

Working with Communities during Major Bushfires

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Abstract

In recent years fire managers in Victoria have placed great emphasis on working with threatened communities to keep them informed during bushfires, particularly through the use of public meetings to provide up to date information about the situation, agency strategies and safety advice for the community. In the 2006/07 fire season in Victoria nearly 300 community meetings were held throughout the threatened areas. Over 30,000 people attended these meetings. An evaluation of these meetings was conducted to identify the outcomes achieved by the meetings and how the meetings worked to promote and support community involvement. The evaluation involved observation of meetings and interviews with both agency staff and the community members attending the meetings. A major community survey was also conducted to assess the response to the meetings.

The results identified that the meeting achieved a broad range of outcomes. These included increased householder planning and preparedness, increased understanding and acceptance of fire management strategies, and more positive attitudes towards the agencies. The paper will present some of the key findings from the evaluation and outline how community meetings can provide a key component of agency strategies to inform and involve the community during major fires and how such meetings contribute to more appropriate community response to wildfires. The paper also highlights some issues that need to be considered in planning and conducting such meetings.

Introduction

During the 2003 bushfires community meetings became an important means through which CFA and DSE engaged the community in North East Victoria and Gippsland. The meetings created a forum to provide the community with updates on the fire situation, safety advice and other relevant information. The meetings were usually conducted jointly with representatives of other organisations sometimes present. Since 2003 community meetings have been used during several shorter duration fires in south western Victoria and during the major fires of 2006 in several parts of Victoria. In the 2006/07 Great Divide Complex fires, community meetings were used extensively throughout the affected and threatened areas when over 300 meetings were conducted and over 30,000 people attending..

Given the high profile of community meetings over recent years an evaluation was undertaken by CFA as part of its involvement in the Bushfire CRC to develop a better understanding of the role of community meetings during bushfires. Despite the increasing use of community meetings and the anecdotal evidence that they are worthwhile, there is little by way of documentation of the objectives, formats or processes used in these meetings and no systematic assessment of the outcomes of these meetings. The evaluation was intended to provide an understanding of the outcomes achieved by these meetings, and how they work to bring about particular outcomes.

Approach to Evaluation

The study draws on the work being undertaken as part of project C7 in the Bushfire CRC. This work uses a program theory approach that draws on current approaches to evaluation using a realist perspective on evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Realist evaluation uses program theories to provide a deeper understanding of what can be expected from a program and to determine how programs work, for whom and in what circumstances. These theories of how programs work are already embodied in the program as ideas about how the program might bring about change in behaviour, remedy a social problem or address a need. Evaluation from this perspective involves the

development, testing and refinement of program theories and in doing so aims to identify the aspects of programs that are critical to their effectiveness.

Often the focus of program planning and development is on the observable aspects of a program such as the activities, resources, funding and practicalities of delivery, with little attention to how the program actually works to achieve the intended outcomes. (Lipsey, 1993) refers to this as the ‘black box’ model of a program, that is, the activities and resources provide a description of the program components but how the program works remains hidden.

A realist perspective on evaluation adopts an alternative approach and uses different concepts in order to understand how a program works. Programs seek to bring about change by providing resources to participants that they interpret and to which they may or may not respond. The reasoning people use and the way they adapt their use of resources represent the potential causal processes, or **mechanisms**, generated by a program. However these processes do not flow automatically from the implementation of program components. They only operate in particular circumstances and so understanding the features of the **context** that affect these causal processes is an essential aspect of realist evaluation. These factors range from those at the individual level of the participants and implementers to the macro context of the program, organisational characteristics and inter-organisational relationships. The **outcomes** of a program will vary depending on the mechanisms that are activated in certain contexts, so realist evaluation attempts to identify particular patterns of outcomes resulting from the implementation of the program.

Explaining how a program works involves developing models of how various causal processes are activated, for whom and under what circumstances to produce particular outcomes. These **configurations** of context-mechanism-outcomes provide an explanation of how a program works and why a program may work in some circumstances and not others.

Evaluation design

As briefly mentioned programs represent ideas or theories about how change might be achieved. These theories are often implicit in the minds of program planners and implementers. Whether these theories accurately reflect the program, or are plausible explanations is usually untested. Realist evaluation can be viewed as a process of articulating, testing and refining these theories in order to make programs more sustainable and effective.

