



The role of communities in post-disaster recovery planning: A Diamond Harbour case study

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ABSTRACT

Though there is strong agreement in the literature that community participation in disaster recovery is crucial, there is a lack of consensus over what might constitute a model of disaster recovery 'best practice' of community engagement. This paper contributes to an enhanced understanding of community engagement in disaster recovery by, first, drawing on 'peacetime' participation literature and secondly, illustrating a case study of post-disaster community-led planning in Diamond Harbour. We argue that roles for community groups vary, but that some communities would rather have influence than decision-making ability, and that this influence can take a number of forms. Though peacetime participation typologies are useful, we suggest that there may be value in combining development studies with scholarship around disaster recovery to account for the suspension of formal modes of participation that often accompanies disasters.

INTRODUCTION

There is strong consensus in the disaster recovery literature that public participation is essential for a 'good' recovery (Chavan, Peralta, & Steins, 2007; Coles & Buckle, 2004; Norman, 2004; Philips, 2004; ; Spee, 2008; Vallance, 2011a; Ward et al. 2008) yet there remains a gap in our understanding of a disaster recovery 'best practice' of community engagement, and how it might be undertaken amidst the chaos and dysfunction that accompanies – and indeed *defines* - disaster. Too often, it is simply assumed that communities will be willing and able to participate in the recovery process, and that recovery authorities will welcome, encourage, and enable this participation (Coghlan, 2004; Norman, 2004; Philips, 2004; Vallance, 2011b), yet this not always the case. Indeed, a growing strand of literature documents the ways in which communities' post-disaster aspirations are deliberately denied through opaque decision-making pathways, the suspension of democratic

rights, and local or state governments using post-disaster reconstruction as an opportunity to push through their own agendas (Klein, 2007; Gotham and Greenberg, 2008). In this context, it becomes all the more important that we better understand the challenges community groups face in facilitating their own recoveries, and the strategies that they adopt to overcome them. In attempting to promote a better appreciation of 'community-led planning', our research focussed on one motivated community group - the Stoddart Point Regeneration Ideas Group (SPRIG). SPRIG is a community network that was established post-earthquake in the coastal settlement of Diamond Harbour, and their efforts were triggered by the damage inflicted on the keystone building of Godley House (as depicted in Figure 1 below). Our research examined how this group developed 'plans' for the improvement of this site, and the recovery of the community more holistically, after the recent earthquakes in Canterbury.

1. 'COMMUNITY-LED' PLANNING AND DISASTER RECOVERY

Various theoretical frameworks exist that may be used to categorise a community's involvement in disasters. Whilst some of these, focussing on the disaster response phase (including rescue and relief), are well-developed, there is less scholarly information available around the public's role in longer-term recovery (including rebuilding and reconstruction). There is a paucity of research detailing communities' planning efforts and aspirations, or their engagement with formal state representatives; however, a great deal of work has been conducted on orthodox 'peacetime' models, including Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, Pretty, Guijt, Thompson and Scoones' (1985) typology and the International Association of Participation 2's spectrum, with each documenting a continuum of engagement/participatory practices. These range from 'token' or 'passive' *informing* through consulting, involving and collaborating, to 'meaningful' or 'active' *empowering* (www.iap2.org) forms of participation where the agency agrees to implement the community's decisions. 'Community-led planning' arguably represents the most empowered form of participation where decisions are made by, and for, the people according to their aspirations. Though these provide useful guidelines, the post-disaster context does add a layer of complexity to these typologies, largely because normal state processes of engagement may be suspended (formally under a state of national emergency, or informally due to dysfunction); the platform on which elected officials gained their mandate may have become utterly irrelevant; or the new context may generate issues about which the state is largely oblivious. In this context, it may be more appropriate to draw on literature from 'development studies' of nascent democracies, where the state is assumed to be somewhat distant and/or preoccupied. This branch of scholarship is more concerned with models of informal, insurgent or transgressive planning in order to explain, for example, DIY urbanism, vigilantism, and grassroots movements.



