

**CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATORY STRATEGIC PLANNING  
PROCESSES**

**EAST GIPPSLAND**

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## ACRONYMS

AV	Ambulance Victoria
BN	Bush Nurse
CFA	Country Fire Authority
CR	Cann River

LIMP	Local Incident Management Plan
MEMP	Municipal Emergency Management Planning
RC	Red Cross
RI	Raymond Island
RICA	Raymond Island Community Association
SES	State Emergency Services
VicPol	Victoria Police

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report summarises key findings that emerged from a series of interviews undertaken in Cann River and Raymond Island, East Gippsland, for a research project investigating community engagement in emergency management approaches. In particular, the interviews focused on the development of the Local Incident Management Plan (LIMP); including the various processes that evolved as well as community responses to development of the LIMP. The interviews included the perspectives of community members, various agencies, and local shire and state government representatives. This report is not to be read as an evaluation of the value or effectiveness of the LIMP, but focuses on the process of community engagement from multiple perspectives. An overview of research project objectives is included in Annex 1.

A consistent finding across all interviews was the lack of distinction between different phases of emergency management as an overall approach. Interviewees focused instead on aspects of emergency management that I will distinguish as environmental, social and operational. For example, some respondents focused on community resilience and preparedness in terms of managing the risks in the environment to mitigate the impact of potential flood or bushfire; others focused on social assessment systems to assist responders to understand different points of community vulnerability; others saw resilience in terms of having a detailed or 5-step guideline on what to do as emergencies unfolded. While all these views are relevant they also reflect the diversity of community priorities and the diverse levels of awareness about effective preparedness and emergency management procedures. Agencies themselves had differing ideas about community capacity and preparedness that were somewhat determined by their views of appropriate agency roles.

There were different understandings of the meaning and purpose of preparedness and this extended to how interviewees regard the LIMP process. As a result there was some confusion about which part of the emergency cycle that LIMP was actually addressing. For example, some groups saw LIMP as a process to build local resilience to prepare for emergencies as agencies would not be able to meet their needs, others saw the process as a means to negotiate agency roles while others saw the process as a means to share information and resources and ultimately responsibility.

In addition to differing interpretations of the purpose of the LIMP process, the interviews demonstrate different understandings of the meaning and value of community engagement and

participation. There is also a range of assumptions and about the meaning and constitution of ‘community’ and ‘local knowledge’, which are outlined in the report. There was considerable commentary from all interviewees about past emergency events-how they were managed and their various impacts. While the report does not consider operational matters, it does include comments on these where they reflect on processes of community engagement.

Six categories that emerged from the interviews have been used to organise the findings. Firstly, **engagement strategies** are considered, from the perspectives of all the stakeholders interviewed. The second category focuses on the main **structural** features that all interviewees identified in terms of engagement and representation; followed by the **communication and information** issues that emerged. The fourth and fifth categories comprise the differing perspectives of the **agency group**-which also included local government officials, and the **community**. The sixth category identifies a range of engagement models and insights that could be regarded as **good practice**, including informal engagement practices that emerged from interviews.

## INTRODUCTION

The LIMP process was instigated after the events of Black Saturday 2009 and the findings of the subsequent Royal Commission. Although the communities and agencies interviewed in East Gippsland were not directly impacted by this bushfire event, they were acutely aware that they were equally as vulnerable as the affected communities. Many of the East Gippsland communities had experienced small-scale events-fires, storms, and floods-and had already developed a range of ad-hoc informal measures to strengthen community preparedness and resilience. The LIMP process attempts to consolidate community engagement in building resilience and selfsufficiency, along with response agencies, in a coordinated emergency management approach.

## FINDINGS

### 1. ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

#### *A Model of Engagement*

All the interviewees who had agency or local government affiliation spoke highly of the LIMP community engagement process. The Shire had a thoughtful approach and all the interviewees described models of community engagement that aligned with what could be regarded as the key features of community consultation:

- A community driven process to enhance participation
- Conducts a legitimate local needs assessment

Recognises the importance of local knowledge

Engages in dialogue, that is, a two-way conversation with information sent up and down

Continuous improvement and updating, that is, an evolving process rather than a rigid format

Builds relationships between community, agencies and local government through consultation and a shared approach to EM

The anticipated effects:

People are motivated to engage when their input is solicited and valued

Participation is seen as innovative rather than a directive/lecture format

Community risk assessment processes identified a range of hazards outside agency boundaries that are additional to fire and flood/storm

An 'All-Hazards' approach to risk management is developed rather than agency-led perceptions

Community expectations about agency/local government provision is moderated

Engage community by aligning with local events, institutions and activities

### *Community Views*

Community groups and members had different perspectives on the engagement process and their feedback indicated that 'participation' was inconsistently applied. All interviewees had good relationships with agency personnel and respected their commitment but they were disappointed by the lack of real engagement and dialogue. They understood the role and purpose of the LIMP was to engage communities but at the same time they often felt disengaged as the process evolved. The LIMP process was ultimately regarded as a process of agency positioning. The way LIMP meetings were held and conducted eventually favoured agency dominance and often became one-way top down information conduits with little opportunity for dialogue. Some community members felt the regard for local knowledge was 'tokenistic' and saw little evidence of delegation to the local level or recognition and inclusion of pre-existing models of local emergency management into planning processes and documents. The perceived lack of real community engagement in the process had two contrasting effects. Firstly, it reinforced a sense of disengagement/passivity amongst some members confirming the perception that agencies would take responsibility (control) when emergencies unfold. This in turn reinforced the agency perspective that the community is apathetic and that emergency planning needs 'key drivers' and agency expertise. The second effect was that some community groups understood that 'we really are on our own' and developed their own procedures outside of the LIMP process. Although agency interviewees saw the value of building local resilience they often had the attitude in various scenarios of 'leave it to us'. Community members say they were not consulted about the final LIMP document and noted that sidelining 'local knowledge' and the generic nature of the final product impacted on its legitimacy with the community.

### *Some Assumptions*

Models of community participation that assume that communities are cohesive and cooperative collectivities are flawed and unrealistic. Both community members and agencies recognized the reality of communities as fragmented and factional rather than cohesive. Even Raymond Island, which was lauded as community-minded compared to Cann River, has a range of factions and personality based antipathies. When communities are found to be fragmented and factional this is then seen as *a problem* and subsequently *a rationale* for agencies to dominate committees and sub-groups as 'key drivers' and leaders. However, as demonstrated, communities do not operate like organisations with hierarchical leadership models and a collective purpose but are diverse and often quite fluid.

While local knowledge is seen as valuable to both preparedness initiatives and emergency management procedures there needs to be a qualitative definition of what constitutes valuable local knowledge. Local knowledge can actually be local memory of previous emergency events or an individual perception of risk with limited usefulness in coordinated emergency management procedures.

## **2. STRUCTURAL FACTORS**

Both community and agency members outlined a range of structural factors that frustrated community participation preparedness initiatives as well as effective emergency management.

Some key factors include:

- the short-term/part-time nature of dedicated positions for emergency management. For example, Flood Recovery Officer is a 12 month position.

- different funding streams and application systems for various positions, resources and activities is frustrating and time-consuming

- Examples of some responses to emergency management scenarios were regarded as rulebased (policy, set procedures and hierarchical) rather than pragmatic or responsive to an unfolding situation – this sidelines community contribution and participation

- when organizational hierarchy is superimposed onto emergency management and decision-making is not based on context and expertise, or harnesses local knowledge, then community participation is limited while distrust is heightened

- community members were criticized for subjective evaluations of emergencies when no agreed common criteria/benchmarking for some emergencies had been developed and shared (this was in development for flood systems)

- Unclear accountabilities for hazard maintenance, for example, clearing scrub/vegetation etc.

- Different community members took responsibility informally

An example was given of one risk-reduction initiative that required coordination between a total of seven different agencies and local government departments compounded by steep bureaucratic vertical lines of authority to get permission to fund preparedness resources, liability issues and self-interest are sometimes prioritized rather than effective preparedness upper management levels of agencies and government were seen as barriers to community participation as they had set views of appropriate action

the legacy of interagency non-cooperation was seen as a blockage to participatory processes, for example, they did not communicate or share information; conducted similar activities simultaneously; and some agencies conducted All Hazards training without consulting other agencies

there was an evident tension between groups that supported environmental protection and those that supported fire prevention this was evident in the remit of different government departments as well as community groups

Because of these barriers personal contacts, relationships and networks gain additional importance to get things done.

