



A virtual organisation: Queensland's crisis and response management – TEACHING NOTES

Synopsis of case

The Queensland “rain events” of 2010-2011 were among the most extensive and costly natural disasters in Australia’s history, on a physical scale massive by world standards. After a prolonged period of drought, December 2010 was the wettest month in the state’s recorded history, causing widespread flooding. Just as this seemed to be over, in early January 2011 the sudden collision of two intense thunderstorms caused an “inland tsunami”, and flash flooding that caused a number of deaths and for the first time since 1974 inundated the capital city of Brisbane. Two weeks later, Tropical Cyclone Yasi, one of the most ferocious on record, smashed across North Queensland, prompting mass evacuations.

Queensland’s emergency management systems, operating from the local level but with decisions driven by the State Disaster Management Group with its whole-of-government, utility and NGO representation, managed these multiple events in a manner that has been described as global best practice.

How this case could be used

This case can be used to identify and discuss what contributes to a successful emergency response. While it tells of what was widely and internationally regarded as an effective and resilient response to an unprecedented sequence of disasters, the case also gives plentiful clues to what lay behind that effectiveness. For instance, the general question of whether the “Queensland model” should or could be adopted by other jurisdictions, could give rise to some good discussion, as could the identification of elements contributing to the successful response. This could lead on to an analysis of the leadership qualities called for, in “peace time” as well as in crisis, and to the value of having a “war room” to direct activities. Another issue is the importance of continual learning, review and development, over a lengthy period, and drawing on previous practical experience within Queensland, but also of other jurisdictions.

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The case could also be the springboard for a wider discussion of disaster management and the question whether there should be a different balance between payment for disaster relief and reconstruction, and funding and other measures aimed at mitigating future disasters. These notes give some theoretical background that can be applied to such discussions.

Target audience for the case

Public servants at the middle and senior management level, in particular but not exclusively those whose roles will take on additional importance in times of crisis. It could be just as important for public servants in general to gain insight into situations which call for different structures and systems.

Suggested student assignments/question lines

1. **What would you identify as key elements of Queensland's crisis management, and what would you advise another jurisdiction wishing to adopt them?**
2. **What are the characteristics of the State Disaster Management Group, and how do they impact on disaster response?**
3. **On what basis could a disaster response be considered "a success"?**
4. **To what extent did the unique features of Queensland contribute to the effectiveness of the disaster response.**
5. **How as leadership demonstrated during the crisis, and by whom?**
6. **What does the response to the 2010-2011 floods demonstrate about relationships?**
7. **What impact might a successful response and recovery have on future resilience?**

What would you identify as key elements of Queensland's crisis management, and what would you advise another jurisdiction wishing to adopt them?

Within Australia, Federal constitutional arrangements ensure that primary responsibility for disaster management falls to each state or territory. Disaster planning is premised on the notion of shared responsibilities, partnerships and collaboration between government and non-government sectors. When a disaster strikes, the principle of subsidiarity dictates that initial decisions on how best to respond are devolved down to the local level which is closest to the people and hence ideally located for decided what needs to be done in the first instance (Wilkins, 2009 p4).

While the principle of subsidiarity applies to all Australian states, Queensland differs in its approach to disaster management because it operates an "all agency position" as opposed to a combat agency model, whereby a particular, predetermined agency is responsible for managing a disaster in the first instance: this means that in New South Wales, NSW agriculture is the designated combat agency in any animal health emergency and the NSW Rural Fire Service for bushfire crisis.

Queensland utilises a coordinated and focussed approach to disaster management, elements of which include:

- The State Disaster Management Group, a high level senior officials group, with representation from key non-government agencies and the private sector.
- An all hazards, all agencies approach
- Emphasis on the centrality of local government helps ensure a useful and timely information flow to the SDMG from the regions, and ultimately a more co-ordinated approach to planning between local and state jurisdictions.
- Length and breadth of experience, regularly incorporated into future planning.
- Organisational culture within and across emergency agencies.
- Ongoing planning and training at operational levels
- Learning and adaptation from previous experience, in Queensland and in other jurisdictions.
- Priority given to collaboration, endorsed and modelled by senior management.
- It won't happen by accident, and it can't be suddenly "switched on."
- Significant time and resources invested in building relationships, learning and training
- Commitment to attend "peace-time" planning meetings.
- Constant review and adaptation even of previous successes.

