



Gender & Disaster Australia

Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Submission

This submission presents real life experiences of Australians after disasters to argue *against* shifting responsibility for disaster recovery from a significant (even when small) military response to instead be borne by those most affected, or their neighbours.

It draws on three qualitative research projects conducted in Victoria in 2009-2011, 2012-13 and 2018.

The first excerpts illustrate that the army was highly appreciated by victims of disaster, at a time in their lives when they were most vulnerable and most in need of help. The final, long excerpt is explanation enough that, with few exceptions, communities must not be left to organise their own recovery after disasters. Disruption, factions, friction and violence are characteristics of post-disaster communities.

There is a social contract. Effective, efficient, and paid military personnel must assist their fellow Australians in disasters. We cannot expect disaster survivors to be 'resilient' until the most basic of services are reconnected – power, water, internet – and the 'clean-up' is done. The quicker this is achieved, the quicker people can re-establish themselves. It is clear from the following excerpts that the only way is through deploying the military.

EXCERPT 1 from:

Parkinson, D., Duncan, A. & Kaur, J. (2018). *Long-term disaster resilience. Vol. 2 Full report*. Wangaratta: Gender and Disaster Pod, WHGNE.

<https://genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Vol-2-Long-term-disaster-resilience-report-FINAL.pdf> pp. 106-107

Although somewhat of a shift back to self-reliance in disasters is inevitable, it must have limits. Under the social contract (see for example, the philosophical theories of Hobbes, 2017, Locke, 2011, Rousseau, 1969), people have a right to expect some level of government help when at their most vulnerable. It was notable that while our informant, Bert, did not remember government assistance in 1943, neither were there layers of bureaucracy that were problematic, as were apparent in the aftermath of more recent disasters. In the current day, and in line with prevention of disasters, people need to abide by new regulations designed to ensure greater safety for residents, such as building houses to BAL ratings or accepting rezoning of flood areas or buy-back programs where private land abuts forests.

Given the requirement to meet these necessary but demanding regulations, when affected by catastrophic disasters, people deserve essential government help. After Black Saturday, the early withdrawal of the army prevented services that were necessary to survivors, such as water tanks. Flood survivors appreciated the skips that allowed them to clear away rubbish. Key tasks that are impossible for many individuals could be provided by government to all who need them, along with



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prioritising essentials such as power, food and water, and mobile connections. There is a direct link to resilience.

Not be put into a box, and be told, 'You're going to now return to back normal'. What's that? I haven't got a home ... or I haven't got power, I haven't got water. (Elise)

The worse thing they did was pull the army out ... It was the two-week mark, at the big top tent in the main street, we all get told to go home, go back to normal. The joint is still burning, half the bodies haven't been found, we've got no power, no water, and, 'Go home, go back to normal'. (Chloe)

Cameron correctly notes that 'Government can't do everything ... People have to get involved and do things for themselves', and John accepts the increased risk that comes with the location people choose to live in. Living on a flood plain or in a fire footprint fires often brings increased risk as well as reduced access to health services. In some isolated areas 'you're pretty much up shits creek without a paddle' (John). Yet, individuals' resilience will have a chance if the basic necessities of life are reinstated for those affected. If government-funded services can quickly reinstate essentials such as water, power and communications, individuals, families and communities are in a good position to build on this.

Suspicion of the concept of resilience creeps in where it appears as if government is devolving responsibility to the individual, and those who don't 'bounce back' are judged to have failed. Perceived deficit in individual resilience may be used in this way by government to relinquish responsibility to the most vulnerable in the community.

EXCERPT 2 from:

Parkinson, D. (2011). *The Way He Tells It - Vol. 3 The Landscape of My Soul: Women's Accounts*. Wangaratta: Women's Health Goulburn North East.

<https://genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Doc-005-The-Way-He-Tells-it1.pdf> (all Vols).

