

## ABSTRACT

# Disaster recovery towards resilience: contributions of an assets-based community development approach

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## Introduction

Climate change is very likely to lead to the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as heat waves, fire and intense rainfall (IPCC 2014, Wang *et al.* 2017). Many governments and emergency management organisations recognise that the future environment will be different from today and that their responses cannot necessarily be extrapolated from past experiences (Bosomworth & Handmer 2008, Owen *et al.* 2014). Some are exploring new approaches to prepare for and respond to more frequent and severe natural hazards and, importantly, helping communities recover after disasters. This paper identifies how a modified assets-based community development (ABCD) approach may contribute to community-directed recovery and to longer-term community resilience, based on the experiences of communities in East Gippsland, Victoria, impacted by bushfire in 2014.

The term 'recovery' has long been associated with returning communities to pre-disaster conditions. Recovery efforts are adept at rebuilding homes and infrastructure and re-establishing key services; the tangible elements of a community (Alesch *et al.* 2009, Leadbeater 2013). However, many recognise the importance of rebuilding and strengthening the less-tangible, social infrastructure of a community (Aldrich & Meyer 2015). Once the initial activity of responding to a disaster passes, it is often local governments that are responsible for managing longer-term recovery efforts to rebuild the social fabric torn apart during a disaster (Alesch *et al.* 2009). Local governments bring varying skills and capacities to this protracted and diverse task and different approaches have been employed (Coles & Buckle 2004). There is no standard approach that works in all situations. Recovery is dependent on the nature of the event and the context-specific elements inherent in the community (Alesch *et al.* 2009).

Victoria's emergency service providers have long-recognised the value of active community participation in recovery (Coles & Buckle 2004, Gordon 2009, Leadbeater 2013) but 'how best' to engage communities in recovery remains a challenge. Numerous community-based or community-directed

As the likelihood of extreme weather events increases under a changing climate, organisations tasked with disaster risk reduction and emergency management are exploring new approaches to help communities recover from these events. Community-directed initiatives place control back with those who are most affected. However, implementing such initiatives can be challenging. Assets-based community development is one community-directed approach that draws on existing social networks, organisations and community assets. This paper considers how an assets-based community development approach might inform community recovery programs so that recovery efforts support longer-term community resilience. Drawing on the evaluation of a modified assets-based community development approach that was implemented as a recovery and resilience-building program after a bushfire in East Gippsland, Victoria, this paper examines how the key elements of assets-based community development can guide recovery programs. Findings indicate that an assets-based community development approach has significant potential to guide community-directed recovery programs that may contribute to longer-term resilience. This provides insights into disaster recovery practices that shift from responsive post-disaster actions to proactive resilience-building.

approaches exist. The *Disaster Recovery Toolkit for Local Government* (Dibley & Gordon 2014) provides guidance and principles for engaging community in recovery efforts pre- and post-events. After the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria in 2009 for example, Yarra Ranges Council implemented an approach to recovery, informed by Disaster Social Process Theory (described in Gordon 2004), and established a Municipal Recovery Committee with staff and local community representation (NLT Consulting Pty Ltd 2012). The community of Strathewen, on the other hand, established their own Strathewen Community Renewal Association (an incorporated body) to lead the area's recovery and renewal after the fires, independent of local government (Leadbeater 2013).

East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC) in the east of Victoria, found that community engagement for recovery mostly follows a 'top-down' pattern, where government agencies lead decision-making and implementation of recovery support. Many recovery projects are conceived and developed by people outside the affected community. This top-down process risks limiting community input to the recovery agenda, resulting in people feeling disengaged from guiding recovery efforts.

Complementing the discussion of community-directed recovery has been an increased discourse around building community resilience to natural hazards (Cutter *et al.* 2014). Community resilience can be considered a localised (often geographically defined) ability to respond to and recover from disruption, to cope with or absorb impacts, to adapt, to reorganise and change in response to a crisis through communal actions (Cutter *et al.* 2008, Cretney 2015). Resilience also suggests emergent behaviour and creativity (Coles & Buckle 2004) and can encompass the opportunities that disturbances and stresses open up (Folke *et al.* 2010). Many documents concerned with disaster preparedness, response and recovery, including the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* (Council of Australian Governments 2011), are underpinned by some form of resilience framework. Many of these frameworks incorporate a focus on social capital (Aldrich & Meyer 2015).

However, resilience cannot be imposed on a community from external authorities. The understanding that 'resilience relies on citizens and communities, not the institutions of state' (Edwards 2009) highlights that for communities to reduce vulnerability to disaster events, they need to look at community assets and how they might provide the opportunity to adapt to changes, in the short and long-term.

