

Disaster recovery: are we doomed to repeat the same mistakes?

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There are significant barriers to lessons management in disaster recovery in Australia. The 2017 AFAC Lessons Management Forum looked at the challenges and why they exist.

Disasters are increasing in frequency and severity globally. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that the effects of disasters are long-term and costly. Poorly managed recovery efforts may have as many negative consequences for disaster-affected communities as the event itself.

Despite the efforts of passionate and dedicated community members and workers for hard-won advances, there are significant systemic challenges to learning lessons from the past and implementing them for future disasters.

Multiple factors result in lessons management in recovery being underdeveloped in Australia. These include:

Limited workforce continuity or development: The nature of recovery work, particularly at the local level, is generally short-term contract based, or 'off the side of the desk' to substantive roles. As a result, most recovery workers may only ever work on one disaster event. In almost every disaster, the recovery workforce has no prior recovery experience (irrespective of the excellent skills they may bring with them). This limits the scope for an ongoing community-of-practice and opportunities for meaningful training and professional development. Professional or education pathways to recovery management are incredibly limited.

Highly political: All aspects of disaster management are political. Many politicians are inexperienced with disasters but naturally wish to support their communities during these events. It is common for politicians to make early announcements directly effecting operational recovery decisions in a way that is unheard of in other aspects of disaster management.

Multi-sector, multi-organisational nature: The number of organisations involved in recovery is necessarily wide-reaching and varied. The multifaceted nature of recovery management makes it difficult to tackle from a lessons-management perspective.

No review process required: Recovery management is rarely included in disaster reviews or enquiries. Program evaluation is currently optional good practice, rather than standard practice or a requirement, though this is starting to change.

Timing of lessons identified: Even when comprehensive evaluations take place, recovery lessons are often

collected at the end of an operation (or end of funding). There are currently limited mechanisms to share and implement these lessons.

The challenges to lessons management in disaster recovery are interrelated. At the heart of it, there is an apparent failure to consider the effects of the aftermath of disasters to be as significant as the hazard event. This limits the way that lessons from previous events are implemented for the future.

We rightly value the education, training and professional development of first responders and incident managers, knowing the risk that may befall both the workforce and the community if we don't. Yet we systematically expect people who are inadequately trained or resourced before a disaster to coordinate community-led recovery. While we continue with this approach, we cannot expect to see dramatic improvements from lessons management.

Over the last few years, there has been a concerted effort at a national level to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for recovery support, which is positive and much needed. Additionally, a number of jurisdictions are making creative and concerted efforts to develop tools for recovery workers. There are passionate people who are doing great work and are improving the way communities are supported.

But it's not enough. While local recovery managers are appointed and trained after a disaster event has occurred, even if the best monitoring and evaluation took place after every disaster, this still may not lead to the improvements we would hope for. Unless we build recovery capability before a disaster event, we can't hope for a cycle of ongoing improvement.

The saying 'recovery starts on day one' is popular and represents a positive and progressive shift; that as a system, we need to think about the long-term consequences of disasters from day one. But there is also a literal interpretation that is frighteningly accurate. For many of the people who will support community recovery, it really does start on day one. The introduction to the most basic information, systems and tools all starts when the disaster starts, at the time when meaningful learning is hardest.

Until we are able to support an ongoing, resourced workforce to support community-led recovery after a disaster, the hard-won lessons of previous events will not be implemented in any meaningful way.