# *Communities, bushfires and how to 'measure' the former's preparedness for the latter…?*

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On the 6th September 2007, we shared some ideas about community, bushfires and evaluation practice for discussion at the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) Conference in Melbourne, with a particular focus on the idea of 'responsibility'/***'response - ability'*** (Frank Fisher, 2006), particularly ***'shared*** responsibility' and on how these ideas might be understood or worked with. The following article is a selection from our presentation, particularly as our article in NCQ (Goodman, Healey & Boulet 2007, 5(1): pp. 11-25) elicited several responses from the readership, one of which is included in this thematic section (pp. 16-20).

## *The context of the Conference presentation*

As readers may recall, our article referred to the role 'communities' (or systems of primary sociality) (may) play in bushfires; Helen Goodman works at RMIT University on an Evaluation Framework project funded by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre, aiming to assist the fire services by developing evaluation frameworks for their community education and awareness programs. The project is led by Gerry Elsworth and she works alongside two other researchers, Kaye Stevens and John Gilbert, the first also supervising two PhD students whose focus is on the evaluation of particular aspects of the delivery of community services. Fiona Dunstan is a Community Education Officer with the Country Fire Service (CFS) of South Australia and has been working at helping communities respond to the threat of fire for several years now. She also assists in supporting other community education officers in the SA and plays a large role in the collection of data about the activities of the community education officers of the CFS. Jacques Boulet was invited to respond to Helen's and Fiona's presentation and highlight dilemmas for both *community development practice* and *evaluation practice* in the particular climate of our times. He has been involved in tertiary education for over 25 years, has been engaged in community-based participatory research and evaluation for another ten years through the Borderlands Cooperative and is at present the Head of Graduate School at ***oases***, Studies in Integrative and Transformative Studies.

## *Policy context*

We (H. Goodman) first presented the policy context in which community education programs were being delivered, noting that it is widely stated that we are experiencing a paradigm shift in community safety – that we are moving from an emphasis on 'response' to the threat, to one on *'preparedness'* for the threat. One of the defining characteristics of this so-called paradigm shift, is the theme of *shared responsibility.*

A member of our research group, Kaye Stevens, carried out the mammoth task of scanning six Government reports and inquiries into bushfire, partly to *elicit the foundational principles which were seen to underlie the recommendations contained in these reports.* One 'foundational principle' throughout the reports was that *"community safety in bushfires is a* ***shared responsibility between householders, communities, agencies and governments."***

Fast-forwarding to another piece of research our project team and an external consultant have carried out - our 'concept mapping' study: we asked 86 individuals from 6 fire agencies and 5 community groups across the most fire prone parts of Australia the following question:

> *"Thinking as broadly as possible, generate statements that describe specific changes or improvements you think need to be achieved to make households and neighbourhoods safer from bushfires".*

This work generated 14 generic *'community safety'* clusters, two of which were *'Greater Community Ownership and Responsibility for Bushfire Safety'* and *'Agency-Interagency Responsibilities and Coordination.'* Under the first cluster, one statement made by a participant was that *"Community safety processes should be driven at a community level,"* and another statement appeared to be directed at the *'community'* needing to 'do more': *"People need to understand that they need to be self-sufficient in a fire and can't assume that the Fire Service and others will be there to help."* These statements provide a flavour of how participants gave different slants on the idea of responsibility in relation to *"community ownership and responsibility."*

Similarly, statements under *'agency responsibility'* also show these different emphases – some indicating what agencies should take up, such as knowing how to find individual properties in an emergency, and others insisting that they should share information across federal, state and local government boundaries and into the communities themselves.



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The idea of *responsibility* also emerged in my (H. Goodman's) interviews with Therese Pedler, a long term resident of the Lower Eyre Peninsula in South Australia and appointed as the Community Education staff officer to this region in 2006. The region experienced a devastating fire in January 2005, known as the Wangary fire, in which 9 people died and over 70 homes were destroyed (and which was at the centre of our previous article). Therese lives with her partner and two school-aged children in Tulka, a small town 10 kilometres from the main regional town, Port Lincoln. Tulka experienced a fire in 2001, in which many homes were destroyed but without loss of human life. Therese and her partner attempted to escape in boats moored near their home, which was thwarted by the depth of the mud at low tide.

