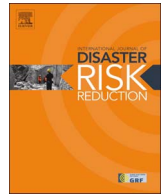




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijdrr

Beyond public meetings: Diverse forms of community led recovery following disaster



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A B S T R A C T

Disasters provoke a multitude of responses at different scales of society, both in the immediate aftermath and in long term recovery. The importance of public participation, consultation and citizen engagement is increasingly acknowledged and integrated into an array of sectors, including planning and governance processes following major disaster events. However, there is growing concern that some practices of participation may narrow the space for genuine democratic engagement. This builds on a wider understanding of the potential for participation to be engaged in shallow and tokenistic forms. This paper explores, through a qualitative methodology, how residents perceived participatory processes following the Canterbury earthquakes which affected the city of Christchurch in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2010 and 2011. Importantly, this paper focuses on the diverse forms of participation in the recovery as discussed by residents. This contributes to a wider perspective on post-disaster recovery that recognises the diverse and informal pathways that shape the ongoing recovery of Christchurch. Subsequently, this critical yet hopeful account demonstrates how action at the local scale is integral to fostering a sense of community engagement and ownership over disaster recovery.

1. Introduction

The sequence of earthquakes that affected the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand throughout 2010 and 2011 shook the very foundations of the city, physically, emotionally and psychologically, disrupting the status quo for hundreds of thousands of people. These earthquakes have had an undeniable effect on the economy, infrastructure and wellbeing of those living in and connected to the region. The first event, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake¹ in the early hours of September 4, 2010, occurred 40 km outside of the city of Christchurch, causing widespread damage in the region. This event, also known as the Canterbury earthquake, was considered a lucky escape as the tremor occurred at night, at a shallow depth and located a distance out of the city. No lives were lost although significant damage to land, buildings and infrastructure did occur. However, on February 22, 2011 an aftershock of 6.2 magnitude occurred during the weekday lunch hour in close proximity to the city centre.² These factors, combined with intense ground shaking³ resulted in the loss of 185 lives and injury to 3129 people. The Central Business District (CBD) was cordoned off for nearly two years as over 50% of the buildings were demolished due to

substantial damage. The city also experienced a net population decline of approximately 7000 residents as recorded at the 2013 census [5,58].

With further large earthquakes in June and December in 2011, recovery has been a delayed and ongoing process. The political, social and economic processes that impact the way a community recovers from such unexpected and disruptive events are understudied. However, a growing field of research is addressing what happens at the community level in the long term, particularly how these destructive events shape practices of public participation and engagement [8,16,19,75,80]. As we face more extreme climactic events, and as more people are exposed to geophysical hazards as a result of population growth, there is a need to further understand the complex and evolving dynamics of how disaster affected places can create long term and successful recovery [26,44].

This paper attempts to expand an understanding of citizen participation following disaster beyond the idea of public meetings and government consultation processes to also include diverse practices of participation and engagement facilitated at the grassroots scale. This argument emphasizes the importance of participation that occurs outside of formal processes while also discussing how challenges to

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¹ The 2010 Canterbury earthquake is reported as a 10 on the Mercalli Modified Intensity Scale.

² The 2011 Christchurch earthquake is reported as a 9 on the Mercalli Modified Intensity Scale.

³ Ground accelerations during this earthquake were recorded as over two times that of gravity, exceeding the accelerations measured in Japan during the magnitude 9 Tōhoku earthquake on 11 March 2011 [30].

government led approaches can emerge at this scale. Such an approach necessarily involves framing disaster recovery as a specific time of governance and politics, one that arises at the intersection of socio-political systems and a destructive agent, force or hazard [1,39,41]. Vale and Campanella [81, p. 8] describe how it is possible to “observe who is in power and who is not” through what is prioritised to be rebuilt, providing insight into the power dynamics that mediate disaster recovery. To do so, this paper explores the case study of community recovery initiatives following the Canterbury earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 in Aotearoa New Zealand. This research emphasizes the importance of participation in disaster recovery and explores perceptions of government approaches and the actions undertaken at the grassroots scale. Consequently, this paper argues for a greater focus on the diverse practices of community led recovery in order to render visible the diversity of engagements with the post-disaster political landscape.

2. Framing participation and community led recovery

Recovery from disaster is one of the lesser understood areas of this field of study [15,68,71]. We know much more about how individuals, communities and regions will respond immediately, but we understand less about how the processes of social organisation, politics and economics interact to shape and influence the pathways of local and ongoing recovery [24,71]. However, there is a growing field of research that is investigating the complexity of long term recovery following disaster [16,19,54,73,75,80]. This is essential for understanding the way these events shape socio-political processes and outcomes well beyond the initial phase of responding to threat and risk. In the first instance, there are challenges in defining successful recovery, which can include the need for an affected place to return to an acceptable state [15] and the increasingly popularly discourse of ‘building back better’ [47,57].

