

Climate Ready Communities: empowering communities to spread climate preparedness messaging and take local action

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The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has articulated an urgent need to address climate change in its recent report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C. Even the most optimistic projections indicate the inevitability of some increase in global temperatures, even if emissions were to be significantly reduced today. With the most vulnerable likely to be the hardest hit by changing weather patterns driving natural hazards of increased severity and frequency, it is essential that communities have access to resources and support to adapt.

Introduction

The Climate Ready Communities project equipped and supported community members to take self-organised action to spread the climate preparedness and adaptation message by engaging their networks and the wider community. 61 Climate Ready Champions from four local government areas were trained and supported between July 2017 and June 2019. The project was facilitated by Australian Red Cross in partnership with Resilient South (Cities of Holdfast Bay, Marion, Mitcham, and Onkaparinga) and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs and the Government of South Australia through the Natural Disaster Resilience Program (NDRP).

Following a training day, Champions were supported as self-organising volunteers, leading their own projects both individually and as collectives. Champions were supported by a project officer who assisted with ideas and helped them make connections with other people and organisations. Champion-led projects included a Climate Ready Forum event, public Facebook page, heat mapping displays at community events, and creating Climate Ready Packs. Champions were successful in securing community grants to support several projects.

Evaluation of the project highlighted the benefits and constraints of supporting self-organising volunteers, the advantages of not-for-profit organisations working with local government, and varied reactions to the message of getting prepared for climate change.

This paper will present the learnings, challenges and successes of this important grassroots change project.

The Resilient South: Aware and Adapt (Climate Ready Communities) project, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs and the Government of South Australia through the Natural Disaster Resilience Program, was a two-year pilot project which sought to empower self-organising community volunteers to spread climate preparedness and adaptation messaging and take local action.

The project, facilitated by Australian Red Cross in partnership with four Adelaide councils, engaged community members who were provided with training and then supported to take self-organising action, both individually and as collectives, in their community to increase climate preparedness and resilience.

Community members engaged in the Southern Adelaide region (City of Holdfast Bay, City of Marion, City of Mitcham, and City of Onkaparinga) were equipped to understand natural hazard risks, how these are changing and are expected to shift with a changing climate, and how they can build emergency resilience in their community. The project took an integrated approach, embedding risk communication within a broader conversation about climate change, and in particular, with a particular focus on the actions individuals and communities can take for themselves.

Climate change and emergency management

A 2014 United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report recognised the link between human induced climate change and the magnitude and frequency of extreme events such as heat waves, extreme precipitation and coastal flooding, as well as changing average climatic

conditions and climate variables. These climatic changes will have a profound impact upon the experience of emergency risk in our communities, particularly for those who are already disadvantaged (IPCC 2014, p.12). In 2018 the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C brought to attention the severity of the situation to urgently and significantly curb greenhouse gas emissions. This report, which garnered significant media attention reinforced the urgency and reality of the need for adaptation at a household and community level (IPCC 2018). Even the most optimistic projections indicate the inevitability of some increase in global temperatures, even if emissions were to be significantly reduced today. With the most vulnerable likely to be the hardest hit by changing weather patterns driving natural hazards of increased severity and frequency, it is essential that communities have access to resources and support to adapt.

The connection between climate change and emergency management features strongly in contemporary emergency management sector planning and strategic documents, including in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, which identifies the need to “update disaster preparedness and contingency policies, plans and programmes...considering climate change scenarios and their impact on disaster risk, and facilitating, as appropriate, the participation of all sectors and relevant stakeholders” (UNDRR 2015, p.21).

Furthermore, there is a natural connection between preparing for and dealing with the impacts of emergencies, including extreme weather events, and adapting to the impacts of climate change. Climate change adaptation efforts can benefit from emergency management tools that have proven to be effective in dealing with weather-related events which will be exacerbated by climate change, while emergency management is improved by incorporating information about new risks, or existing risks that will be exacerbated by climate change (Tearfund 2008).

Climate change and risk communication

Communicating risk with communities remains a challenge for the emergency management sector. It is not easy to communicate risk in ways that are engaging for communities and develops the knowledge and skills that people need to take action, particularly when it comes to engaging people who have not experienced, or recently experienced, a disaster event.

The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience Community Engagement Framework (Handbook 6) (AIDR, 2013, p.3) identifies that community engagement has traditionally been peripheral to the core business of emergency management organisations, and therefore “embedding engagement within the culture and practice of emergency management organisations is a key challenge for the future”. A 2012 review of Australian Disaster Inquiries (Goode et al. 2012, p.17) identified that there is “scope for improvement in community engagement particularly with respect to clearly communicating risks and hazards”.

The traditional approach to communicating risk with the community has largely been an information-action model that generally involves emergency management professionals

providing information about risks, and encouraging people to do something in response. Too often, the communication process is one-off and one-way, and assumes that the audience is an indistinguishable group of individuals who have the same needs and values. The information-action model also assumes that people will actually take action based on the information provided (O’Neill 2004).