The Army

The army [was] welcomed by all. Their presence seemed to bring comfort to the fragile communities. Everyone who spoke of the army spoke in glowing terms. They were on the scene quickly at makeshift camps and set up tents and beds, then stayed to work on supplying water, and help with fencing, bridges and meals. The practical help extended to emotional support that seemed more acceptable to men than formally speaking to counsellors. The unquestioned masculinity of the army officers gave credibility to their assurances. One woman spoke of an army officer reassuring her husband that his emotion was understandable given what he had been through.

Those first few weeks after the fire, when the roads were closed ... the army came in and started cleaning things up and providing meals, and people really felt the generosity of Australia and the whole world. It was like a big hug. (Ruth)

The day the Army came to Kinglake was a wonderful day for me. It just felt fantastic. We were in such chaos, everyone was running around like chooks without their heads ... and it



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was great to have people show up and just follow orders, you could see somebody in command and somebody else saying 'Put up a tent' and people didn't go 'Well I don't think that tent should go up like that blah blah', they just went 'Yep, put the tent up'. 'Put the food out' ... And they just served food and just said, 'What's yours, love?' and that was it. You know, nobody sort of said, 'And how are you today?' and stuff, cos you just wanted to punch people who did that for quite a long time. (Michelle)

The army were pulled out after two weeks. Research participants were told this was to return to normality and prevent the communities becoming dependent. It was apparent, though, that this was an unwelcome decision. No-one wanted to see them go. One woman commented:

Well, we had the Army come in soon after but some dickhead in town decided 'No, we need to get back to normal, it's inflicting against local businesses', and sent the Army away. And we went 'Don't go, we need you'. The only person who helped my husband initially was an Army captain who came as a counsellor, and it was pretty thrilling to have a guy in camouflage in your kitchen. A guy in uniform anytime! ... There he was this guy who said to [my husband], 'Mate, I've been in Iraq, I've been in this, I've been in that, this is every bit as crappy', and he made [him] feel like how he felt was valid and he got such a lift from that. (Andrea) (p. 117)

...

On the ground, a range of services were quickly established or expanded, and workers seconded from organisations Australia-wide. Temporary villages and community hubs were set up to house and inform survivors. Churches and the army augmented essential services in the early days and weeks. The response was immense in order to meet the equally immense needs of those affected.

The army set up mobile kitchens in the first weeks to the great appreciation of people struggling to live in damaged properties – sometimes without transport, water or functioning kitchens ... The recommendation to VBRR that meals provided by the army be ceased apparently came from some local people, but it was a recommendation that was vehemently not shared by all. (p. 116)

EXCERPT 3 from:

Zara, C., & Parkinson, D. (2013). *Men on Black Saturday: Risks and opportunities for change*. Wangaratta: Women's Health Goulburn North East. (pp. 23-27)

<https://genderanddisaster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Doc-011-Men-on-Black-Saturday-Vols-1-and-2.pdf>

Community leadership and community consultation

Those consulted in this, and other reports (see Gunter, 2011), believed that while governments and departments listened they did not actively hear the main issues or solutions provided by the communities. While the National Principles of Recovery directs that communities must be an integral part of recovery, there is a strong perception in this sample of men that only lip service was accorded to community consultation.



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Disagreement with decisions made by authorities through the recovery and reconstruction stages – and attendant frustration – soon set in. An example given by several men was Murrindindi Shire Council's early decision to ask the army to withdraw. This left locals questioning Council's wisdom, and more practically, leaving them to cope without the basics of life. The arrival of the army seemed to be universally welcomed by community members in desperate need of essential services. The army was organised and efficient, asking what needed to be done and doing it.