To help communities emerge from traumatic events, to reconnect social fabric and build resilience, there is a need for leaders to emerge from within the community to guide recovery efforts (Leadbeater 2013) and for community needs to be expressed (Coles & Buckle 2004). This requires timelines that are longer than currently allowed for by government recovery efforts and for recovery to be shaped internally (Leadbeater 2013). It also requires flexibility in project design so that different community needs can be met in creative ways (Coles & Buckle 2004). Above all, recovery efforts

need dedicated specialists to assist community efforts (Gordon 2009, Horney *et al.* 2016).

The EGSC Adaptation for Recovery project, implemented after fires in the region in 2014, sought to address issues of government-led, top-down, decision-making while improving resilience in the fire-affected communities. Drawing on the ABCD approach, the project facilitated a recovery effort that offered communities the time and flexibility for local leaders to emerge and to draw on community assets to re-develop social connections and, in the process, contribute to shaping their own form of community resilience. The Adaptation for Recovery project was evaluated to determine if the project contributed to community ideas of resilience and in what way the ABCD approach may contribute to a more empowering, community-directed recovery.

## East Gippsland, early 2014

Several fires occurred in East Gippsland from January to March 2014. The two most severe were the Mt Ray-Boundary track fire north of Glenaladale and the Goongerah-Deddick Trail fire in the remote communities of Deddick, Tubbut, Bonang and Goongerah. These were intense fires that burnt for 67 and 70 days, respectively (Emergency Management Victoria 2014b, Emergency Management Victoria 2014a).

Glenaladale is a predominantly farming community 30 minutes from Bairnsdale. It also incorporates several lifestyle properties and a plantation forest. The population is approximately 400 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). Goongerah, Bonang, Tubbut and Deddick are in the remote, forested hills in the east of the shire. Bonang, Tubbut and Deddick are chiefly farming communities, while Goongerah has smaller-scale farms and an 'alternative lifestyle' population. These remote communities have a combined population of less than 200 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011a, b and c) and were hit by severe fires in 2002-2003.

During the 2014 fires, no lives were lost, however, several homes and over 1000 livestock perished. Nearly 200,000 hectares of private and public land burnt (Emergency Management Victoria 2014b, Emergency Management Victoria 2014a). The trauma of the extended exposure to the fire threat, and for the remote communities the compounding effect of two large fires just over a decade apart, was evident. Members of both communities expressed hurt and anger at elements of the fire response by emergency services.

Several recovery projects, delivered by government agencies or non-government organisations, were implemented concurrently. The Goongerah, Bonang, Tubbut area had five additional projects running simultaneously, including the East Gippsland Mental Health Initiative (EGMHI), while Glenaladale had the EGMHI and council-led recovery events delivered alongside the EGSC Adaptation for Recovery project.

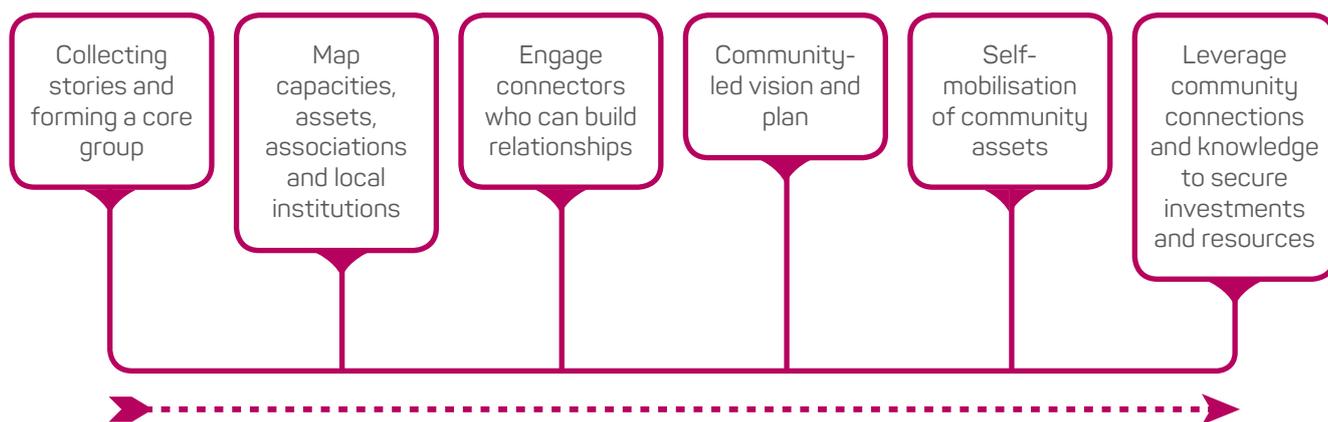


Figure 1: One representation of the assets-based community development process.

