Increasing Emergency Management Capacity Through Business Sector Involvement

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OVERVIEW

The resource capacities of emergency management organisations are geared around managing relatively frequent disaster scenarios. It is not cost effective to have significant investments of resources that might be only employed in the most extreme or catastrophic events. However, the inevitability of more extreme events that can overwhelm local and regional, and even national, resources means that it is worth considering where additional surge capacity might be sourced if and when needed. This research considers the role of the business sector in both sustaining business continuity and in the provision of resources, services and technical expertise in relatively rare disaster events.

The business sector is defined here as organisations that do not comprise part of government and who operate on a for-profit basis.

To date there has been little research examining the role of the business sector in disaster management although many businesses large and small provide assistance during disasters.

SUGGESTED APPROACH FOR ENGAGING WITH THE BUSINESS SECTOR

Effective preparedness for catastrophic disasters means bringing together a diverse group of organisations with specific capabilities to plan and prepare for future events. It is clear that the business sector should be considered a key player in the preparedness for, response to and recovery from all disasters. The business sector can assist in providing additional capabilities and capacity to manage events that would otherwise overwhelm existing emergency management arrangements. Based upon this value proposition emergency managers should expend further effort to build public-private partnerships.

A continuum of options exists for the business sector to engage in disaster management. These include: direct delivery of goods or services to impacted communities on a for-profit basis; corporate social responsibility programs; for the purposes of maintaining business continuity; for the purposes of fulfilling regulatory obligations; and direct contracting to government of the business sector either in advance or in the aftermath of a disaster. Each option should not be viewed in isolation, as businesses and government can advance their shared objectives through multiple models of engagement.

An initial step to foster partnerships would be for emergency managers to focus on establishing arrangements to share risk and situational information in an open and transparent manner. This could be done directly with businesses or through partnerships with existing business networks such as industry associations. Two way information sharing between emergency management organisations and business is vital in that it enables the business sector to best direct its resources for the purposes of corporate social responsibility and to make critical decisions to ensure continuity of business. Emergency management organisations can also gather information from businesses who have local networks to collect valuable situational intelligence; have knowledge of vulnerabilities within their supply chains; and ideas about how their capabilities maybe utilised to support response and recovery efforts. Such networks should also aim to foster sharing of information between businesses and business to business collaboration.

Where specific capability needs are identified that the business sector would be suited to provide, emergency management organisations should actively engage with business sector suppliers. Engagement should seek to understand the extent to which capabilities could be made available to support community needs and how a relationship would best work.

To best enable emergency procurement of significant capabilities it is important to integrate specialist government procurement agencies within the emergency management framework. These organisations are best placed to understand appropriate governance arrangements that would apply to emergency procurement and have existing relationships with major suppliers.

Discussion must be had about what level of the Australian national emergency management framework engagement with the business sector for formal partnerships should occur. From the perspective of a large multinational or national corporation the prospect of engaging with a single nationwide coordinating entity would be advantageous, rather than establishing individually negotiated agreements with individual states and territories. State and territory emergency management organisations could then focus on relationships with small to medium sized businesses that operate mainly within in their jurisdiction. Such a model would lead to the need for the Commonwealth to take a greater role in emergency management or for States and Territories to collaborate to expand national resource sharing arrangements.