For these reasons and in response to a greater understanding about what motivates behaviour change, efforts to grow awareness of risk are increasingly moving towards two-way conversations that place greater emphasis on:

- the values and attitudes of the target audience
- community norms
- practical and local examples that model the desired behaviour
- developing and building upon the self-efficacy that already exists in individuals and communities
- ‘bottom up’ processes that encourage community members to be active participants in their own safety and in defining and implementing potential solutions.

Improving the way in which we engage with communities about disaster risk is particularly important given that our experience of emergencies and risk is changing because of climate change. We need to get better at building community awareness about disaster risk if we are to be successful in helping communities adapt to a changing climate.

The Climate Ready Communities project set out to build on existing information and advance a proven way of engaging communities around risk through empowering people to understand the risks they currently face, the way these are and will change in the future because of climate change, and what they can do to build their resilience.

The project methodology undertaken sought to support ‘whole of community approach’ to improving the wellbeing, knowledge, connection and security of people who are most at risk in emergencies as outlined in the People at Risk in Emergencies Framework for South Australia. Furthermore, the Framework acknowledges that education about emergencies occurs best in a community context and emphasises the need to ‘lead action together’, ‘build on strengths’ and to ‘tailor approaches to individual capabilities’.

Key learnings and outcomes

The key success of the project was the establishment of a network of 62 Climate Ready Champions in Southern Adelaide who were equipped and supported to spread climate preparedness and adaptation messaging both informally through conversation and more formally through talks and public engagement events.

Feedback from Champions and stakeholders as to the effectiveness of the project to engage people in truly community-led change was overwhelmingly positive. The project has been showcased at a number of conferences and events, and has been the subject of significant interest across Australia.

Climate Ready Champions workshops

The first stage of the Resilient South: Aware and Adapt project was the Climate Ready Champions workshops. Four workshops were planned, however a fifth was run due to demand as the project grew and became more widely known within the region.

The workshops were held at Noarlunga Centre, Brighton Civic Centre, Woodcroft-Morphett Vale Neighbourhood Centre, Cooina Neighbourhood Centre, and Tonsley Innovation District, with three conducted as one-day trainings, and two as two-evening split trainings. Training opportunities were primarily advertised through the four partner local governments (council newsletters, libraries, community centres), and through Red Cross communication channels (volunteer lists, social media, other organisation contacts).

The trainings were facilitated by the Red Cross Project Officer, and included guest speakers from local government, NGOs, and a previously trained Climate Ready Champion (from the third training onwards). The five training workshops were attended by 62 people aged between 16 and 75 years of age, with varying levels of existing understanding of extreme weather and climate change.

Although the general scope of the workshops was established, community member input was considered crucial to shaping the workshops in each location. As such, a pre-training survey was sent to champions in advance and the information collected was used to shape content and delivery. The responses from this survey indicated that there was greater interest from registrants in learning about taking action in their communities, than in detailed climate science information. The Red Cross Climate Ready Communities guide (available publically online), was utilised throughout the workshop as a supporting resource.

A survey of all workshop participants was conducted following the workshop. The results of this survey revealed that 100% of respondents agreed they have a role to play in taking action on climate change and climate readiness in their community. 62% of respondents reported experiencing an increase in confidence to share information on climate change and climate readiness with others as a direct result of the training. 84% of respondents indicated that they felt confident or very confident to share information following the training.

"Training helped me develop some good ideas about what to do, who to approach, and a bit of an action plan which will evolve further I'm sure. (The training) also gave me some great insight and resources. Positive presentations and a positive friendly group of people makes me feel confident things will happen."

Climate Ready Champions workshop participant

Ongoing engagement with champions

Following the training, Champions had ongoing engagement with the Project Officer who supported and encouraged them to continue climate preparedness and adaptation conversations within their networks, run climate-ready events, and take action to increase their own resilience and that of their community.

Ongoing engagement included monthly e-newsletters, the establishment of a Climate Ready Communities network (via Facebook), a Climate Ready Bus Tour daytrip, regular drop-in coffee catch-ups, periodical surveys, and phone calls with Champions. Further face-to-face support was provided to two main groups which formed organically – one based on location (Aldinga and Willunga), another based on a project (the Climate Ready Forum).

The project used online social media platforms and email to effectively and efficiently communicate with the large group of volunteers. Technology was further utilised with the purchase, following the suggestion of a group of Champions, of a thermal camera and laser thermometers which Champions could borrow to assess temperatures around their neighbourhoods and homes – particularly during extreme heat. This particular use of technology was popular with the Champions who could use the devices to engage others in their family and community to visually identify what they could do to create safer spaces during heatwaves.

Climate Ready Champions' actions and community change

As a result of the project, community members were engaged by members of their own community in climate resilience conversations and action, including through a range of events. The changes in these communities as a result were captured informally during the project through story sharing, and more formally through surveys and focus groups with Champions. The surveys and focus groups included both the collection of quantitative data measuring a change in knowledge and action, as well as qualitative information and feedback such as the two examples below:

"This program seems to be addressing an urgent and growing need to support communities in developing their own grass roots responses to climate change, not just relying on authorities, and to me this is the most powerful way to build true resilience."