What are the characteristics of the State Disaster Management Group and how do they impact on disaster response?

Boin et al point out that effective management of any crisis depends upon capable political and administrative leadership, whose duties include "recognizing emerging threats, initiating efforts to mitigate them and deal with their consequences" and in the recovery phase provide direction "to re-establish a sense of normalcy" (Boin et al, 20210, p 706).

In 2009, despite the apparently effective management of earlier disasters, the then Director General of the Department of Premier and Cabinet (and chair of SDMG) foresaw that Queensland might not cope with a more extensive disaster. As a result the government commissioned a report that, while generally favourable, questioned some aspects of the existing disaster management system. Of particular concern was the reliance on comparatively limited numbers of dedicated disaster management personnel from Emergency Management Queensland, being dispatched to wherever a local disaster had occurred and in charge of deploying volunteers.

The review concluded that this and Queensland's lack of a designated coordinator potentially limited the state's capacity to respond to a more widespread disaster situation and argued that "policing organisations have the capacity and competence to perform this role on a State-wide basis in a scalable way to deal with one or multiple disasters (O'Sullivan and the Consultancy Bureau, 2009). It recommended an Assistant Commissioner of Police be appointed with overall responsibility for state coordination, and that police be the lead agency for individual disaster areas. This would mean police taking over the role previously filled by specialist emergency management personnel, brought in to work with local mayors and councils, and organise volunteers.

While the changes were contentious in some quarters, a general view is that they proved essential. The timing of their introduction was prescient and a relief to those who feared that

the old disaster model could not have dealt with the unexpected extent of the 2010-11 disaster.

The State Disaster Management Group gives Queensland a significant advantage because:

- Top-level representation, with a commitment from ALL departmental Directors-General to attend “peace-time” quarterly meetings to plan, strategise and prepare, as well as the “war cabinet”.
- A whole of government perspective and an “all-agency” approach.
- Participation by non-government agencies such as charities, and utility companies.
- One important by product of the all-agency approach is that any decisions taken at those meetings are then enacted, providing a level of surety to those further down the chain of command, as well as those outside of government e.g. insurance companies and NGOs.
- Clearly understood rules and thresholds for seeking federal funding and assistance.
- Top-level backup always in place for local first responders if a situation escalates.
- Ability to make rapid decisions and enact them across all representative agencies and bodies.
- Consistent information to be shared across agencies and communicated with urgency to the public.

On what basis could a disaster response be considered “a success”?

Despite the international acclaim, not everyone agrees that the Queensland crisis was managed well. As any observer of the Queensland Flood commission of inquiry hearings would testify, stakeholders (for example those assisting during disasters either as volunteers or as paid officials, and those affected such as flood victims or their families), use different criteria to judge success.

McConnell speaks of the difficulty in rating the relative success or failure of public policies and government activities, particularly in relation to the “paucity of policy-oriented reflections” (McConnell, 2011, p 65). This lack of evidence is compounded when the outcomes or results are subject to the appraisal of “multiple constituencies” and, as usually happens around crises, there is a lack of agreement between them as to what constitutes effectiveness or success (Marsh & McConnell, 2010, p 567). As well there are methodological dilemmas, such as how to distinguish “success as a fact from success as interpretation” McConnell 2011, p 64).

McConnell has devised a framework on which crisis management responses can be plotted. Most will fit somewhere along the spectrum from outright success to complete failure, in categories such as “durable success” where success outweighs failures, to “conflicted success” where successes and failures are equally balanced, and “precarious success” where failures outweigh success. Benchmarks for judging success include:

- Matching what occurred with the stated objectives of crisis managers
- Benefit for individuals/groups/localities under threat
- Level and speed of improvement
- Adherence to industry standards, laws, and contingency plans

- Comparison with the crisis experience of another jurisdiction
- Level of expert/political/public support for the initiatives.

