

Generational gaps

Patrick Lagadec talks to Anita Chauvin about resilience after trauma, exploring how attitudes to, and preparedness for, disaster vary between the generations

ANITA CHAUVIN HAS BEEN researching resilience for many years now – resilience after trauma – of the individual, of communities and of different cultural groups.

Patrick Lagadec: You highlight differences between generations, which appeared to be widening fault lines, but you also speak of what the generations might learn from each other, including those of us who design the responses to disaster. Australia has experienced some great challenges, with flooding and the Category 5 Cyclone Yasi – what are the changes you are seeing in Australia?

Anita Chauvin: Yes, there are challenges being posed to disaster response by Generation Y (born after 1982), a generation characterised by a deep distrust of publicity and hype; people who will base most of their decisions on the influence of their own peers, who, in a crisis will skim the net and confer with peers. They reach their own conclusions on the best way forward, for example: whether to evacuate, where to go. In Australia during fire and flooding events in early 2010, communities were mobilising themselves through rapid-fire messages on Twitter and Facebook. In the end, the organisers and responders were going to these social networking sites to keep their finger on the pulse, to track the movement of fire, flood and evacuating communities.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

What absolutely impressed me with recent flooding and cyclone responses, was that government had embraced the modelling of this community and engaged its members in communication about these floods and cyclones, the categories of risk, evacuation strategies and shifting parameters of safety, using these very social networking mechanisms. In what I think may be a first for Australia, Government adopted this new dynamism of communication, which created a capacity for faster intelligence gathering and information updating between government and the public ...and the media.

PL: This is probably very difficult to integrate into the command and control



approach, does it demand innovative vision?

AC: It reflected an interesting movement between the comfort zone of a command and control model and the flexibility required to accept and process information from multiple grass roots and official sources. Veracity for decision-making required a rapid triangulation of information through a collaboration of lines of authority, eg the police and fire and emergency services, with members of the public, non-government organisations and the media. And certainly one has to manage the risk of misinformation. But, for those willing to ride

The City of Rockhampton was cut off by floods: Anita Chauvin says older members of communities in Australia did not expect help, even aged pensioners in genuine dire straits tried to turn down offers of financial grants, saying they that just a few dollars for some food would carry them through (see page 12 for full report)

Chris Ison / Morning Bulletin

FROM THE UNKNOWN

Spearheaded by CRJ Editorial Advisory Board Member Dr Patrick Lagadec, who is Director of Research at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, France, this series is devoted to exploring the challenging issues characterised by 21st Century crises. The aim is to go beyond our usual mindsets, helping to clarify pitfalls, redesigning the new landscapes that must be considered and showcasing creative moves that will help to feed positive dynamics. The goal is not to find ready-made solutions, but to stimulate and feed new ideas, new approaches and new methods of thinking

the wave of change, information management entered a new era where a dynamic partnership was being forged between suppliers of disaster management and recovery services and the general public. Because they were engaged, the public and particularly young people, Gen Y, whose natural lines for sourcing trusted information lie in electronic media and messaging with their peers, were willing to listen and respond to advice on safe movement.

The young have great strengths to offer us in making the step up to managing multidimensional complexity in information gathering and synthesis, which could support more responsive movement of people, resources and service delivery. They bring us a high speed multi-tasking dynamism in information gathering and communication

from which we can benefit. In turn, however, I think there is an opportunity for them to learn a thing or two about endurance and self-reliance from the stoic elders in their communities.

PL: And you discovered other unknowns, and surprises?

AC: In early 2010 we found one of the downsides of being young in a developed country today appears to be some level



of habituation to being a passive recipient of services. Perhaps this could be down to the cushioning of several generations of peace and relative affluence and very effective welfare systems.

In 2010 in Australia, we began to find communities which had traditionally prepared

would have been stocked with tinned goods, such as grains and pulses. In recent years, though, in major flooding, with substantial property damage and rebuilding, communities have received emergency assistance grants and many assumed receipt of funds as automatic, rather than building some level of self-reliance. They had become less resilient, less likely to prepare for predictable seasonal flooding.

What stood out at the time, though, was a generational divide. Field workers described that the older members of the community did not expect help, even aged pensioners in genuine dire straits tried to turn down offers of financial grants, saying that just a few dollars for some food would carry them through.

Perhaps the most profound example of this resilience, an assumed normality of self-reliance, was an older woman who was found in her home giving herself dialysis manually. She did not think it was necessary to have emergency assistance and had an attitude of: "Oh, I'll be fine." The older members of the community were the most ready to fend for themselves and to offer to assist others in clearing debris, repair and reconstruction.

PL: Resilience is a quality that we are all familiar with, but is it easily defined?

AC: In Australia we have had a National Mental Health Strategy in place since 2000, for promotion of mental health, prevention and early intervention of distress and disorder. This has been based on identifying and working with the risk and protective factors for individuals, families and communities, which may contribute to or diminish their resilience. Now this is being built on in disaster management, using strategies which build protective factors as a vehicle for growing resilience in services, businesses, property and infrastructure in order to be better prepared.

Local councils are mobilising communities in preparation events, street clean-ups,



Since 1996, Anita Chauvin has been researching individuals and populations who have survived great adversity and gone on to flourish, in order to identify what elements have contributed towards their greater resilience in the face of trauma. Her doctoral studies in the School of Medicine, University of Queensland, explore cross cultural comparisons of western interventions for trauma with Tibetan Buddhism as a psychological framework, including the impact of different meditations on the neurophysiology of trauma. Her work on identifying the protective factors which contribute to greater resilience has contributed to development of health and social services across a range of sectors over the last 20 years, building infrastructure, policy frameworks, programmes and services for disaster recovery, HIV/AIDS and in mental health, as well as programmes and services for young people from backgrounds of prolonged trauma. This work has also contributed to human rights policy debate on the needs of refugees and asylum seekers

supportive relationships and preparedness.

The response to recent flooding and cyclones has brought out wonderful community spirit, a great generosity and resilience.

PL: Perhaps there will be an opportunity for the younger and older members of the community to come together and learn from each other when rebuilding and preparing for the future? It sounds like some disaster management systems have already learnt a new responsive way of communicating and engaging. The contrast between the self-reliance of an older generation and the younger has challenged us all to consider – when are support services an important safety net and when do they cross a line to create dependency and increase risks?

The complexities of being prepared for and responding to disasters continue to emerge, an interesting balancing act.

AC: Indeed, we can no longer follow a set menu, we need to be responsive to change, innovative, open to adaptation, but without losing the established strengths of communities and systems.

For those willing to ride the wave of change, information management entered a new era where a dynamic partnership was being forged between suppliers of disaster management recovery services and the general public

well for seasonal cyclones and flooding, were less prepared and assuming receipt of financial assistance after much less impact from extreme weather, than in the past. For example, after cyclones caused loss of power for up to a week in some places, thousands of people applied for emergency assistance, largely because of loss of perishable foods. In the past, their cupboards

neighbourhood centre information nights and are encouraging people to prepare to meet their own needs for food and medicine, to have evacuation bags packed and community plans in place. Working with formal and natural leaders from across geographic, cultural and generational groups, these events are being used to strengthen community networks, build