## ABCD model for community recovery

The ABCD approach has been used in community development since the 1990s when the concept was outlined by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993). The approach recognises that traditional forms of community development focus on needs and deficits in a community and efforts to fill those deficits often come from external sources. Over time, this deficits-based model leads to increased dependence on external resources and assistance (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993). The alternative assets-based approach identifies and builds on the assets and strengths that exist in a community and mobilises individuals, local organisations and institutions to come together to use and build on those assets. Five types of assets are recognised:

- individual skills and knowledge
- associations such as clubs and groups
- institutions such as government agencies
- place-based assets such as the land or heritage of an area
- connections including social networks (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993).

Implementation of ABCD varies between projects but can be represented by Figure 1. The ABCD process begins by listening to people's stories and their perspectives on a situation, and forming a core group of community members to lead the process. It then maps the assets in a community to create awareness of latent strengths and draws on them to identify community aims, and to facilitate connections that can help achieve them.<sup>1</sup> Internationally, the approach has been used in both developed and developing countries. In Yates County, New York for example, ABCD was applied in a rural health improvement program (ABCD Institute 2011) and in the Solomon Islands in a program building sustainable livelihoods (Coady International Institute n.d.). In Australia, ABCD was first implemented in 1999 in

Victoria in the Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens and Santa's Workshop projects that focused on community and economic development (Sustaining Community 2015).

EGSC recognised that the recovery model employed in the past focused on 'needs and deficits'. They sought a different method and proposed ABCD as an alternative model for recovery and community resilience. This aligned with Victoria's Emergency Relief and Recovery Plan, which notes that a resilient community 'uses personal and community strengths, and existing community networks and structures' (Emergency Management Commissioner 2015, p. 8).

The Adaption for Recovery project developed differently in each of the fire-affected communities and was modified from the generic ABCD approach.<sup>2</sup> With guidance from facilitators, Glenaladale and Bonang-Tubbut established local emergency management groups that led the project in the respective areas. Establishing these core project groups was proposed at community meetings but they were ultimately formed from local volunteers rather than through an electoral process. Membership included men and women, farmers and non-farming community members. Some were representatives of the local hall committees, others held no previous formal role in the community. Their focus was connecting with their communities and preparing for future emergency events. Unlike Glenaladale and Bonang-Tubbut, the community of Goongerah did not establish a formal group. Instead they opted for interested individuals to meet on a regular basis to plan for and progress initiatives.

The traditional asset mapping that underpins ABCD was not undertaken. Handmer (2003) notes that while assets

1 For a detailed explanation of ABCD, see Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) or visit the ABCD Institute at <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/about/Pages/default.aspx>.

2 Refer to Adaptation for Recovery Evaluation Report ([www.cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/east-gippsland-afr\\_final-\\_v5.pdf](http://www.cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/east-gippsland-afr_final-_v5.pdf)) or Adaptation for Recovery in Bushfire Affected Communities Final Project Report, Dec 2015 for a description of the project in each of the communities.

such as networks and linkages can be mapped under normal conditions, during a crisis, emergent networks may be more critical, but are not easily mapped. Thus, an iterative process of identifying assets emerged. For example, in Glenaladale, as ideas emerged to move the community forward, the facilitator worked with the project group to identify specific tasks and the skills and assets that were needed. The project group members identified where those skills and assets might be sourced, with the facilitator encouraging the group to enhance their own capacities and skills.

Each project group and the Goongerah residents, helped by the facilitators, identified activities and initiatives that were particular to their local community and met community needs of feeling prepared and connected. They took the lead in mobilising community assets, coordinating and implementing the initiatives. The group members also leveraged connections and knowledge to secure additional funding by applying for grants, and to draw additional resources into the community.

## East Gippsland community recovery and resilience

The Adaptation for Recovery project was evaluated during 2016 through 22 interviews with organisational stakeholders and community members, five community evaluation meetings and a vox pop session at a community recovery event. The evaluation found that the project delivered immediate and tangible outputs for the communities, as well as longer-term, less-easily quantifiable outcomes (Scott *et al.* 2017).

Tangible outputs included numerous initiatives in each of the project areas targeting individual capacity needs as well as community preparedness. Initiatives included community events (e.g. emergency services days and fire preparation planning days), capacity building and training activities (e.g. multiple conference attendance opportunities and Bolder Bushbeats workshops for children), local infrastructure projects (e.g. static water supply and information shelter) and establishing local incident management plans. Feedback about these activities was generally positive, for example, a comment about the children-focused Bolder Bushbeats workshop was:

*There was great benefit to our students to be able to participate in this program....The feedback from the parents and general community at the concert was very positive and the clear message around fire safety and preparedness from the children was powerful and timely for all.*

(Goongerah community member)

Those who contributed to the evaluation perceived that less-easily quantifiable resilience outcomes, which were defined by each community, occurred as a result of the project. This included improved access to resources and better engagement with government. Interviewees felt the project had improved communications, strengthened

connections and contributed to a sense of self-reliance, community commitment and participation. It also provided mechanisms to enhance practical preparedness at individual and community levels. As noted by one Bonang-Tubbut resident, 'The sprinkler day—that was a useful exercise. It gave me some ideas'.