Climate Ready Champion

"It (the Resilient South: Aware & Adapt project) has provided me with opportunities to refresh or develop new skills such as grant writing, attending a public relations training and public speaking. I've also met other local

champions who are becoming close personal friends. I would highly recommend the program to continue in the Resilient South catchment area and be expanded into other areas as a way of helping us all be better prepared for future climactic related events and to develop resilient communities.”

Climate Ready Champion

Formal project evaluations included two focus groups (one with Champions, and another with project stakeholders) and a comprehensive Champions survey. 41 survey responses were received from the group of 62 Climate Ready Champions. The project officer was deliberate in ensuring that responses were received from a range of Champions including those with high, medium, and low levels of engagement in the project so as to avoid a positive skewing of consolidated data.

Results from the survey showed that a very high proportion of Champions took action following the training to spread the climate resilience message to the wider community with 97% saying they spoke to individuals about climate readiness, 68% spoke to groups, and 57% supported a Champion-led community event.

The 41 Champions who responded reported speaking to an average of 91 people each about climate preparedness which was a total of 3731 people. If this average were to be extrapolated to the total group of 62 Champions, the reach of Champion engagement can be estimated at approximately 5,600 people.

The survey of Champions captured actions undertaken by them specifically as a result of the project. The actions undertaken by the highest percentage of Champions was to “be informed e.g. read climate adaptation articles or attend events” (71%), to “get connected e.g. with their neighbours and local community” (49%), to “help others e.g. take care of those most at-risk” (44%), and to prepare themselves for specific extreme weather events (49% for heatwaves, 39% for drought, 29% for storms, 24% for bushfires, and 7% for floods). In addition to the percentages reflected above, some Champions said they were already doing these things before the project, and many planned to take these actions into the future.

Climate Ready Champions volunteered their time individually, and as small working groups, to run events including a Climate Ready Open House in September 2018, stalls at the Feeling Hot Hot Hot! event in February 2019 at Adelaide Town Hall and the Fleurieu Film Festival in McLaren Vale, the Climate Ready Forum Champion-led event in March 2019, and a number of presentations to community groups. A number of Champions were supported to write and submit applications for community grants to undertake specific projects. One Champion was successful in securing a grant of \$5000 to develop Climate Ready Packs which were distributed through a range of avenues including other Champion-led events.

The Climate Ready Forum feedback form showed that the actions community members were most likely to take due to attending the training were to “prepare household action plan for extreme weather events” (76%) and “connect with other

locals to make changes as a community” (64%). Additionally, 100% of attendees said they would recommend the event to a friend, were it to run again.

Stakeholder review

An in-depth stakeholder review focus group (with two council representatives, one NGO representative, and two state government representatives) revealed a high level of satisfaction with the Resilient South Aware and Adapt project. All stakeholders present reflected that the project met or exceeded their expectations. It was felt that the model of supporting community members to run their own projects and spread the climate preparedness at a peer to peer level had been highly effective. Stakeholders were especially impressed with the Champion-led Climate Ready Forum. Council partners also indicated that the number of trained Champions exceeded their expectations.

In terms of the level of stakeholder involvement and engagement they felt that most aspects were “about right” and they did not desire less involvement with any aspects of the project. Some suggested they would have liked a little more engagement directly with the Climate Ready Champions.

The stakeholder group agreed that a particular aspect of the project that could be improved was the level of cultural diversity within the group of Champions, as well as even more focus on engaging the most at risk communities. There was an appreciation for the level of diversity in age and gender.

Stakeholders were pleased to personally hear about and see some of the outputs of the project in their community beyond communications with the Project Officer. Stakeholders reported seeing and hearing about the project and from Champions on social media, through colleagues, and at community events.

Conclusion

The Resilient South Aware and Adapt Project provided a platform for engagement by community members, including those aware of and concerned about disaster resilience, particularly in the face of climate change. These Climate Ready Champions built resilience in their communities in a way that fit with their existing lifestyle, as self-organising volunteers with support from Red Cross and other partners.

This support was provided through the initial Climate Ready Champions training, subsequent engagement and motivation, and flexibly supporting the Champions with their projects and ideas. The Champions found the regular communication and encouragement extremely helpful, as well as the sharing of ideas and real life examples of climate and extreme weather preparedness.

Overall the Resilient South Aware and Adapt Project was able to engage communities in an important, and often daunting topic. The project delivery model was both community-facing and community-led.

The Climate Ready Champions engaged in a number of ways to get the message to their community. As a result, they were able to reach a wider and more diverse audience, with more genuine community and peer engagement, than the Project Officer could have ever achieved on their own.

The evaluation of the project with Champions and other stakeholders reinforced the success of the project and an enthusiasm to see more climate resilient communities into the future.

Following the success of Resilient South Aware and Adapt project, the delivery model developed and refined throughout the project term is set to continue and expand across South Australia in partnership with local government under the name 'Climate Ready Communities'.

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