Building capacity to prepare: A generative model of community engagement for preparedness

Mapping community engagement for preparedness in Australia

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Community preparation for disaster response has been empirically established as a key factor in mitigating risk associated with disasters. Although community engagement is used widely to support communities to build capacity to prepare, approaches to engaging a community have varied widely, with few frameworks empirically built or evaluated for effectiveness. This qualitative study of 30 emergency management agencies and practitioners, and thematic analysis of agency policy documents, investigated current approaches to community engagement to develop a model to help communities mitigate risk. Drawing together key concepts from natural hazard behaviour research, community development, participatory design and codesign, a five step Generative Model of Community Engagement for Preparedness is proposed, based on relationships, networks and shared meaning. The model has both theoretical and practical value for community engagement for risk personalisation and protective action because it not only helps communities prepare for emergencies but also helps build relationships across communities that create social capital for recovery and during nonemergency periods.

Figure 1: Generative model of community engagement for preparedness

Introduction

Community preparation in disaster response has been empirically established as a key factor in the protection of life during a disaster (Coles et al, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2015). Risk management plans identify a clear role for collaborative engagement with local communities (Heath & Lee, 2016) Community engagement (CE) enhances social outcomes through community decision making (Johnston et al, 2018) however, little is known about what makes a CE program for preparedness effective, and what are the attributes of a best practice approach to CE for preparedness. This study addresses this gap and establishes a framework for CE best practice.

Methods

A two-stage qualitative research design featuring 1) semi-structured interviews (N=30) and 2) document analysis, was undertaken between Oct 2018 to Jan 2019. Empirical and grey literature was used to build an interview guide. Data were thematically analysed and coding into core topics (Glaser, 1992) while the second analytical stage applied an inductive analysis.

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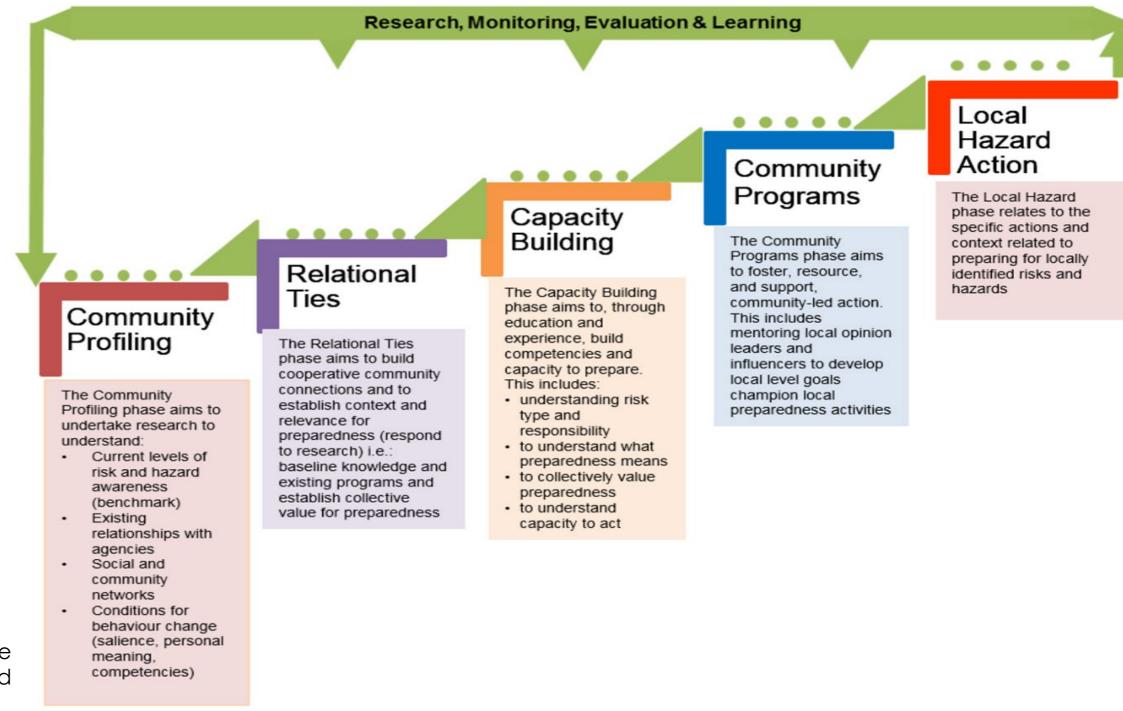maureen.taylor-1@uts.edu.au

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Results

Attributes of a best practice approach to CE for preparedness include: Awareness and understanding of risk, recognition of self-responsibility, and the notion that preparation within a community is widely held as desirable and valued. Attributes of a CE for preparedness program should feature
• Community led
• Co-design and community development
• A relational approach
• Recognises the importance of community networks

The model – titled the Generative Model Of Community Engagement For Preparedness, (Figure 1) reflects and represents a synthesis from current Australian CE for preparedness practice (interview data and document analysis) and responds to the principles of practice that prefaced successful CE. The model details aims of each step, with an accompanying toolkit of tactics and monitoring/evaluation tools aligned to each step.

Discussion

The findings of this study support a high-level commitment by emergency agencies to engaging with the community in order to save lives and property through risk identification and action. The model brings together the core features and benefits of a common understanding, language and practices used for CE for preparedness in Australia and around the world. There are four key theoretical and practical implications of the findings of this study for CE for preparedness, including systematising sharing of knowledge, the importance of localised approaches, the challenge of shared responsibility, and systematising evaluation.