For those who participated in the project, they reported positive attitudes and behaviours such as more confident outlooks, feeling empowered and a sense of pride in their achievements; feeling more connected to their community and a willingness to take more responsibility. One community member noted: 'I've really grown as a person. I feel more educated, more empowered. I'm better at handling difficulties' (Community member, Glenaladale). In addition, community and government agency representatives reported that healthier relationships were established with better two-way communication.

While the project engaged over 200 people in different activities there were several people in each of the communities who did not actively participate, even with the support of the EGMHI mental health professional. For some of these people, there were concerns about the legitimacy of the project groups, perceptions related to lack of transparency and accountability and feelings of being 'outside' the process. Recognising these perceptions of the project pilot will contribute to enhanced future project design.

## ABCD contribution to community recovery and resilience

The evaluation found that several elements inherent in the ABCD approach enabled the project achievements, particularly the recovery facilitators and the community-directed nature of the project, as well as the flexible project design and budget and extended project timeframe. Importantly, it was the addition of the mental health professional working for the concurrent project, EGMHI that enabled greater psychosocial benefits to occur, particularly in the remote project areas. The mental health professional worked alongside the recovery facilitator in meetings to enhance connections and linkages, by encouraging bridges for outsiders and drawing out attributes of tolerance and care. This requires professional skill and is an important feature to add to the traditional ABCD approach when implementing it in a recovery situation. The project, working with the mental health professional for EGMHI, encouraged tolerance and care by mobilising all community members to participate. Kesselring (2016) emphasises that such efforts of inclusion and mobilisation decrease a 'victim' response scenario.

The recovery facilitators were vital to the project. Project group members noted that without them, 'there wouldn't be an impact on anything' (Community member, Bonang). They were regarded as crucial in directing community attention towards the future. They developed strong relationships and trust with community members;

actively motivating the community project groups and individuals. Additionally, the facilitators provided an important link to government agencies and helped to establish contacts and resourcing opportunities.

The non-prescriptive project design and flexible budget supported the emergence of creativity. This flexibility allowed the project to evolve according to local conditions and requirements, to draw on and build local assets and enable collaboration with concurrent recovery projects. Importantly, the flexibility enabled community-directed recovery. In each community, the voluntary project group coordinated project efforts, or in the case of Goongerah, individuals volunteered to coordinate particular initiatives. This allowed community members to identify the priority issues for their area, as well as how they could be addressed. Drawing on and building on existing skills and capacities in the community enabled a sense of ownership and achievement. Additionally, allowing the project to be delivered over a two-year timeframe provided the space for leaders to emerge and for social connection processes to occur in a more natural way.

The project groups also created a focal point for agencies to liaise with the community, with local project governance left largely up to each group. A locally convened project group created some challenges, however, such as reinforcing perceptions of those 'within' the group and those 'outside'. The EGMHI mental health professional worked to minimise these perceptions, not only directly by professional efforts with individuals, but also by influencing the way the facilitators and project groups worked with the community, encouraging inclusiveness.

The pilot of the ABCD approach has shown promising results but can be further enhanced. Future projects could incorporate an early and robust, facilitated process to address community anger and frustration. Also, earlier and explicit involvement of mental health professionals to engage with the emotionally vulnerable in the community, and to enable existing community divisions to be recognised and minimised to allow open inclusion of as many of the community as possible. Future applications of ABCD may explore how dynamic asset mapping might be incorporated. Finally, although the community came to embrace the project's flexibility and openness, it was confusing for them at the start. Developing a simple, cohesive message about the aims of a community-directed recovery and resilience project and its functioning would assist understanding and adoption.

## Conclusion

The application of the ABCD approach to post-disaster recovery and community resilience-building demonstrates a promising method for community-directed recovery. The Adaptation for Recovery project delivered in fire-affected communities in East Gippsland shows that the approach can build individual capacities

as well as social connections and bonds in communities. The facilitators were vital to the project by helping to identify and draw on local assets and strengths. The addition of a mental health professional working alongside project facilitators was an important element that contributed to the project's outcomes (even though their role was part of a separate, concurrently run project).

Evaluation of the two community project groups demonstrated a preference to enhance preparedness for future events, both individually and as a community. This suggests the approach could provide insights into proactive resilience-building and recovery planning.

Future applications of the ABCD approach may explore dynamic asset mapping and how this might serve recovery and resilience. To improve the potential of ABCD, additional elements such as a facilitated process to address community anger and frustration, explicit incorporation of a mental health professional early in the project, as well as simplified, consistent project messaging at the start of the initiative should be incorporated.

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