A basic model of how community meetings are intended to work was developed from documentation and interviews with key personnel from various agencies. The development of a more refined program theory employed a grounded theory approach (Blaikie, 2000) that used the realist evaluation framework of context–mechanism–outcomes to guide the qualitative data collection and analysis.

Method

During, and following the fires, fieldwork was conducted involving

- interviews with 13 CFA/DSE/municipal personnel responsible for planning and conducting community meetings;
- analysis of documentation of the meetings e.g. guidelines, agendas, etc.;
- observation of 15 meetings in a range of locations and situations;
- interviews with 18 people who attended community meetings;
- observations by 3 other researchers who attended 8 meetings; and
- survey of residents in fire affected areas, conducted post season.

Data were collected to identify the outcomes of the meetings and the processes that enabled these outcomes to be achieved, as well as a range of context factors. The data collected during this qualitative phase was then used to inform the development of questions for inclusion in the post season survey conducted several months after the fire. The analysis of the qualitative data using NVivo software enabled the development of a more refined program theory of community meetings.

Initial analysis of the qualitative data was used to inform the development of a survey that was conducted by telephone with householders in localities affected by the fires (Strahan & Rhodes, 2007). Stratified random sampling – stratified by locality, was used to collect responses from 639 households. This sample enables 95% confidence that the sample result is within $\pm 3.5\%$ of the population value. The response rate for the survey was 68%. The survey results provided further insight into the processes and outcomes of the program.

Developing a Program Theory for Community Meetings

The primary purpose of the study was to articulate a more developed program theory of how and under what circumstances community meetings work and the outcomes achieved. The following section outlines the refined program theory of community meetings based on the analysis of the qualitative data. The discussion uses the realist framework of context-mechanism-outcomes to discuss the findings. The results and discussion presented in this paper represent preliminary findings from the study.

Community meetings during bushfires represent one of a number of interventions intended to address aspects of the bushfire problem by enhancing community preparedness and response. When community meetings were first initiated in 1997/98 the basic idea or theory was that providing information to the community would enable people to make more informed decisions and improve their preparedness. The meetings were also seen as a way to manage community concerns about the threat. A review of the limited documentation and through interviews with agency personnel enabled the development of an initial program theory of community meetings as shown in Box 1.

Box 1: *An initial program theory of community meetings*

Community meetings convey information about the fire and advice about how the householders should respond in order to protect life and property. This information and advice is intended to provide a realistic assessment of the situation and alert people to the threat whilst also addressing their concerns. This advice and information is expected to lead people to realise they need to take action, assist them make more informed decisions and enable them to implement appropriate preparations and protective actions. In this way the meetings are seen to contribute to increased safety and reduced loss of life and property. The main process for achieving these outcomes is assumed to be the transmission of information leading to changed attitudes and the adoption of appropriate behaviours.

This basic model guided the initial development of community meetings during major fires. Experience of some of those interviewed who have been involved in planning and conducting such meetings over a number of years has led to the development of more sophisticated models of how community meetings work. However the above model might be considered as a simple statement of the underlying logic of community meetings that identifies the outcomes to be achieved as a result of particular activities that are assumed to lead to change through the transfer of information and advice in the meetings.

What are the components (activities and resources) of community meetings?

The component parts of community meetings are relatively simple but consist of more than just the obvious role of agency personnel presenting information. Meetings are best thought of as consisting of the following activities and resources:

- Content of information and advice presented by agency personnel – this information consists of information about the fire situation including fire spread and weather forecasts, agency fire management strategies and resourcing, advice about safety and preparation, and other information about local issues, services, and the roles of different organisations.
- Resources – in particular maps of fire spread and management strategies such as prescribed burns, containment lines, and publications such as *Living in the Bush* or information from other agencies about services.

- Questions and answers – the opportunity for those attending to raise issues and ask questions was a significant part of most meetings. Following the meetings there was often an opportunity for people to talk with the presenters or other agency personnel.
- Social interaction – the meetings created an opportunity, both before and after the meeting, for members of the community to gather and talk amongst themselves about a range of topics such as local issues, the meeting content, exchange information, and to catch up with friends and neighbours..