In the year after this event, Therese was asked by the Fire Service to speak publicly about her experiences on at least three occasions in January 2002 in two other regions of SA, which she did in a voluntary role, with travel expenses paid. She learnt during this time that the Fire Service had developed a program called Community Fire Safe and were offering this in other parts of SA. The program provides a medium through which community members can take up a role in community safety, be supported by a community education officer in examining that role and provide an environment in which educative messages can be delivered and future action planned.

> *"That was how I started to learn about it … and what I learnt over the day or two that I was involved … I just thought that this program was the most amazing thing, like it actually empowered people on the ground, like they could work with each other …free of, or with the assistance of, or with the guidance of … an agency ... It was done informally, but it was done professionally, it was done accurately and there was heaps of technical information, they were given the support, but they decided what they wanted to do as a community, and I'm thinking … this is the best thing since sliced bread, like how come this is not compulsory?"* (from the interview)

Therese returned from this speaking tour determined to see if her community would be interested in starting a Community Fire Safe group; other life events took over and in January 2005, the Wangary fire occurred. She said: *"I thought: right, that's it, no more excuses…So at that time I picked up the phone and got it organised... All I knew that there was this thing that groups could work together and we needed it."* She told me (H. Goodman) that a Fire Service Community Education worker arrived from another part of SA, to start the process: *"David gave us out some sort of blank household plans to work with and stuff like that and then basically said - the ball's in your court as a community."* The group formed and has continued to be an active community group, now convened by another resident of Tulka since Therese's appointment to her role as Community Education Officer with the Fire Service.

One issue which emerges from the interviews with Therese and from observation of the community groups she works with is how she *creates space* for community members to take up their roles, or, indeed, *take up their responsibility* as they see it, within the context of the Community Fire Safe program. The idea of *'creating space'* also comes through too in discussions with the Community Education Program Manager, John Gawen. In describing some of his ideas about how he works with groups, he notes that *"What's more powerful is to get their peers, their friends, and even family members that they respect the most …to influence their decision."* He describes experiences talking to mothers with children whose immediate response to the idea of an impending fire is often to say they would flee. People fleeing in cars is a major cause of death in bushfires and John continues: *"Mothers with kids say 'we're just going, we're just going', but that's until they sit down with another group of mothers and they toss it about and they provide other solutions to that issue."* Included in some of the solutions they come up with might be agreeing to keep each other company, to shelter in one of the others' house, sharing resources.

We can only pick up one strand of the complex work done by these community educators, but it is an important one and one which can be overrun in some organisational climates – it's that element of their practice which recognises *that some members of a community can and will take up aspects of responsibility for community safety.* The short history of researching community involvement in preparing for fire has, to date, in the main focused on *tangible measures of change at the individual household level,* such as whether there is measurable evidence a householder has prepared his or her home according to certain criteria, such as reducing foliage abutting walls of a home. Clearly, these measures are critically important and there is good science to show that property preparedness can protect people and properties in the face of a fire. We are, however, at risk of just measuring what is measurable if we only concentrate on these more tangible indicators, whilst being *considerably less clear on what it means for community members to take ownership and drive the change, or what it means to share the responsibility.*

The words of one senior fire officer epitomise this dilemma; in talking about why an emergency agency known to him did not pursue the idea of facilitating community groups to work together on preparing for the threat of fire, he stated that after 6 years of operating these community-based groups, the program managers looked at the programs to see how active they were and what they had achieved. They found that in many areas they had ceased to operate and where they were still in existence, *they were not seen to be doing much and hadn't addressed what the emergency service wanted*



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*them to address, which was to clean up around their homes on a collective basis.* We don't know if the program managers looked into what else those community members who were meeting in groups might have been doing, but it does point to the dilemma of *directing community groups to do what the program managers may value the most, which in this case was cleaning up around homes.*

What else might those groups have been doing? The following description of Fiona Dunstan's recent interaction with a group on Kangaroo Island may give us some insight into other functions that group members might perform for each other and how these functions may form part of the less visible fabric of community safety.

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The community education officer's role with CFS in South Australia takes her all over the state, either supporting existing facilitators or presenting her own sessions on Bushfire Awareness and Preparation. One of the locations she visits is Kangaroo Island, a very beautiful part of the world, 110 K from Adelaide and a major tourist destination for South Australia. Next to Tasmania and Melville Island, it is the third largest island off the Australian coast. One-third of its land is national or conservation park and it has a population of around 4500; the key industry is agriculture, followed by tourism, particularly nature-based tourism.