It was really supportive having the army here [because] there was nobody in charge, they were all separate. The police were doing the police thing, the fire brigade were still running around putting out fires, the Shire had no idea. (Steve)

Waves of discontent with bureaucratic decisions from Council, the Victorian Government and VBRRA seemed to characterise the post-disaster period. Early management of exclusion zones and road blocks was a primary cause of friction. There was a sense of that people's fundamental rights to access their homes and properties were contravened. Tree management was contentious, whether it was removal (to widen roads) or planting (deciduous or native). Both attracted criticism. The 'buy-back' scheme – where the Victorian Government aimed to buy land abutting the National Park that is now considered unsafe for dwellings – remains contentious too. Objections were not related to the aim, but to the ongoing management of these properties. Land bought by the Crown was considered to have been inadequately managed to reduce fire risk. The building of community assets was another contentious issue – the architectural styles used, their locations and purposes. For example, the modern styles used in Marysville and Kinglake, and basketball stadiums and tennis courts:

It's sort of like, 'We're going to put a tennis court here, we're going to have a cricket pavilion, we're going to do this and we're going to do that' and you sort of think, 'Hang on, did anyone ask us?' (Vincent)

The initiative and drive of the locals in the early days was smothered by a recovery process described as overlooking local knowledge and expertise in community leadership. The effect was one of disempowering local people and marginalising them from real decision-making processes. Their sense of being disenfranchised runs counter to the appearance of deep community consultation.

What we found in the aftermath of the fires was that people were assuming authority ... it was 'power over' rather than 'power with'. We found the same with police, and emergency services staff, state government staff, local government staff, professionals ... It's profoundly disempowering. (Paul)

Such issues have been documented elsewhere, but are touched on here as men described the effect of what they saw as lack of genuine consultation. The sense of being patronised and controlled engendered anger. Meetings were described as 'top-down':

I went there with a copper, which was probably a mistake. He was a guy that had a whole heap of stuff on his shoulders, and he stood there with his hands on his hips, 'If you guys don't settle down, we're just going to frigging leave'. Some sort of authoritarian. He didn't want to hand the microphone to me, he says, 'No, they're an angry crowd, you can't talk to them'. (Chris)

In many communities daily meetings were held at first, gradually becoming less frequent but always regular. It is not an easy task to 'ask the community'. Communities are essentially people with necessarily different opinions. There is no one community opinion to be sought and implemented.



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Yet, participants in this research suggested there are more genuine ways to consult, most simply by offering practical support to allow local fire-affected people to contribute meaningfully and thereby contribute to both their own and their community's recovery (Gunter, 2011). The men acknowledged the effects of the fire, using terms of 'fire-brain', even 'fire-fucked', of feeling exhausted, with little energy or capacity beyond what was required of them in their home and workplace. They noted one effect of personal pressures in the aftermath of the traumatic experience of Black Saturday was that capable people were often unable to function at their normal level.

It was really interesting, especially for men, that men who had leadership roles in this community before the fire, if they were heavily impacted by the fire – like if they lost everything – they were stuffed ... I was just so emotionally and physically rooted that I actually couldn't devote the intensity of thought to those kind of things [community recovery committees] that I had before. (Brad)

A significant barrier to this man's ongoing participation was the travel involved in attending meetings three or four times a week, particularly as detours and road blocks added hours on to each trip. Another practical barrier was simply the lack of administrative support to community groups. In the absence of community leaders through loss of life in the fires, or their relocation for housing, the huge workload in the aftermath of the disaster landed on fewer shoulders.

Most community organisations were having to do five times as much work with only half the membership and half the committee available. We really needed people to come in and [offer] support ... We had 67 community organisations and we genuinely needed secretaries and treasurers, people willing to take responsibility for minuting meetings, for following up actions and for making sure the budget was OK. (Paul)

The men's cynicism of the way community consultation was handled was clear in their discussions of the political underpinning of decisions made during the reconstruction after Black Saturday. They pointed to timelines apparently dictated by media events or elections, and a focus on rebuilding achievements rather than ensuring community input. The ongoing effect has been an increased rate burden for Shire residents as the ongoing maintenance of new infrastructure is borne by the Shire and its rate payers.