Figure 1: Godley House, post-earthquake (Geoff Trotter)

Perhaps as a consequence of these additional factors, disaster scholarship has yet to comprehensively adopt and adapt orthodox participatory schema in a meaningful way, though the empirical evidence to do so is accruing: Davidson, Johnson, Lizarralde, Dikmen & Sliwinski (2007, p.100) compared four case studies exhibiting different types of 'active' community participation, from supplying the labour force at one extreme to taking an active role in decision-making and project management at the other. They found that having the opportunity to make meaningful choices led to more positive results. Unfortunately, the authors also noted that 'despite often-good intentions, this level of participation is rarely obtained and the [community's] capabilities are often significantly wasted' (2007, p. 100). Others talk about the relationship between the communities and recovery authorities in terms of social capital (Aldrich, 2011; Murphy, 2007; Lorenz, 2010; Pelling and High, 2005; and Vallance, 2011a and b). Hawkins and Maurer (2010), for example, found that bonding capital (based on close ties) was vital in terms of immediate support, but that bridging and linking social capital (between communities and government) was important for longer-term recovery and neighbourhood revitalization. The role of bridging and linking social capital post-disaster has been explored in terms of 'participative capacity' (Lorenz, 2011) which presents another lens through which community-led planning may be explored.

2. COMMUNITY INTELLIGENCE, CIVIC EXPERTISE AND MANDATE

In the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes, local, regional and central government (through the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority) have all played a role in recovery. Although this combination of elected bodies may be regarded as the best representation of the wishes of 'the people' in a democracy (Arnstein, 1969), it may also be seen as a 'top down' approach that potentially marginalises parts of society and may leave communities disenfranchised (Coles & Buckle, 2004; Philips, 2004). The issue of adequate representation and mandate is particularly difficult post-disaster because processes designed to deal with incremental or rational modification are unable to cope with rapid, unpredictable and catastrophic change. Even the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002, which has the aim of encouraging key stakeholders to work together and to develop the capabilities of communities to plan for themselves post-disaster (Norman, 2004), seemed unable to adequately legislate for civic involvement. The recent *Review of the Civil Defence Emergency Management Response to the 22 February Christchurch Earthquake* found that even during the response phase, community groups lacked an effective conduit to the Christchurch Response Centre (CRC) or held a recognised place within the Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS). This effectively isolated most communities from decision-makers right from the beginning, and has arguably shaped the recovery as well. Though the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) is statutorily bound to promote public participation as part of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Act's purpose, the relationship between communities and decision-makers within CERA is unclear.

Another factor influencing the recovery is the geotechnical nature of the process which further excludes public participation. It has been argued that the public lacks the necessary geological expertise and that there is little room to accommodate community aspirations in the face of engineering, geotechnical and economic realities. This raises interesting questions about the role of 'community intelligence' in recovery processes, the communication that takes place

between recovery agencies and the public, and the types of issues community networks seek to change or influence (Cuthill & Fien, 2005). It is particularly interesting to us given the literary consensus that community participation – at some level is cathartic, can help identify workable solutions; can be cost effective, can secure buy in and consumer confidence; can promote political stability (Olshansky, 2007; Chavcan et al.; Monday, 2002; Benight, 2004; Campanella, 2006; Kweit and Kweit, 2004); and be 'sustainable' in the sense that communities do not become dependent on external sources of funding for the recovery (Lawther, 2009). What is less clear is the type of participation that delivers these benefits.

If empowered communities with decision-making powers tend to facilitate recovery and deliver these benefits, further questions are raised about the mandate of community leaders' and their right to speak on behalf of 'the people'. One of the greatest challenges identified in the literature is getting the whole community – some members of which are likely traumatised by the event - to coordinate and communicate together (Becker, Kerr, & Saunders, 2006; Monday, 2002; Vallance, 2011b; Norman, 2004). Further, diverse communities may be dominated by particular groups, with strong ideals, and it may be hard for some members of the community to speak against this without fear of being ostracised (Shaw, 1997). A significant challenge for community-led planning is, therefore, the mandate under which it occurs in the absence of democratic or other recognised traditions.