The island poses some interesting challenges from a fire education point of view, given it experiences a high number of electrical storms and usually has several ignitions of potentially hazardous fire each year from lightning strikes. The focus of this section is on a particular group she has worked with, for its relevance to our thinking about ways in which we can conceptualise community responsibility in matters of community safety and the threat of fire.

One of the several roles which community education officers perform is to establish, support and facilitate groups of households living in high fire risk areas and who are willing to come forward and meet in a group setting over either a set or an open-ended number of occasions, to work toward improving their preparedness for fire. Such facilitated support, however, is not always available, in part because staffing resources cannot stretch across every high fire risk part of the state and in part because another of their roles is to recognise and work with groups which already exist in the community, whose members seek some educative input from them, but on whose 'groupness' they rely to provide the setting and the energy to further their task of seeking to prepare themselves for a fire event. The following presents one such group.

Because there's no community education presence on Kangaroo Island (KI) itself, the service has to be strategic about making the most of any educative opportunity which it creates or which it is asked to respond to. The opportunity for that occurred recently; an advertisement was placed in the local paper on KI that the officer would be visiting the island. This was noted by one or more members of this particular group and she was asked if she would attend one of their now quarterly meetings. *"I did meet with them, and interspersed with delivering some of our usual 'fire safe' content knowledge which we have built up as a state group together with others around Australia with expertise in this area, I also sought to understand something about them, given their value to me as a fire safe educator. This value was explicitly in the fact that they were already a group, they sought me out, they set up the time and place and other requirements of such a meeting, and my job was to attend and interact as well I could with the knowledge I had and making use of their strengths. Those of you who do community work will readily see the reduction in workload for the facilitator which this provides, not to mention the potential richness of the group dynamics which I will come onto shortly."* (from Fiona's notes presented to the workshop).

The strengths of this group were considerable; they had begun to meet more than two years ago as a group under the auspices of a program funded by an agricultural industry organisation to improve a certain aspect of their agricultural endeavour, aimed at increasing the productivity of their business and that of the state and nation. While the group outcomes as seen by the funder of agricultural program were not explored, one of the things they were asked to do was to select projects they wanted to work on over a specified time and some of these were seen to be somewhat removed from the goals of the funder. For whatever reason, that funding dried up but what had occurred was that they were now a group and were actively engaged in working out with each other how they could remain self-sustaining and of use to each other. The group's sustainability and its current operations would – most likely - not be known to the original funder as we know that many such programs are focused on relatively short-term cycles of activity, compared with the longer-term cycles which would have to be observed *if looking for community level change*. As well, where goals are *economically* driven, such as the need to demonstrate a productivity return or increased market value for a product, they mostly fail to attend to the *social underpinnings* of *'productivity'*, leaving a rather skewed picture of 'outcomes'. I don't know how the project was seen by the funder, but *"all I knew was that I could benefit from aspects of what had occurred well outside the time frame of 'their' project."*

This group of women are assisted by the facilitator who was employed when it was an agricultural group and she has elected to stay on in a voluntary capacity; they have had some challenging discussions about their current goals, their future, where they should put their energy, how they could preserve the bonds that they built up in knowing each other and seeing that they can care for each other in a variety of ways, and how they can stay open enough to share some of what they can be for each other, with those outside the group. They have come up with an interesting approach to this, including having open meetings with speakers. [This is an interesting and complex issue which we need to understand more about, namely how to understand what a group thinks it needs to survive and how much we can expect groups to take on the agendas which we are funded to see occur. This is too big a topic for now]. Other than preparing for fire, there were two other topics which they mentioned that they might try and explore together: one had to do with issues of health and the other about human relations and understanding particular personality types.



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The group members had already been able to be of assistance to each other in offering mutual support during the drought they had been experiencing. They had had an experience last fire season, developing considerable anxiety about not being able to be in touch with one of their members, due to phone lines being down and other barriers put up and therefore not being sure that she was aware of the impending threat. The group members were both mothers and grandmothers and some had partners involved in the CFS. Due to this, they were aware that the chances were high that their partners may be on duty in their volunteer roles in the event of a fire and the members would be on their properties on their own. This dilemma had been one of the triggers for them to invite the education officer to talk with them. They also had the (insider) knowledge that response times from their volunteer brigade would be different from that one might expect in an urban environment.