### **3. INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION ISSUES**

The Shire is seen as responsive to community feedback and demands and open to the idea of continuous improvement to participatory processes. However, they did not control the production, formulation and distribution of emergency-related information. Community interviewees felt there was *information overload* through multiple and fragmented agency leaflets and initiatives lacking cross-coordination. The information was often directive poorly structured communication practice was counter-productive regarding risk awareness.

There were no official systems for gathering local knowledge across the full range of emergency management processes or methods to document, store and share local information. Although the LIMP process as seen as facilitating the move from macro-agency to community level planning there was no communication about agency and government roles – were they unchanged or amended to facilitate community participation. There seemed to be no formal entry point for communities to negotiate and provide information about their needs other than attending meetings. Communications patterns were seen as a big risk and ranged from non-communication to the dominance of agency-jargon which maintained the gulf between agency (expert) and community (non-specialist).

Generic emergency guides which did not address local contexts (though I understand that communities were to develop these) were regarded as a limited tool for community members to respond to specific emergencies. There were also technical issues regarding communication, for

example, the SMS system on Raymond Island is not always reliable as some messages are received after several days and not everyone has a computer or the internet.

The LIMP document was regarded as too generic and poorly formatted (unprofessional). As a result when information is considered not relevant for local context this stimulates the production of more leaflets and brochures to address these gaps. For example, three separate agencies designed leaflets for community members to record medical information

#### **4. AGENCIES**

##### *Community Perception*

lack of coordination across agencies and a sense that they were ‘disconnected’ community interviewees knew local agency members and respected their work and commitment but also identified competitive, territorial and hierarchical behaviour

agency perspectives were seen as internally driven rather than a focus on all-hazards management or on community needs

agency had territorial demarcation but lacked role clarity when events were more complex than just fire or flood/storm – who assumed responsibility was personality-based

agency attitudes (jargon, territorialism and regulations) put off some community members from attending meetings and forums for emergency planning and some interviewees suggested that community ownership is a threat to agency pre-eminence

all agencies and local government departments were seen as highly bureaucratic, independent vertical pillars lacking horizontal linkages.

##### *Agency perception:*

while some agency members articulated good models of the community engagement process – these were largely idealized and were not informed by community engagement methodology and the complex nature of risk perception

agency interviewees (as well as community themselves) had reductive stereotypes of community members as either ‘doers’ or apathetic/complacent ‘gunnas’

Agency interviewees regarded community complacency was informed by a lack of direct experience of a major emergency and thus a major risk factor

They were also concerned about community members who relied on their memory of past emergencies as a preparedness plan without factoring in changing climate patterns - the increased intensity and difficulty of contemporary fire and flood emergencies.

Even agency interviewees noted the lack of interagency cooperation and the ‘jockeying for position’.

Agency interviewees all agreed that community resilience was a key issue they understood that awareness and planning were crucial to a) Survival b) recovery

## 5. COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

some community members who were long-term residents did not participate in the the LIMP process, they felt that:

- they knew what to do in case of emergency (did not distinguish between different phases)
- were familiar with emergency events and knew what to do eg. Storm driven power outages
- saw themselves as aware and prepared but others as disengaged and lazy
- regarded fire as the danger but flood as harmless except for stock losses

Some interviewees regarded LIMP as a process to sort out agency governance issues which were not relevant to the community

Some disengaged interviewees saw participation as too hard because of difficult personalities, personal antipathy to other groups, for example, environmentalists; frustrated by multiple agencies and government departments; not relevant to their personal circumstances; lack of time

There was a level of community resentment and many examples given of when their views and their efforts were dismissed or ignored

Some community members regarded the purpose of policy and legislation was to justify topdown management processes – this can also be attributed to difficult personalities

One group was disappointed at the final LIMP document as they felt it was too generic and fire-centric and did not address specific details of what to do during emergencies – they outlined a information model which they thought would be more relevant – a small booklet divided into procedures for different emergencies (all-hazards) relevant to their context

By contrast the SES flood management planning process was seen as responsive to community needs and initially worked together with the LIMP process; the subsequent leaflet was seen as informative and helpful for preparation *and* response