All these things that government have offered us and thrown us, it's like feeding school children lollies to keep them pacified. All they've done now is put a huge burden on the communities of increasing rates. (Eric)

We had all these consultation meetings, which basically amounted to nothing because the bureaucrats, government, architects, still went ahead and did what they wanted anyway. So people refused to go to those meetings in the end and refused to participate. So that basically left government and planners a free hand to do what they want. (Brad)

The disaster's aftermath saw a change in leadership in some communities as people who had this role before Black Saturday were unable to continue through personal grief and demands. In the void, others – mostly men – took on leadership roles, for example, as heading Community Recovery Committees. As people aligned with those of similar values, factions emerged, intensifying community aggression and division, even to physical aggression and violence. Points of difference arose over the direction of community rebuilding, and local- and state-government decisions that directly impacted on people's daily lives as they tried to re-establish. Leadership in the community inevitably 'percolated' up and down as new leaders emerged in the void left by overburdened,



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previous leaders. Mostly, they were men. Trust was won and lost depending on the actions behind intentions and rhetoric.

You can liken it to the Monty Python movies, where ... he stands up, 'I've got nothing to say' ... If somebody put their hand up to be a leader, then that person was a leader, up until the point that they did something stupid, or they did something that was counter to everybody's else's desires. (Chris)

Chris went on to describe one such situation where a local leader lost all support after he attempted to sell donated goods:

He had a lot of anger towards him, nobody would talk to him [... or] listen to him, people were close to throwing things at him at a public meeting. (Chris)

The corrupt or immoral behaviour of community members was a source of community division and anger. It was men who were spoken of as acting improperly. Jack noticed equipment had been taken from the burnt ruins of his home, and from his neighbour's property – sold for scrap metal by another neighbour. Gerald's anger, too, was evident:

Someone said to me one day that I don't deserve to get help so I just felt like bashing the shit out of him because I knew he was going around collecting [donated equipment] and you get blokes like me who get nothing because people were just rorting the system and it sickened me. (Gerald)

A myriad of different community groups emerged, often competing for funding and leading to 'instability, bickering', and 'unhappy people'. After the honeymoon period of cooperation and collaboration, about six months in, people shifted from turning to one-another to turning away from one-another and to turning on one-another. (Paul)

It actually became very personal where people didn't speak to each other. Very nasty where people threatened other people, made obscene gestures at people, derogatory ... remarks at people in the street because they didn't agree. (James)

Layer upon layer of inequity and dishonesty fuelled the discord. The unfairness and seeming capriciousness of grants and insurance drove much community anger. It seemed to come down to good fortune in having an effective case manager, having an insurance company that did not 'rip you off', and being considered deserving of a grant. Apparent 'obsession' with funding domestic housing over business was of concern to several men interviewed:

Insured, uninsured, it didn't matter, just money turned up in their accounts ... [there was] a real disparity here of needs being met ... If I was sitting in Spring Street I'd be saying, 'Well people donated ... this money to help people. Okay, this guy's lost his joinery shop, he's the only one on the hill, he's fairly useful when they're doing rebuild'. There was a mechanic ... who had his shop burnt down, his workshop. There was a sawmill, all these things were just left to dissipate into the ether. They're just gone now. (Scott)

Winning through violence: a reflection

We tried to organise meetings ... [and] then we forced a meeting with our local association president by going around to her 'house' in the temporary village. Then her husband and this guy turned up, the one who'd told me to piss off over the phone. It turned into real, nose-to-nose. He was saying, 'You're a fucking this and you're a fucking dickhead and you haven't got



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a clue. Let's get our cocks out'. I remember going, 'What the fuck are you on about?' and this guy was like, 'Let's get out cocks out, see who's got the biggest dick shall we?' I thought he was going to hit me ... I went to many meetings, they were just so full of testosterone ...

There was a lot of other discussion, often with women, starting maybe 18 months later about, 'How can we participate in our community when we've got this handful of men who are being extremely aggressive, but extremely successful in their aggression?'. These men were getting rewarded by state and local governments for being the most aggressive and dominant members of the community. They still are ... [T]his was actually happening within families that this dominance was coming out, for some reason it was an effective strategy for many men. ... You could see them puffing up as they got more funding and more positions in the community ... like steam locomotives that weren't going to be stopped ...

[F]or a while, I had a lot of people coming and seeing me as somebody who was bright and confident and capable and saying, 'How do we stand up to this, how do we stand up to this?' but then I gave up. I just quit. I didn't have the time or the energy for a losing battle ...