McConnell (2011, p68) also provides a working definition:

A crisis management initiative is successful if it follows pre-anticipated and/or relevant processes and involves the taking of decisions which have the effect of minimising loss of life/damage, restoring order and achieving political goals, while attracting universal or near universal support and/no or virtually no opposition.

Based on this definition, it can be argued that Queensland successfully managed the 2010/11 crises, its performance during this event fitting somewhere between outright success and the “durable success” category on the success spectrum, in that the success of the 2010/2011 event outweighed any purported failures.

It can also be argued that the commissioning of the post-Cyclone Larry review report, a factor in prompting changes to the state’s disaster management approach, provides evidence of programmatic success. The changes introduced because of it positively impacted on the final outcome of the 2010-2011 crisis. The enactment of the report’s recommendations enabled a better response across larger tracts of land than would have been possible, if (for example) police had not been given a lead agency role. (for more on evaluating success, see Marsh and McConnell (2010) and Bovens (2010) P 584-85.)

To what extent did the unique features of Queensland contribute to its success?

Bovens (2010, p584) asserts that judging success should be distinguished between what he calls “process” assessment and “outcome” assessment. Both process and outcome factors distinctive to Queensland contributed to the successful response.

Process factors included:

- Regular, often twice daily, meetings of the SDMG. Present were representatives from local government and NGOS, power, telecommunication organisations and charities which ensured informed decisions based on the most up to date information possible
- Demonstrable cooperation between all those involved (government, NGOS, private companies, charities and the ADF)
- Successful communication of up to date information was provided by the Premier and public officials after each SDMG meeting and broadcast across the state.
- The Queensland Police Service worked cooperatively with other disaster agencies, and effectively used social media technology to communicate information and field queries.

Outcome related factors included:

- No person going without clean drinking water despite up to ten communities with no water supplies or operating sewerage systems at some time
- In the days immediately after the disasters, no person reported a public health issue
- A good disaster response is highly reliant on trained volunteers and in these disasters 2600 additional SES volunteers were deployed.
- Offers of help were quickly matched with those urgently needing assistance
- Power and telecommunication facilities were more quickly restored after Cyclone Yasi than in previous disasters, notably the smaller, less intense, cyclone Larry

How was leadership demonstrated during the crisis, and by whom?

Boin, 't Hart, Stern & Sundelius (2005) identify five critical tasks for leaders during crisis events:

1. Sense-making: appraising the threat, deciding what the crisis is about, determining how threatening events are – to what or whom, what the parameters are; how the crisis is likely to develop.
2. Decision making: determining an appropriate initial response; prioritising the allocation of resources; co-ordination.
3. Meaning-making: responding to citizen demands to know what is going on; developing and communicating a compelling narrative about what the crisis is about.
4. Terminating: returning to normal. Shifting from crisis to routine.
5. Learning: political and organisational lesson-drawing.

During the 2010-2011 disasters, it seems that both political and administrative leadership across jurisdictions and including the private sectors and NGOs fulfilled these criteria. Throughout the crisis, local, state and federal government agencies acted collaboratively to restore normalcy and assist those affected. In this they were aided by Australia's intergovernmental arrangements that clearly set out funding and assistance criteria.

It could be argued that the SDMG demonstrated all the above facets of crisis leadership. Premier Anna Bligh, who gave regular updates of information, often flanked by relevant experts such as hydrologists or meteorologist, played a significant role in meaning-making. Ian Stewart was a key player in the decision-making role.

What does the response to the 2010-2011 events demonstrate about relationships?

The literature on crisis management often refers to crisis in relation to national security (defence) issues rather than natural disasters per se. Furthermore, most of the literature uses overseas examples. Connery's observations about crisis management, particularly as it relates to the East Timor intervention, indicates there are some common themes that are applicable to both security crises and national disaster emergencies. In particular Connery notes that Australian crisis policy-making "tends toward the collegial approach" and this is in part due to the time pressures involved in crisis decision-making (Connery, 2010, pp 142, 143). McGowan (2012) supports that noting that "relationships need to be developed during 'peace time'" so that roles and responsibilities of all agencies and response personnel are clear."

