

VOLUNTEER WORK-PARTIES IN POST-DISASTER RECOVERY SITUATIONS

Overall

This is a short paper outlining some of the key factors which relate to the successful implementation of volunteer groups helping in post-disaster recovery situations. This is based primarily on the experience of lessons learnt from the Geelong inter-church initiatives in supporting affected communities following the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires in Feb 2009, and the Victorian floods in January 2011. Altogether, this program, primarily organised by Barrabool Hills Baptist Church (Barro) in Geelong, has involved six post-bushfire recovery working parties, as well as two post-flood working parties. Most (but not all) of the work-parties took place over weekends. Altogether 26 families/couples have been helped throughout these initiatives; with 97 volunteers providing a total of 277 days work.

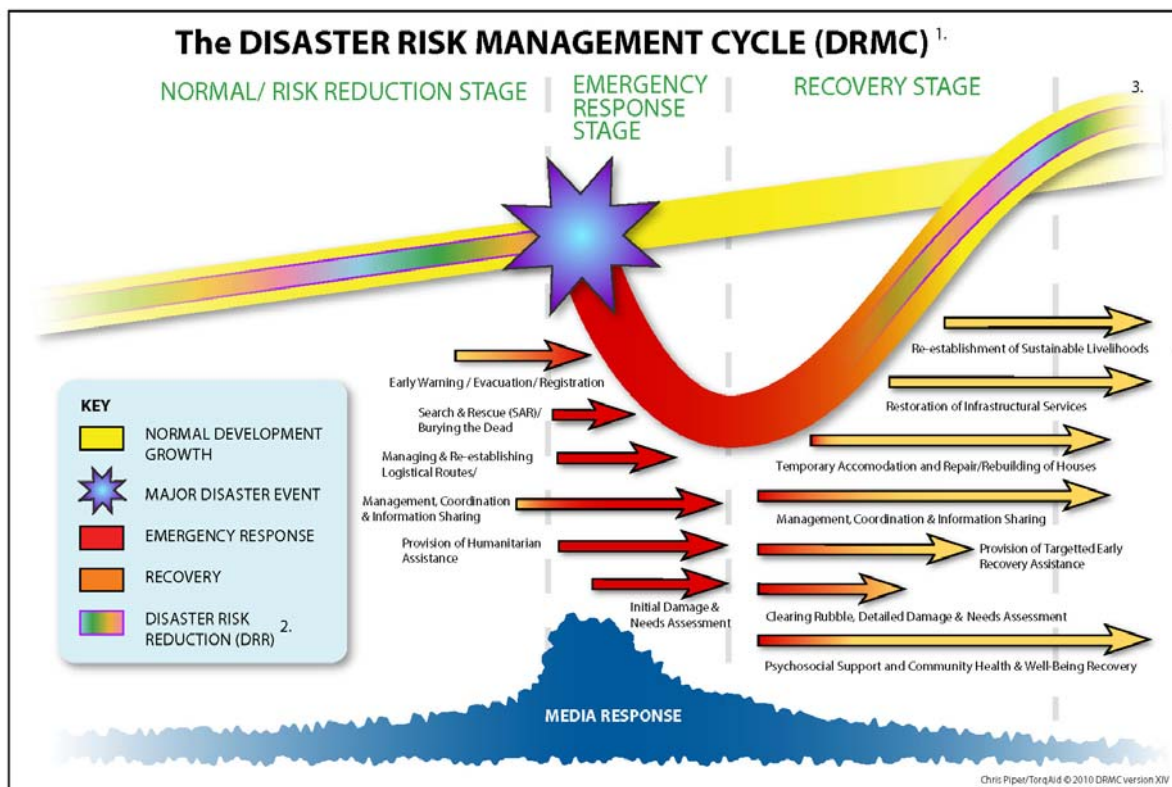
For the post-bushfire situation, Barro worked with St John's Anglican Church in Healesville as its main partner, with the majority of clients supported coming through from the local GP Network. St John's also liaised closely with the Yarra Ranges Council throughout this time. For the post-flood situation, Barro worked closely with Bendigo Baptist Church; which in turn liaised closely with the Shire of Loddon for the first initiative; and with BlazeAid – www.blazeaid.com for the second. The range of activities carried out included clearing up flooded or burn out property; cutting up fallen trees; clearing debris from flooded fields and knocked down fences (and carrying out some repairs and putting these upright); planting saplings; and carrying out some building repairs. Approximately 15-20% of the volunteers were skilled craftspeople (eg builders/fencers), whilst the rest were relatively unskilled in this type of outdoors work. Their ages ranged from older teenagers to 70+ years.

It is interesting that the volunteer work fell into a number of the recovery stage categories as outlined by the accompanying Disaster Risk Management Cycle (DRMC)¹.

- Clearing rubble & debris
- Contributing towards restoration of infrastructure (if fences can be classified as 'rural infrastructure' ?)
- Contributing towards re-establishment of livelihoods (eg by repaired fences helping keep livestock in their allocated paddocks)
- Helping repair houses and temporary accommodation
- Psychosocial support and community health & well-being

It was often argued that just by helping affected Victorians, this fourth category was perhaps the one which helped the most...

¹ This can also be accessed from the following website; <http://www.torquaid.com/images/stories/DRMCdiagramXIV.pdf>



¹ This mainly applies to a relatively quick-onset disaster (such as Cyclone, Flood, Earthquake, Tsunami, Bushfire etc), rather than a slow-onset one such as Famine (due to Drought/War)

² For details of this see the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) diagram ³ Ideally in the recovery stage the community is able to 'Build Back Better'

Key Aspects of Successful Volunteering

It appears that the following are some of the main keys to successful volunteering in a post-disaster recovery situation. It is recognised/accepted that other volunteering models may work equally well.

1. It appears to be much more cost-effective to organise a group of volunteers, rather than have individuals just arrive out in the field. The average size of the volunteer groups were between 15-25 people.
2. It is important to work through a partner agency on the ground, this being Bendigo Baptist Church in the case of the post-flood work; and St John's, Healesville, in the post-bushfire recovery situation
3. It is important that these partners in turn liaise with key organisations in order to reach affected people. In the case of the floods, this was a combination of BlazeAid and Loddon Shire; whilst for the bushfires, it was mainly the GP Network and Yarra Ranges Council
4. It is important for the volunteer church body (ie Barro) to work with the partner agency (ie Bendigo Baptist/St John's) to carefully plan out the work beforehand, and this sometimes requires visits to the field
5. It is important that the volunteers are briefed and equipped (both both appropriate clothes and tools) before the working party event; and that a careful risk management process (with appropriate insurance cover) is undertaken

6. The logistics of moving volunteers up to the field, and then moving them around between locations (this including the accommodation sites) needs to be carefully planned, managed and financed.
7. There will be requirements to both feed and accommodate volunteers. This potentially can be expensive, and ways should be sought to have other stakeholders involved in or contributing to this. For example in the flood situation, the volunteers were mainly accommodated and fed by Bendigo Baptist Church. For the bushfire, the Shire of Yarra Ranges mainly provided accommodation, as well as some vouchers for food
8. Closely management of the team needs to take place in the field, to ensure that people are both happy in what they're doing; and that the work is being maximised
9. It helps to both brief and debrief the volunteers at the beginning and end of each day; as well as prepare a brief final report which includes lessons learnt
10. Volunteering is ultimately about relationships, these including those between the volunteers themselves; as well as between the volunteers and the assisted individuals and other stakeholders. Getting a balance between avoiding dependency and encouraging resilience is always challenging.

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