Although these four component parts were present in all the observed meetings and were also typically described in interviews with both agency personnel and community members, there was considerable variation in the components between meetings. For example the publications available at meetings differed from none being provided at some meetings to others where *Living in the Bush* was a promoted extensively, to others where locally specific publications were distributed. Similarly the amount of time devoted to questions and answers varied substantially as did the way questions were dealt with, varying from using them as a the basis for more detailed discussion to fairly perfunctory responses.

The interviews with agency personnel identified that the content of the meeting attempts to put forward an argument or logic that underpins the decision to stay and defend or leave early. Most people attend the meetings aware that there is a fire but with limited knowledge of the nature or implications of the threat. The fire is an unknown entity that leads to high levels of uncertainty, anxiety and stress amongst those who attend. The meetings appear to articulate a set of propositions that amount to an argument or logic that is intended to lead to particular behavioural responses. This argument can be summarised as follows:

Box 2: Logic of key messages presented at meetings

1. *The current fire situation and predicted weather mean the fire threat is significant, and*
2. *The fire is may/will spread and threaten this community at some time in the future, and*
3. *Agencies are undertaking various actions to deal with this threat, but*
4. *Agency capacity is limited in a fire of this scale agencies are unable to provide protection to every property ('don't expect a fire truck'), so*
5. *People need to take responsibility for dealing with this threat themselves, but*
6. *People need to have a realistic understanding of what is involved in these decisions, so*
7. *People need to think about their situation and what they will do if the fire threatens (stay or go), so*
8. *People need to plan and prepare as part of their decision, so that*
9. *They will be safe and property loss will be minimised.*

In practice the delivery of this argument varied considerably, both in its coherence, consistency and comprehensiveness, identifying a major source of potential variation in outcomes of the meetings.

Mechanisms – What potential causal processes might be activated by the activities and resources in community meetings?

Mechanisms provide an explanation of how the components of the program influence and shape people's reasoning leading to different choices and the use of individual and collective resources. As such mechanisms represent the causal pathways generated by a program and explain how the program components bring about particular outcomes. As part of a program theory, mechanisms provide plausible explanations of how the program works. Such explanations need to be tested in order to confirm their role in bringing about outcomes. Table 1 lists the potential mechanisms identified through the analysis of observational data and interviews.

Table 1: Plausible mechanisms generated by program components

Mechanism (nickname)	Causal process
Credibility ('We don't want spin') Presenter rapport	Use of local knowledge and expertise, and honest communication creates a sense of trust leading to greater receptiveness to information (M ₁) Presenters using open, sincere style, demonstrating commitment, being themselves, and use appropriate humour foster a personal relationship with participants leading to trust and greater

Mechanism (nickname)	Causal process
Psyching up (reality check)	receptiveness to information (M ₂) Clear, hard-hitting statements of the current situation and implications provide a 'reality check' and shake people out of lethargy or denial (M ₃)
Reassurance (empowerment)	Feedback about what people have done or are doing to deal with threat increases confidence, empowers people and encourages self reliance (M ₄)
Reassurance (comfort)	Information about the fire threat and agency actions that reduces the perceptions of the threat provides comfort and leads to increased confidence that people can cope thereby reduces stress and anxiety (M ₅)
Understanding	Information about the nature of the threat and how to deal with it increases understanding and provides a rationale for taking particular actions (M ₆)
Access to information (In the loop)	Information about the situation and forecasts creates a sense of being up to date about what is happening, making the unknown threat more known and thereby reduces uncertainty (M ₇)
Peer influence	Seeing and hearing how others in the community are feeling, what they are doing etc. leads to adoption of similar attitudes and behaviours (may be positive or negative e.g. perpetuating rumours) (M ₈)
Social pressure	A sense of obligation that people should attend meetings, participate and follow actions of others (M ₉)
Community identify (we're all in this together')	Shared experience of threat reduces sense of isolation and sense of being part of community increase confidence to deal with threat (M ₁₀)
Perceived agency cooperation (they've got their act together')	Perception that agencies are working together and presenting consistent messages increases confidence and receptiveness to messages (M ₁₁)
Scepticism	Lack of confidence and trust in agencies ability to deal with the threat or to act in best interests of community reduces receptiveness to information and advice (M ₁₂)
Diverting issues (bandwagon)	Focus on particular issue or raising issue in controversial manner diverts discussion and polarises opinion creating uncertainty and undermines trust (M ₁₃)
Avoidance (closing down tactics)	Presenters fearful of questions or discussion heading into perceived difficult issues attempt to narrow focus and to steer discussion onto safer ground leading to resentment and rejection of information (M ₁₄)
Over-dramatisation (cry wolf)	Perception that threat is being exaggerated leads to denial and rejection of advice (M ₁₅)
Didacticism (top down style)	Perception of presentation style as authoritarian and not facilitative reduces participation and discourages proactive community response (M ₁₆)
Contradictory, unclear messages	Inconsistent, contradictory or unclear messages lead to confusion and uncertainty about how to respond (M ₁₇)