There's no time to discuss the content of the education I (Fiona) was able to impart; suffice it to say that there was a strong sense of *mutuality* in what was explored with them as to what they might attend to in relation to fire preparedness and how some of their strengths could be included in what I was able to impart. We spent two and a half hours together, talking about fire safety, walking around the property of the person who had hosted the meeting. In terms of their group's strengths, they displayed a significant degree of comfort with each other, which led to a willingness to be open with each other and allowed us to get to key concerns quite readily. This openness led to a ready sharing of the experiences they had with fire, making this knowledge available to each other and allowing me to add weight to some of their stories from other experiences and knowledge about fire. One example of this was offered by one member, who shared her belief that she always expected a fire to come from a particular direction and she had based some of her preparedness on this belief. They also readily shared their experiences of having multiple loyalties in a fire event, to each other, other people close to them and their own families and properties. These experiences led to an informative discussion about the unpredictability of fire and what this means in terms of preparing for such an event. *"It seemed to me that this discussion was enhanced by what I observed to be a respect for each other's experiences, a keenness to hear each other's perspectives, and they could actually also visualise what was being discussed as they knew each other's properties."*

One other of the several matters which were discussed was the issue of household and farm insurance and what they had learnt about variability in insurance policies; those with more experience encouraged those with less to examine the detail of their policies to ensure they understood what the terms were, for example, small details as to whether *'cover for fencing'*, a key issue in agricultural properties, included the labour required to put up the fence.

*"In summary, I hope I have demonstrated the enormous value of groups such as this one for my task of needing to impart ideas and practices about fire preparedness to the community, with the goal of building resilience to the threat of fire. The ease with which I was able to enter their group, the use to which I could put their pre-existing strong bonds, and impart issues which I felt confident could continue to be raised and discussed, all pointed to the enormous importance of groups like this for overall community safety. I have little doubt that the knowledge generated from an evaluation of the agricultural program which first seeded the beginning of this group, if ever it was evaluated, would not have been able to encompass the benefits I saw in their ongoing shared concern for each other and also their desire for ongoing learning."*

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We concluded our presentation with some reflections on *responsibility/response-ability, sustainability, community* and *appropriate evaluation approaches and frameworks,* capable of grasping the real meaning of 'community responsibility' and capable of adding onto the already existing knowledge and experience of those who live with the danger of bushfires.

Primarily understood within a (Western) legal-formal context, *'responsibility'* is mostly constructed as *'private'* and *individualised;* it puts an 'onus' on the person (or 'body') who is said to 'be' responsible and if that person does not carry the responsibility 'assigned' to him/her, s-he would be 'liable' for the consequences – and litigation would not be too far away. It figures largely in contractual arrangements – including employment and sales contracts and is otherwise regularly used as an almost moral category. It is no surprise, then, that 'responsibility' has regular appearances in the context of litigation and 'claims' disputes – not the least when conservative governments challenge claims their citizens (think they) have on public services and (welfare) state supports, *'mutual obligation'* carrying a meaning rather close to the notion of responsibility.

'Responsibility', therefore, squarely falls into the contested space between 'individual' or 'personal' and social' or 'societal' or 'collective' agency – which has become a rather uncomfortable space in an environment where economic rationalism, neo-liberalism and utilitarianism have invaded and dominate most 'social/public' spaces and have been questioning or denying the role of the state as the major embodiment of the 'social' (leaving only that other 'building block' of society, the nuclear family…). Outsourcing, so-called public-private 'partnerships', all manner of privatisations have clearly changed if not eroded the link between state and citizen and in the face of the great ecological changes, the roles – responsibilities - of both are in need of re-thinking, to say the least.

In our previous article in this journal we suggested the need to return to some very basic reflections on those relationships, using the notions of 'primary' and 'secondary sociality' and proposed ideas around the 'subsidiarity principle' as grounding the relationship between state and citizens. We obviously don't want to repeat what we said there; suffice it to quote this:

> *'the importance of the **subsidiarity principle** which … would assist in framing other relationships between the 'systems' of primary and secondary*



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*sociality, especially in addressing more fundamentally the bureaucratic and increasing centralising tendencies of (central and state, but, given their growing size and scale, also of local) governments and their associated institutions of secondary sociality.'*

With Frank Fisher (2006)[1], we therefore would like to change our notion of responsibility to 'response-ability' – so try and figure out how we can become more able to respond to the expectations of our environment, to start to understand what adaptations the environment expects from us so that both we and the environment may become more 'able to sustain one another'. But that would require a deeper sense of participation on our behalf and, obviously, another way of 'assessing' and 'evaluating' whether and how much we have achieved such 'abilities' (Goff, 2007)[2]