I'm about to cry. That was the worst part of it. I really thought that that wasn't how you won in our society. But that's what winning's become. And that's how you win. And I can't do it, so I'm not going to win. I won't do it, so I'm not going to win. So I went elsewhere. It's probably quite symptomatic that I focused on my acre. I can win here. I can build my house, create my dream here for my family. (Edward)

Activist John Stoltenberg (1989) argues that men possess two types of identity that are fundamentally in conflict: a gender identity, which sees men in constant competition with each other and involves the oppression of weaker males and women in order to preserve an acceptable masculine self, and a 'moral identity', reflecting a self that is unaffected by social ideals of masculinity. He challenges men to choose to follow their moral identity. Edward's narrative encapsulates his struggle to do just that. Kahn (2011), too, notes the strength in not following a designated way to be a man, urging men to see the gap between their view of themselves and the ideal man as prescribed by society, and then accepting that their failure to meet the ideal standard is no failure at all.

The importance of improving disaster response cannot be over-estimated when community division and violence is the consequence. The impotence felt by local people at times turned to rage. Most men spoke of their own anger or frustration – four had suicidal ideation, with two of these planning to 'take out' others along with them. Many, too, spoke of other men's anger, bullying and violence:

And that was only half a dozen people, four families essentially, who wanted exclusive power over the community. One of them was our local councillor – the guy that got beat up. (Paul)

Anger and aggression in community meetings spilled into the streets: Absolutely out of the blue he started ripping right into me, 'You're an arsehole, blah, blah, blah. We don't want people like you in this town. Why don't you get out of here?'... I think his parting words were, 'Why don't you just piss off?' and then walked out the door ... To this day I have absolutely no idea what it was about, none whatsoever ... I think for a lot of people that stuff is just percolating away below the surface and I think it will take a long, long time. (Brad)



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Social gatherings, too, were more likely to erupt than before the fires. The tumult of the fires had consequences that were not directly related to changed behaviour of traumatised people. Men reflected on their communities changing from quiet places where people valued their privacy to almost forced communality with newcomers. One man mentioned having intervention orders against other community members:

With all the people going to functions and all getting together, it just seems to be everyone's a lot rowdier, everyone's a lot noisier and you can see the violence happening. (Eric)

Well, it was definitely threatening. Verbal abuse and physical abuse as well. I can remember walking from the big tent to the main street with a person who I'd known for the best part of 10 years. I was challenging him on a particular issue that he was taking a leadership role in, and that exploded into violence. (Paul)

Recommendation

Ten years of research with disaster affected communities must not be ignored for political expedience or cost-saving or a misguided sense that people must be 'resilience' no matter what they have survived and are now faced with.

In a country as wealthy as Australia, it is beyond belief that we leave people living in tents or temporary accommodation for weeks, months and sometimes years after bushfires, floods and other disasters. Mallacoota, Lismore and Rochester are just three recent examples. We are heartless towards our fellow Australians. A disaster recovery worker in Victoria following the 2022 floods reflected that the social rupture is the same as after Black Saturday, but the services and donations are fewer.

Climate change is taking hold, and more frequent and extreme weather events will cascade and overlap, and our emergency services will fail to adequately halt the damage. The damage will extend beyond buildings, fences and infrastructure to harm women, men and people of diverse identities. Family violence, and men's harm to themselves and those around them, will continue to be linked to disaster experience. It will extend through generations.

This month, September 2023, temperatures soar and bushfires have already started in three states of Australia. This month, violence against women reaches reporting rates not seen before, and murders of women by their male partner sit at 35 so far this year. September 2023 is not the time to be gearing up to make disaster survival even harder for Australian men, women and children.

Rather than deserting disaster survivors, increase our commitment to deploying the military to disaster affected regions now and into the future. If war means diverting military personnel and resources, Australians will recognise the need. But having this effective and efficient army sitting on bases while tragedies unfold after disaster is unthinkable.