Through interviews conducted for this study, from the evidence provided in various governmental reports, as well as accounts provided by the SDMG extraordinary minutes, it is apparent that relationships and networks developed over a long period of time were a vital part in successfully managing these disasters. The contrasting evidence of Hurricane Katrina highlights this point, where a lack of trust, partisan politics and an uncoordinated response extended the suffering of thousands of New Orleans' citizens. This study argues that Queensland's regional patterns of development, its emphasis on a bottom-up, local government in the first instance response and the importance placed on fostering relationships that is well-recognised and seemingly practiced by the senior staff of Qld emergency management agencies, was a vital contributor to Queensland's successful response.

While these arrangements are articulated in state and federal legislation, and seem to be understood, what is not so immediately apparent is how these arrangements contribute to

building trust between the disaster agencies – many of whom have different perspectives on what should be prioritised. Interviews with key personnel at the state level, as well as more informal conversations with local councillors, confirm that the relationships developed during “peace-time” enabled a level of understanding and communication during the fog and urgency of a disaster. Leadership commitment at the state and local level is crucial to building the networks that are a fundamental part of any successful disaster management approach. These networks are not just between government agencies and the different tiers but also between private companies and NGOs, who all have input into the SDMG. The Queensland tot the 2010-2011 natural disasters highlighted the importance of co-ordination, in clearly understand what needed to be done and who was responsible for doing it; in having the most up to date information available and in having a flexible and scalable set of arrangements.

Both emergency services and the Queensland Police Service realised that some recommendations of the 2009 review into crisis management would not be universally welcomed. In the wake of Cyclone Larry, senior disaster personnel had already spent significant time crossing the state to consult with local mayors, shoring up relationships and understandings to gain the trust of local mayors, in particular that police would not adopt their old-style command and control approach.

This was the first time that police had worked alongside non-uniformed disaster management staff out of the same complex at Kedron. By all accounts the level of co-operation that existed between uniformed police, Fire and Rescue Service, and the Queensland Ambulance – organisations that all have their own distinctive cultures and hierarchies – and non-uniformed personnel was noteworthy. It indicated the emphasis placed on collaboration and the importance placed on fostering relationships by senior management. “We may not all like each other, but we certainly respect each other,” was a commonly-heard refrain.

Significant credit should go to Ian Stewart as the first designated disaster co-ordinator who had to ensure that police and the emergency services they could be seen to have displaced as a lead agency, worked effectively together. He was able to build on the work done in previous years by senior disaster personnel, but his personal example was also cited several times. The collaborative approach that he modelled was mirrored by police in disaster districts across the state.

What impact might a successful response and recovery have on future resilience?

Across Australia, partisan politics diminish during times of natural disasters, as parties, politicians and community groups from across the state and beyond, respond. Yet as Boin et al 2008 argue, disasters always have a political element to them, and it is the political dimension that often inhibits necessary reforms, including the development of more resilient, less dependent communities, despite this being a purported and agreed to aim of state and federal governments (see COAG 2010, Kapucu and Ozerdem 2013 p 17).

Former attorney-general, Robert McLelland, voiced his concerns about the untargeted payments of \$1000 made to individuals:

“They’re in addition to hardship payments that are jointly funded by the states and territories. So what I have consistently said, we need to evaluate how efficient these payments are, these

\$1000 compensation payments. Firstly to streamline them so that we target them to those who are most in need, but secondly to look at shifting a substantial amount of that money into preventative measures and one good example is last year, following the Queensland floods and Cyclone Yasi, was about \$840 million in these \$1000 payments that went out to individuals. Now there was certainly a spike in consumer spending, plasma TVs and so for the, but there was no spike in insurance policies or buying generators for the next event.”

The untargeted payments, in some instances for seemingly inconsequential hardship (no power for a relatively short period of time), probably helped the short term lift in popularity of the Bligh government. However as some policy analysts have noted, the longer-term consequences of these untargeted payments include raising expectations of what governments should do, reduce individual resilience as a result and limit the resources that could be spent on mitigation programs that would be cheaper and of more benefit in the longer term (see McGowan 2012).

Audio-visual material: There are some striking images, as well as maps, on the Queensland Government’s website <http://qldreconstruction.org.au>

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