Each of the mechanisms listed in table 1 offers a potential causal pathway explaining how particular program activities and resources can lead to particular outcomes. However, consistent with the realist perspective, mechanisms are contingent on the context. Whether a particular mechanism is generated depends on the circumstances. These context factors are critical to understanding how a program actually works.

Context – What circumstances influence the causal processes and outcomes?

Programs do not occur in a vacuum but are implemented by agency staff, using particular styles and modes of delivery. They attract particular participants, are implemented through organisations and occur in different locations and settings (Chen, 1990). These context factors influence whether particular mechanisms are generated and hence what outcomes are achieved. A wide range of potential context factors was identified in the analysis of the qualitative data as listed below:

- Characteristics of participants (C₁)
- Existing level of household preparedness (C₂)
- Presenter role and manner (C₃)
- Style and format of communication (C₄)
- Initiation and promotion of meeting (C₅)
- Meeting facilities and infrastructure (C₆)
- Integrated agencies (C₇)
- Nature of existing community-agency relations (C₈)
- Local brigade involvement in meeting (C₉)

- Level of fire threat (C₁₀)
- Local fire management issues (C₁₁)
- Perceptions of defendability of localities (C₁₂)
- Community capacity/social capital (C₁₃)
- Community leadership (C₁₄)

Since a program is almost always implemented in different circumstances, that is, a different configuration of context factors (C_{1-n}), the extent to which particular mechanisms are activated will vary and hence the pattern of outcomes will also vary.

Outcomes – What are the possible outcomes of community meetings?

The outcomes achieved in a particular community meeting will reflect the mechanisms activated in the particular circumstances of the meeting. Despite the apparent similarities between meetings, the above discussion of potential mechanisms and the range of possible context factors highlights that the outcomes achieved, or at least the extent to which they are achieved, are likely to vary. Analysis of the interviews and observations identified a range of possible outcomes of community meetings. These can be considered at three ‘levels’ – individuals and households, neighbourhoods, and community-agency.

The outcomes of community meetings at the level of individuals and households can be grouped into four broad categories intended to flow directly from the meeting:

- Changes in risk perception – involving lowering anxiety and stress by reducing uncertainty and making the ‘unknown’ threat ‘known.’ In this way people come to recognise the threat is real but also have a better understanding of its scale and the level of current threat (O₁).
- Understanding and attitude change – involving an understanding of what is being done but recognising that agency capacity is limited and that people need to recognise they need to take action and share the responsibility for dealing with the threat (O₂).
- Adoption of protective actions – involving understanding the options and their implications, deciding and implementing appropriate actions (O₃).
- Appropriate protective response – such that if the fire actually threatens households they respond appropriately and effectively, thereby protecting life and property (O₄)

This sequence of outcomes (O₁₋₄) represents an ideal hierarchy; which is assumed to contribute to the reduction in loss of life and property from the fire.

There are also other outcomes that could result from community meetings at the neighbourhood or broader community level:

- Shared understanding of the risk (O₅);
- Collective action involving people undertaking actions that went beyond individuals and households to the level of neighbourhoods or communities in a particular locality. These included sharing fire fighting resources, phone trees, training and practice sessions with equipment, and planning collective action to respond to the fire (O₆); and
- Increased sense of community and connectedness(O₇).