## 6. GOOD PRACTICE

A model of community engagement outlined and conducted by an SES official and mentioned by several community members:

dialogic approach – information travels down and up to create mutual awareness don't pre-decide what actions the community should take outline agency responsibilities beforehand provide a hypothetical emergency scenario along with agency technical information (ie. Trigger points for flood, measurement criteria, protocols for communicating unfolding emergency events) to start the process tailored to a particular local context with information about likely consequences and impacts

conduct community risk assessment and then distinguish between perceived and actual risk then guide community to develop their own plans and follow up that this has been done Once planning and consultation is finished:

Community level process of constantly reinforcing preparedness messages

Testing the relevance of procedures

Education/coaching rather than lecturing

Building relationships of trust

Follow up and annual review

## **7. INFORMAL PRACTICE**

There is a lot of evidence of *under-the-radar* activities – that is, communities engage in informal processes to prepare for and to cope with emergencies. Many examples were given of community members who undertake clearing, rubbish removal and infrastructure adjustments. Agency personnel also engage in practices that suit local context rather than formal management policies – this is under-researched and would indeed be very difficult to research. There were many examples of local level improvisation in response to unfolding events that attempted to work around policies, regulations, territorial demarcations and hierarchy. Some RI Communities implemented local warden management system (pre-2009) an example of a self-management system outside of agency purview. The key factor of informal processes is based on personal relationships and networks, these are often called upon to deal with unforeseen contingencies or to get things done, to solve problems when there are official blockages or no resources to hand.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The research demonstrates that community participation in building resilience and in emergency management processes is a necessary component in approaches to ensure survival and recovery. The research also demonstrates that community members are motivated to participate and have substantial resources to contribute to emergency preparedness and management. This experience has demonstrated a commitment on the part of all the relevant stakeholders to work toward a systematic approach. The initial attempts at community-engagement through the development of the LIMP show that building participation and community resilience requires a continuous investment in time as well as human and material resources as it is constantly evolving. The critique of the LIMP – as a process – has provided many insights that can be harnessed to strengthen rather than abandon the process of community engagement in disaster preparedness.

*Some further recommendations:*

- Long term community-friendly planning and a commitment to continuous improvement, learning and innovation
- A more nuanced model of community dynamics and a recognition of the dispersed nature of community groups and relationships as a strength
- A re-articulation of agency roles/behaviour when engaging with participatory initiatives guided by partnership approaches
- A process of community delegation as well as a recognition and incorporation of existing community level innovation in disaster preparedness
- Formalisation of participatory processes needed to maintain community engagement and trust
- Improved communication practices for all information products using external specialist knowledge
- Establishing formal communication channels for genuine dialogue and for sending information **up**

## **ANNEX 1**

### *PROJECT OBJECTIVES*

#### **Purpose**

**To contribute to SES capabilities in developing community resilience within Victorian communities by studying citizen engagement policies and practice used in the East Gippsland region and analysing their role in enhancing, or impeding, the building of community disaster resilience within that context.**

#### **Project Objectives**

The study will analyse East Gippsland's citizen engagement and participatory strategic planning processes across four areas:

The impact of international, national, state and/or local regulatory frameworks on policies and practice in the region.

The social, cultural or political influences on citizen engagement and democratic participation during strategic planning for disaster resilience in the region

Identify possible barriers that would prevent transfer of the region's participatory communication strategies from rural to urban contexts.

Communicative practices that enable or, conversely, detract from, participatory strategic planning—dialogue, listening & voice, used in the region.

**Output/Activities**

1. Conduct a survey of Community Resilience Committee members’ perceptions of effective & non-effective community engagement strategies used to-date (Focus group of committee members using Burnside-Lawry evaluation tool).
2. Conduct a community perception survey of effective & non-effective community engagement strategies used to-date (Focus groups among various communities using Burnside-Lawry evaluation tool).

**Case study informed by:**

- a. Analysis of local-level interpretation of policies & its impact on disaster resilience planning;
- b. Analysis of Leadership style used to establish & maintain East Gippsland CRC- e.g. role of local government &/or established community groups;
- c. Community perception report indicating nature of the impact of community engagement techniques on inclusion/exclusion, marginalisation /mainstreaming & conflict / co-existence. d. Community Resilience Committee members’ perceptions of effective & non-effective community engagement strategies used to-date (Focus group of committee members using Burnside-Lawry evaluation tool);
- e. Community perceptions of effective & non-effective community engagement strategies used to-date (Focus groups among various communities using Burnside-Lawry evaluation tool).