The questions raised here, about community intelligence, mandate and type of participation that delivers significant benefits for the community were explored in the context of a particular case study. This paper revolves around lessons and insights derived from the Stoddart Point Regeneration Ideas Group – or SPRIG - vis-à-vis community led planning and associated challenges and opportunities. Our conclusions are based on observations and in-depth interviews with SPRIG members. The fieldwork was conducted mid- to late 2011, approximately one year after the first earthquake.¹

¹ A more detailed methodology is available in Love, R. (2012). *Community led planning in post-disaster recovery: A*

3. THE ROLE AND MANDATE OF THE COMMUNITY IN RECOVERY IN DIAMOND HARBOUR

Given New Zealand's 'peacetime' planning and regulatory framework, it was not seen as possible or ideal for the community to develop, design or formulate a comprehensive 'plan' as might be outlined in formal statutory documents. The SPRIG membership acknowledged early on that they had neither the skills nor the mandate to do so. Yet they still saw an important role in undertaking background work so that they could make a useful contribution to more official procedures that they assumed would follow at some later date. Our research suggested that, over time, SPRIG members decided that its role within the community and planning process was to act as a *facilitator of ideas and motivating force* that might encourage the community to participate in formal recovery plans. This was pointed out explicitly by the interviewees who told us:

"The main purpose is that it's about facilitating the processes of recovery and capturing and doing something useful with ideas. Moving them into reality some of them, but not in itself being a decision making body".

"It [SPRIG] was created with the purpose of the need to do something to draw people back and make it a destination with lots of options for people to increase tourist numbers".

"I think it is really important that in rejuvenating the community by new facilities and structures, but also businesses, and the social structure of the community, that there is grass roots participation".

Yet, as interviewee one pointed out, the group understood that the community should not be making all the decisions, as they are not the ones

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who have to implement or monitor the resultant plans.

In the end, the person who has to implement the plan is the council. The council owns all the infrastructure and services, and a bunch of private individuals are creating the plan... But the council runs them on behalf of the community...Councils also represent the views of groups such as businesses. And they look at all the views, so the approach they take is actually community planning that fits in with the councils systems, so they can actually implement it.

To overcome this tension, SPRIG adopted the role of facilitators and chose to create an 'ideas paper' by seeking contributions from the wider Diamond Harbour community. The first step in the process involved the local Community Board representative convening a meeting for the community to discuss the plans for the Godley House site. At that public meeting, a member of what was to become SPRIG noticed that there were a few passionate individuals in the crowd, and approached them after the meeting with the intention of capturing that energy. This led to the first community-led meeting where "Lots of thoughts and ideas were captured. Various people made their voices heard" (Interviewee one) and enough people from that initial meeting were interested in creating a group to manage the recovery of the Stoddart Point area. Since then, SPRIG have run their own local meetings, open to the public and advertised through the local paper. The group operates these meetings in an open forum format, with an agenda to keep on track. The relaxed attitude of the meetings has allowed for a fluid membership and input, described by interviewee three as an 'informal' setting "that has allowed for the flexibility of people to come in for a bit and leave again".

The ideas and suggestions captured at these meetings dealt with the future use of the Godley House site, and other concepts for the redevelopment of the Stoddart Point area. During the meetings, SPRIG gave itself the task of developing an 'ideas paper' titled *Getting to the Point* that will include some of the workable and desirable recovery options for the Stoddart Point area. The ideas paper was drafted out of all the possibilities presented, both at the initial public meeting called by the Community Board and

through the group's ideas. The group intends to take this document to the local Community Association (the pre-existing Residents Association) for suggestions and approval, and thereafter back to the community for comment. The purpose behind this is to gauge support for certain ideas and to gather feedback. Once this process is complete, a document will be created and presented to the local authorities: "Then we would like the Christchurch City Council to prepare a detailed plan for redevelopment based on the outcomes of the community consultations held."

The group has purposely called the draft document an 'ideas paper', as they did not want to give the impression that they have created a formal plan, with some statutory backing, for the area. The purpose of the paper is to collate all of the different possibilities for the area and to encourage the public to debate what they want on the site. It was hoped that by leaving the process open, and giving it that title, the ideas paper would act as a 'spark' for the community. This aspiration is also highlighted in SPRIG's documentation:

This paper summarises the community's vision for the Godley House site in context of the whole of Stoddart Point. The overall purpose of this paper is to provide the community an articulated vision for their further input and comments, building from the consultation already undertaken. It is also intended to provide inspiration and a launching platform for the next step.

Key features of their consultation process included raising awareness of the Stoddart Point music festival (Figure 2); communicating through various media including pamphlets, mail drops, and developing a website; talking with locals they knew lived around the area; and the deliberate use of the term 'ideas paper' rather than 'plan'. Interviewees repeatedly made it clear that they were aware of the danger of becoming a group

that was planning *with* the community to a group that tries to plan *for* the community.