At the level of community-agency interaction the following possible outcomes were identified:

- Increased understanding of agency roles, responsibilities and services (O₈);
- Resolution of local issues such as road closures, green waste collection (O₉);
- Additional services to meet community needs such as free access to tip for disposal of green waste (O₁₀);
- Increased understanding of fire management strategies (O₁₁);
- Greater familiarity with agencies and appreciation of the work undertaken to manage the fire (O₁₂); and

- Stronger perceived community-agency partnerships and an expectation of less community concern following the fire (O₁₃).

Several unintended, undesirable outcomes were also identified as possibly resulting from meetings in some circumstances. These included:

- False sense of security that basic or relatively low level of preparation would be appropriate for the level of risk (O₁₄);
- Unrealistic expectations about the experience of defending a house during a fire (O₁₅);
- Dissatisfaction with the way fire was being managed (O₁₆); and
- Increased levels of anxiety due to lack of information about fire or fire management strategies (O₁₇).

Whilst some evidence of these outcomes (O₁₋₁₇) was identified from the interviews and observations they are described as *possible* outcomes. This reflects the tentative nature of realist evaluation theory building and that the full list of possible outcomes is not likely to occur at any meeting but will depend, as stated on the circumstances and the mechanisms activated.

Context-Mechanism-Outcome Configurations (CMOC) – How do community meetings work, for whom and in what circumstances, to bring about what outcomes?

The discussion of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes as outlined above provides the basis for a more refined program theory of community meetings, that is how a range of possible mechanism (M₁₋₁₇) are potentially activated in particular circumstances (C₁₋₁₄) resulting in patterns of outcomes (O₁₋₁₇).

It is now possible to put forward propositions about how particular combinations of mechanisms and contexts might operate to bring about certain intended or unintended outcomes. These propositions provide the basis for conducting empirical investigations to test the program theory of community meetings. Given the complexity of this, and indeed most social programs, it would not be possible to test all possible configurations, however some of those expected to contribute to the more significant outcomes could be the focus of further evaluations.

An example of a CMOC will illustrate how the above elaboration of context, mechanisms and outcomes can be used to propose a theory of how the program works. For example a key intended outcome of the meetings is to increase people's level of preparedness. Several mechanisms could contribute to achieving this outcome. It is likely that the credibility (M₁) and rapport (M₂) could be considered pre-conditions for an effective meeting and these mechanisms will be activated where conditions (C₃) a presenter role that encourages trust, and (C₄) a meeting style that is clear and engaging, operate. These conditions may also be conducive to 'reassurance as empowerment' (M₄) and understanding (M₅). However they are unlikely to operate productively unless the characteristics of the individual participant such as their perception of the risk, and their belief in the efficacy of protection measures (C₁) make them receptive to the messages. Other conditions such as already having a reasonable level of household preparation (C₂), where the threat is not imminent and there is an absence of notions that the area is 'undefendable' (C₁₂) may also be necessary to activate mechanisms of empowerment and understanding. This complex configuration of mechanisms and conditions influence the achievement of increased preparedness (O₃) that in itself underpins the higher level outcome of reduced losses (O₄).

Community response to meetings

The post fire survey provides some additional useful insights into how the community perceived the meetings. More than 6 in 10 people in the fire affected area (61%) reported attending at least one community meeting during the bushfires to get information. Of those who attended community meetings 44% attended all or most of the meetings held in their local area. Nearly 2/3 reported that they found the meetings very useful and another 25% found them somewhat useful. The main reasons given as to why the meetings were useful were that information updates, the advice on preparation and

planning, and the support and reassurance gained from the meetings. Of the 10% who indicated the meetings were not useful the main reason was that the information was inadequate.

Respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about the meetings. The results, shown in table 3 provide evidence to support the possible outcomes and mechanisms identified in the analysis presented above.