Early studies of recovery have proposed models that proceed through phases including emergency, restoration, replacement/reconstruction and commemoration [32]. These models have been heavily critiqued for the assumption of linear progression through time and the orderly and inevitable nature of recovery [8,15]. Other areas of recovery research investigate impact assessment, physical reconstruction, rehabilitation, restoration, and regulatory processes [15,32,71]. While these aspects are important to understand, there is also a need to interrogate how communities contribute to and influence the politics of post-disaster decision making and participation. As Dionisio and Pawson [23] note, the idea of building back better can be strengthened by making space for community and stakeholder engagement in ongoing disaster recovery.

A broad shift from practices of government to governance in the last several decades has led to an integration of forms of participatory and direct democracy, particularly through consultation and engagement with public decision making [53]. Both theoretically and practically, the ideal role of formal participation and engagement in government processes is a contested topic [17,37,43]. Much has been said on how to practice participation, the different levels or types of participation and the benefits and costs [4,17,38]. The factors that influence participatory approaches to decision making arise from a diverse range of perspectives, including notions of communicative action, structuration theory, consensus building and deliberation [11,37,38,42]. In practice, participatory processes are widely engaged in mainstream processes through the use of tools such as citizens’ juries, education programmes, public hearings and comment procedures [14,36,43]. However, challenges arise surrounding the potential for participation to be dominated by certain interest groups and pre-determined decisions, as reflected in the concern that consultation processes may narrow the space for democratic engagement [12]. In this vein, it is argued that consultation may be used in a tokenistic way to placate the need for citizen participation

resulting in de-politicisation and the marginalisation of the contestation that is integral to democratic debate [17,51]

In this context, the involvement of community in formal participation processes is considered an important factor in the success of disaster recovery initiatives [16,31,67,82]. There are also circumstances unique to the disaster context, such as the need to balance the complexity of immediate survival needs and responsibilities to protect life and repair infrastructure, as well as the ongoing need to foster and facilitate trust and collaboration between government and affected communities [9,63,89]. As a result, there is a complex interaction between the actions taken by a government or state authority in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, and the ongoing implications of these actions, particularly surrounding the involvement and participation of residents and citizens.

As the use of post-disaster participatory initiatives has increased, it has become important to understand the role of grassroots community initiatives following disaster [74,76,87]. Research in this area has suggested the importance of participation and community engagement as part of the general move away from the dominance of command and control approaches [64,65,86]. In an analysis of two communities in the United States during recovery from floods, Kweit and Kweit [49, p. 369] found that the local administration that engaged the community in decision making was “more likely to believe that citizens had an effect on decisions made and that the city made attempts to involve them”. Other studies on participation and recovery have reported improvements in the success of post-disaster initiatives, an increased trust in authorities and assistance in the psychological processing of the disaster experience [22,27,49,77].

McLennan et al. [55] contextualise the shifting role of volunteers in emergency management within the wider context of changes in the sphere of governance in Australia. These findings highlight the relevance of broader trends in political governance and administration in shaping disaster response and recovery policy. Similarly, on the role of participation during recovery, Berke et al. [8, p. 3] note that recovery policy making is “intensely political” and thus stress the importance for communities to initiate collective actions soon after a disaster to establish equitable recovery practices. However, as Vallance [83] notes, there are significant difficulties in achieving post-disaster participation despite a broad acceptance of the importance of the practice within this context. These challenges have also been raised by scholars who have questioned how participation can be best incorporated with post-disaster governance processes given, not only the particularities of the post-disaster context, but also the historical legacy of command and control approaches to emergency management [22,62,65]. Thus, the specificities the post-disaster context remain a lesser understood aspect of participation and democratic involvement despite the widely-acknowledged benefits and importance of community and citizen trust and buy in to recovery activities [76].

3. Methods

This paper draws on research undertaken in 2014, approximately four years after the first earthquake on September 4, 2010. The research is based on a post-structural qualitative methodology that aimed to interrogate and explore the discourses of disaster recovery enacted at the community scale. The methods employed for this research include a mixed method approach using qualitative face to face interviews, qualitative online surveys and analysis of media releases and government documents.

Semi-structured face to face interviews were undertaken over two separate field trips in October and December 2014. In total 31 interviews with key participants in community organisations were undertaken. Informed consent was required and an extensive approach to ethics was put in place to sensitively and carefully approach the subject

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