4. DISCUSSION

Though the literature clearly indicates the importance of public participation in disaster recovery, 'peacetime' planning scholarship recognises a range of types of involvement/engagement and degrees of community empowerment. The issue addressed in this paper centres on the kinds of participation that might deliver the benefits indicated in the literature. Our results indicate that community members do not necessarily want to have decision-making powers and that 'empowered' participation might take a number of different forms. In this case study, SPRIG wanted to have the ability to *influence* planning processes, and its outcomes, but did not want decision-making authority. SPRIG members therefore walked a somewhat awkward path between understanding it was not their place to hold power or make decisions but, at the same time, needed some kind of legitimacy in order to act as a credible contributor to more official processes. They knew they lacked the mandate to act as decision-makers but were keen to take on a number of other roles including building awareness; bringing the community together and resolving some early conflicts; gathering information about the area, and becoming a 'community' with capability and capacity to become engaged in formal processes. They become empowered through recognition that their contribution was meaningful. SPRIG members understood the value of community input and their possession of specialised local knowledge including their ability to identify errors in plans that recovery agencies may otherwise miss. They also believed that the community are the most important stakeholders as they have to live with the consequences of the plan. Including community groups from the outset, they maintained, could avoid the development of plans that were controversial, inadequate, or that missed unique opportunities.



Figure 2: SPRIG's Music Festival at Stoddart Point

Though there is a great deal of literature devoted to the benefits of 'good' community engagement and consensus as to its benefits, very little work exists around the steps that could be taken by communities to facilitate and foster the process. Our research suggests that before any 'consultation' or 'engagement' occurs, it is helpful if a group of people (re)form a community of practice to discuss what a satisfactory process would entail, and what the relationship between community groups and recovery agencies should look like. Recovery authorities can actively encourage, facilitate (by providing meeting spaces and other resources) and even fund such groups if such mobilisation is seen as desirable. SPRIG members believed that they would best operate as a liaison between the community and the local authorities, primarily to enable a swift and easy transfer of information between the two parties. This does raise some interesting dilemmas for the recovery agencies and/or local government officials given they have limited understanding of how the community's ideas were generated, facilitated or captured. Nonetheless, when triangulated with other, more orthodox means of consultation, involvement or engagement, the community intelligence generated by such groups can be extremely useful.

5. CONCLUSION

Many of the suggestions about the benefits, difficulties and challenges associated with different types of public participation, involvement and engagement literature are

supported by this case study. Further, our research suggests great merit in harvesting the 'peacetime' participation literature for the purposes of developing a 'best practice' around community engagement in disaster recovery because such literature emphasises there is a spectrum of possible approaches, depending on the overall goal. Such nuance is often missing from disaster scholarship community engagement models. Conversely, despite their value, we cannot simply apply 'peacetime' engagement models to the disaster recovery context because, critically, both 'the community' and 'the state' may be dysfunctional. Indeed, this is almost certainly the case given the nature of disasters.

The role of community groups in recovery planning needs to be evaluated in this light; in SPRIG's case it was assumed that formal processes of engagement would eventually be restored and they developed their recovery strategy on this basis. They therefore saw their role as helping the community become an entity capable of being engaged more formally, generating interest in the area and its possibilities, keeping civic interest alive until more formal processes of engagement were restored, and facilitating good working relations between the local council and the local community. Importantly, SPRIG demonstrates that communities do not always want to possess decision making *authority*, but they do want to be able to influence the process in a meaningful way. Members were aware that they lacked an electoral mandate to make decisions, but sought to complement, enhance and invigorate more official channels. They sought influence rather than power, and wished to be recognised by the local authorities as a legitimate and valued part of the official recovery effort for the Stoddart Point area. A process of triangulation with orthodox consultation and engagement strategies might be a useful way of resolving the tension between using community intelligence and accepting their unusual mandate.

On a related point, our research also highlights the value of fostering 'community competence' or 'civic expertise' as both a preparedness and risk reduction strategy,

particularly as they relate to resilience as a function of an entity's ability to bounce back, or even thrive, in the face of change. The SPRIG case study illustrates some of the skills and capabilities this community needed to achieve their goal, and it is useful to reflect on the various ways critical competencies - including conflict and data management, communication, leadership, fundraising, and so on - might be incorporated into more standard, peacetime activities.

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