Table 3: Community response to the meetings

<i>Elements of meeting assessed</i>	<i>Respondents %</i>			<i>Respondents %</i>		
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree
Statements about meeting format and presenters						
Information presented was honest	1.7	4.4	61.4	32.5	6.1	93.6
Information from meetings was credible	1.9	5.4	59.1	33.5	7.3	92.6
Format of meetings worked well	2.2	6.0	62.2	29.6	8.2	91.8
Overall presenters at the meeting were well informed about the fire situation	3.3	6.8	49.9	40.0	10.1	89.9
Meetings provided an opportunity to get my questions and concerns answered	2.7	8.2	55.3	33.8	10.9	89.1
Statements about effects on attitudes and perceptions						
Being kept up to date about where the fire was spreading reassured me	4.7	9.1	53.7	32.5	13.8	86.2
Information about what Fire Services was doing was reassuring	3.3	12.6	55.8	28.3	15.9	84.1
After meetings I felt more confident to do things myself to deal with fire threat	3.0	19.9	50.4	26.6	22.9	77.0
Talking with friends and neighbours at meetings made me feel better about the situation	4.6	19.0	51.1	25.3	23.6	76.4
Community meetings helped me reduce the uncertainty I felt about the fires	6.0	22.3	47.3	24.5	28.3	71.8
Statements about learning from meetings						
Meetings helped me to know what to do to prepare my property	2.2	14.6	52.6	30.6	16.8	83.2
I learnt about bushfires and effects of the weather	2.8	20.4	54.0	22.9	23.2	76.9
I learnt about personal safety during a bushfire	2.7	21.9	51.6	23.8	24.6	75.4
Statements about understanding key messages						
In meetings it was made clear that the Fire Services could not guarantee a fire truck would be present to protect every property	1.9	4.1	42.0	51.9	6.0	93.9
After attending I was better informed about what to expect during a bushfire	2.5	13.9	52.7	30.9	16.4	83.6
Meetings helped me feel more mentally prepared to deal with the fires	5.2	18.1	50.8	25.8	23.3	76.6
Meetings helped me make a better plan of what to do if the fire threatened the area where I live	2.7	21.6	47.8	27.9	24.3	75.7
Meetings helped me decide whether I should stay and defend my property or leave early	6.6	26.3	35.1	32.1	32.9	67.2
Statements about community action and capacity						
Meetings helped develop a sense of community during the fires	1.6	7.1	45.2	46.0	8.7	91.2
As result of meetings people took actions to help each other during the fires	1.4	10.6	51.0	37.0	12.0	88.0

<i>Elements of meeting assessed</i>	<i>Respondents %</i>			<i>Respondents %</i>		
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Disagree	Agree
Statements about understanding and attitudes to agencies						
Fire Services and other agencies did a good job of dealing with these fires	2.5	9.6	44.9	43.0	12.1	87.9
Seeing different Govt Depts and agencies jointly presenting at meetings made me feel they were working together to deal with the fires	4.7	15.6	56.2	23.6	20.3	79.8
I learnt more about how Fire Services deal with major bushfires	2.8	20.4	55.5	21.3	23.2	76.8

The meetings also appear to have contributed to increasing the level of preparation activity by respondents. Of those who attended meetings 41% reported taking action as a result of attending the meeting. The action taken by a quarter of respondents (25%) who did act following a meeting, was cleaning up around the house, raking leaves, and clearing combustibles away. Over one in six respondents (18%) positioned water supplies like buckets, hoses and sprinklers around the house. The other actions taken by many respondents as a result of attending the community briefing during the fire included completing house preparation (15%) and enacting or improving on the fire plan (13%).

The community response to meetings as identified in the survey provides evidence to supports many of the findings of the interviews and observations in terms of the outcomes and mechanisms operating in the program. Further analysis of this data will be used to further refine the program theory of community meetings

Conclusion

Community meetings are likely to continue to be an important part of the ways agencies in Victoria seek to manage events, particularly campaign fires, in an attempt to deal more effectively with aspects of the bushfire problem. The study has identified a range of processes, conditions and possible outcomes resulting from community meetings. By adopting a realist evaluation approach to the development of a program theory the study has suggested that community meetings like all social programs can only be understood in the context in which they are implemented. Further it highlights that there is no formula that can be applied in terms of determining what makes an effective meeting, nor are there easy answers as to whether meetings will achieve similar outcomes or work in the same ways in different situations such as short duration bushfires or in other locations such as another state. The program theory of contexts-mechanisms-outcomes provides the basis for developing testable propositions that can further develop understanding of the role of community meetings during bushfires.

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