coordination in Victoria – is overdue for application to all other phases of the spectrum that comprises the broad view of Emergency Management. Interoperability also has sister concepts in community development: collaboration and collective impact. Although the two systems have very different means for achieving their respective outcomes, interoperability and collective impact define a bridge between these different, but complementary ways of working.”*

This report is an important new piece of work that adds to the knowledge and insight afforded to us through the disaster of the 2009 Victorian bushfires. It is imperative that we continue to learn from the findings of this report and others like it, so that individuals, families and communities who face future disasters, will receive improved responses.