Another theme we introduced was the meaning of the meanwhile ubiquitous notion of *'community;'* it must be the most over-used and under-defined/mis-understood concept in the Anglo-Saxon (quite imperial) linguistic realm. Again, we refer to other discussions held in this journal, some equally contributed to by the present authors (NCQ 4(3) on Volunteering). Linking the rather ephemeral understanding of community as a *'collective of some description'* to what we previously indicated about 'responsibility' and its uses, it is salutary to remember that in many western courts 'collectives' have no 'standing' – except through 'class actions.' Corporations – or 'Companies', who replaced communities as mediating structures between individuals and the ruling class - are legally considered to be 'natural persons' with 'limited' *responsibility* for what they own and for what happens through the impact on the people and the ecology by what they own – and with considerable economic and political benefit for them (and we really should not have to give examples of this, should we? Or just one: Hardie…)

Hence the paradox of the expectation on 'communities' to become 'responsible' and the ongoing erosion of their power, the lack of subsidiary resourcing of and for the development of their capacities, the ongoing centralisation of political and economic decision-making *away from* communities and the individualised resistance against community by persons who insist on their 'private rights' against any imposition of social responsibility. Whilst notions of *social capital* and *community capacity* have vigorously entered the debates – if not the practices - surrounding 'community,' the evaluative 'measurements' of their growth, their emergence, their loss still have a long way to go before they catch up with the every-day vocabularies and turns-of-phrases of people-on-the-ground. Indeed, all-too-often the evaluative assessments and the terminologies in which they are cast remain deductively wedded to the centralised intentions of departmental planners, of remote academics and off-the-shelf how-to-do manuals. And the formalisms associated with litigation-avoidance, with fear of transgressing departmental 'responsibility', with avoiding to establish precedents potentially leading to uncontrollable further expenditure – they all conspire against valuing – and evaluating – what is really 'going on' in communities and against devolving 'responsibility' in a shared and mutually strengthening manner (which, of course, would equally be subject to rather interesting evaluations…).

The traditions inherent in evaluation, inherited from its positivist and utilitarian origins both in academic and in the public-political uses of the craft, still leave it very much 'outcomes' (if not 'output') focused, leave it with a preference for 'hard' and 'objective' data and for 'summative' approaches to the evaluation process. What we have been attempting to demonstrate in our work have been participatory approaches, grafted right into the *formative* stages of community programs (in this case, community fire prevention and fire preparedness programs), interested as much in what it takes to *'be'* community as in what it takes to 'prevent fatalities and damage to private property' in bushfires – because we happen to believe that the two overlap to a great extent. We're, therefore, using *conversations* – both in creating them and in becoming part of the existing ones - and are interested in narratives, rather than in pre-prepared questionnaires to be filled in by individual householders… In short, as we strongly believe in the need to (re-)build communities for everyone's social, personal and physical well-being, we also believe in the capacity of such communities to become empowered and indeed, 'en-abled' to live in greater harmony with their environment and with themselves in it.

Indeed - and finally, - our understanding of *'sustainability'* has direct relevance for our approach to evaluation of fire prevention and preparedness programs. We strongly argue for the craft of evaluation to further evolve from its relatively isolated 'in/output', 'outcome', 'impact' and 'process' foci; to continue to expand its repertoire from *summative,* via *formative* and *developmental,* onto *'sustainability'* evaluation approaches. 'Sustainability evaluation' goes beyond the usual resources- and systems-based notions of sustainability and returns it determinedly back into a *'question of a human 'ability',* including the levels of people's *awareness* about their ways of living, the quality of their *relationships,* their *practices* and the *cultural context* in which and through which they give their lives meaning.

Rather than an over-determined focus on the necessary *techno-resources* to prevent (the spread of) bushfires and to avoid fatalities, rather than a (over-)reliance on formal *systems* – especially those associated with and controlled by central governmental departments – we are arguing that both *the promotion of people's* – individuals' and communities' – *ability to sustain* and the *appropriate ways of evaluating the further development of this ability* should become the central principles in future approaches to community bushfire safety. And we are arguing that we have still a very long way to getting there…

## Endnotes

1 Fisher, F. 2006 *Response Ability* Vista Publications, Elsternwick (Vic)

2 Goff, S. 2006 *Living, Knowing and Writing the value of Participatory Practice to Sustainability* Unpubl. Dissertation, University of Western Sydney.



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