

A PRINCIPLED APPROACH TO AUSTRALIAN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Aither's recent review of Australian and international emergency management arrangements points to clear principles that should guide the development of new arrangements.

Disasters are expensive. Recent modelling suggests that the total economic cost of natural disaster events to the Australian economy could reach \$23 billion per annum by 2050 – compared to \$6.3 billion in 2013. While the majority of this cost will be borne by affected individuals and the private sector, ultimately Australian governments will bear significant costs.

Disaster management is complex. The environment in which governments develop emergency management arrangements and manage these costs is increasingly complex. Climate change, and its increasingly variable and extreme impacts, makes the management of all hazards ever more challenging, and the evidence suggests that the frequency and scale of these events is likely to increase.

Australia is experienced at disaster management, but could improve.

While Australia is regarded as having world-leading emergency management arrangements, a series of catastrophic fire, flood and heatwave events observed

in our recent past, and subsequent disaster inquiries, reveal opportunities to improve both federal and state emergency management arrangements.

The inquiries have exposed structural issues in emergency management arrangements, such as poor cross agency and departmental coordination; inadequate communication between different levels of government, and the community sector and private sector; poor understanding, awareness and assessment of risk; and a lack of understanding and use of agreed planning arrangements.

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PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT:

- 1 **Develop an all hazards and all agencies approach** – management of most hazards requires common and generic arrangements that can be more effectively managed through cross-agency coordination, as opposed to siloed management approaches.
- 2 **Balance command and control versus flexibility** – arrangements should maintain clear lines of accountability, but also allow for flexibility to enable more effective management of unpredictable operating environments as they develop.
- 3 **Improve role transparency across the prevention, planning, response and recovery spectrum** – improved coordination is needed across the public, private, not for profit and community sectors to minimise redundancies associated with conflicting and duplicative roles.
- 4 **Foster fluid policy change** – management frameworks need to be designed to foster any policy change at least burden to all stakeholders. This ability will be crucially important in response to climate change impacts.
- 5 **Manage proactively** – where possible, improvements to emergency management arrangements should be made before disaster events, not after highly publicised inquiries and reviews highlight avoidable inadequacies.
- 6 **Useful, useable and used** – the fundamental test of emergency management arrangements is that they are useful in the prevailing operating environment, useable by those tasked to manage, and actually used to actively manage hazards or at the time of an emergency event.

Developing more strategic emergency management arrangements can provide better outcomes. There are clear and significant social, economic and environmental benefits in government responding to these issues as a priority.

To their credit, some jurisdictions are making concerted reform efforts. In doing so, they are leading efforts to introduce more effective policy and planning arrangements for the management of all hazards, and improving community resilience through embedding shared responsibility thinking. But it remains to be seen how these arrangements perform when tested in practice.

Robust emergency management principles can help. Aither's recent review of Australian and international emergency management arrangements points to clear principles that should guide the development of improved arrangements.

While they do not provide the whole answer, these principles represent a robust conceptual foundation for improvements to emergency management arrangements and response. If incorporated successfully, they will ultimately enable emergency managers to better meet current and emerging challenges, and enhance Australia's resilience to disasters.



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