Community Engagement Post-Disaster: Case Studies of the 2006 Matata Debris Flow and 2010 Darfield Earthquake, New Zealand

Susan Collins, *Joint Centre for Disaster Research, Massey University*

Bruce Glavovic, *Massey University*

Sarb Johal, *Joint Centre for Disaster Research, Massey University*

David Johnston, *Joint Centre for Disaster Research, Massey University/GNS Science*

Engagement and participation are terms used to describe important processes in a democratic society. However, the definition and understanding of these terms is broad and varied. In a disaster context, community engagement and participation are recognised as important processes to support individual and community recovery. What these terms mean, who is responsible for leading engagement, and the processes that are to be used, are important issues that need to be clarified at the onset of recovery, if not before. Despite this, there are often barriers to community members being involved in the recovery process as active and valued participants. These include governance structures that do not adequately recognise the spectrum of community engagement and the power dynamics of information sharing and decision-making. This article discusses two New Zealand case studies where engagement activities were put in place to contribute to the communities' post disaster recovery.

Engagement is a construct that has different meanings in different contexts (Son & Lin, 2008). It is often used to describe a range of actions that take place between people and organisations. It can include a variety of approaches and styles of participation, such as one-way communication or information delivery, consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making, and empowered action in informal groups or formal partnerships. These terms also take on different meanings depending on the context (Goodman et al., 1998; Pretty, 1998). Hudson and Bruckman (2004) make the distinction that engagement only requires active mental attention, while participation requires the listeners to contribute to and shape the discussion. In a preliminary findings report by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), it was identified that the term engagement meant different things to different people across a range of countries. They felt that "to facilitate cross-cultural communication it may be useful to provide functional descriptions of a process rather than assuming a shared understanding of terminology" (Offenbacker, Springer, & Sprain, 2009, p. 5).

The word 'community' is also a very broad term used to define groups of people, whether they are stakeholders, interest groups, or citizen groups. A community may be a geographic location (community of place), a community of similar interest (community of practice), or a community of affiliation or identity (such as an industry or sporting club). The combined terms *community* and *engagement* describe a process of diversely defined groups working together. On the State of Victoria's Department of Sustainability and Environment Website, *Introduction to Engagement,* the " linking of the term 'community' to 'engagement' serves to broaden the scope, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure consideration is made of the diversity that exists within any community".

Research has shown that utilising a community engagement approach prior to a disaster as an effective way

to facilitate and implement resiliency-building activities with community members in a neighbourhood context (Norris et al., 2007). This involves a range of different types of participation including the involvement of members of the community in planning preparedness strategies for their community in response to a disaster (Patterson, Weil, & Patel, 2009; Skanavis, Koumouris, & Petreniti, 2005). Using an engagement approach that builds on existing community knowledge and that creates a sense of ownership in the community can result in communities that are more resilient and prepared for disasters and are able to recover more quickly from disasters (Jessamay & Turner, 2003; Norris & Stevens, 2007; Norris et al., 2007). This process can have the additional value of increasing the skills of members of the community and ensuring knowledge stays in the community, with community members themselves building capacity (Spee, 2008).

Community engagement is identified as an important component in achieving improved psychosocial recovery for individuals and groups post-disaster (Attree et al., 2011). The use of a range of engagement approaches between agencies and communities ensures that information flows out to the local public, and that communities are able to provide feedback, are listened to, and are active participants in their recovery, providing them with a sense of purpose and control over their situation (Morrow, 1999). Effective community engagement also assists in creating a relationship of trust between agency representatives and members of affected locations (Goodman et al., 1998). Feeling included in decision-making, being listened to, and having information are key elements to improving individual and community well-being (Paton, 2008). The benefits for agencies are actions that are potentially more effective, sustainable and appropriate (Paton, 2008). These are also more likely to be supported by the communities they are intended to help. The more people are informed, are involved in the decision making process, and feel valued and contribute in meaningful ways, the

better their recovery and the recovery of their communities (Tierney, 2009).

There is a limited body of literature that focuses on community engagement models used in the response and recovery phases of a disaster. However, there are a number of ways of organising and discussing public participation. One of the earliest models of public participation in government decision-making processes was Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. This model characterised the various interactions between citizens and government. Many of the subsequent methods of organising participation stem from and complement this original model. For example, Pretty and Hine (1999) have developed a typology of 'participation' to differentiate actions according to the level of power that agencies wish to devolve to participants in determining outcomes and actions. More recently, the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (Inform-Consult-Involve-Collaborate-Empower) is referred to as a comprehensive approach to participatory actions. Other tools and techniques that can actively include community contributions to promote a community engagement process include Asset Based Community Development and Participatory Appraisal approaches (Israel, Checkoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman, 1994).

All of these models identify a range of differing types of participation. In a recovery environment, it is essential that a range of methods is used due to the complexity of the recovery environment, making it difficult but important to involve communities. A wide range of participation methods are more likely to increase the number of people engaging with the decision making processes. This can range from public hearings, citizen advisory committees to emergent citizen groups (Skanavis et al., 2005; Rich, Edelstein, Hallman, & Wandersman, 1995). However, it is just as important to know which of these 'tools' to use and how to use them at the most appropriate times.

Engagement strategies that use an interactive, participatory approach to a disaster context are more likely to facilitate a community-led approach to recovery, enquire about pre-event community dynamics, map existing social structures, identify existing strengths and ways of communicating and use these as the foundations for engagement and community building moving forward (Landau & Saul, 2004; Morrow, 1999; Rich et al., 1995; Patterson et al., 2009; Skanavis et al., 2005). It is important to recognise that often these types of interventions require 'outside' encouragement and support, and, in most cases, facilitation (Landau & Saul, 2004). Laverack and Labonte (2000) propose a framework that identifies and offers a pathway to accommodate community empowerment goals with more traditional top-down approaches using participatory strategies.

There is an inherent power imbalance in the dynamics of disaster response and recovery (Waugh & Streib, 2006). Actions of control and decision-making are crucial, especially in the initial response; people need to see decisions being made and services provided to meet their basic needs of safety, food and shelter. It is also important to achieve a balance with affected communities being actively involved in their recovery as well as receiving support from services (Maton, 2008). Instead, the focus of the recovery process is often about efficiency of actions. It is common for the government officials appointed to recovery structures to work from a client delivery model, where people are viewed as 'needing' to be helped, perpetuating a dis-enabling environment where citizens are covertly encouraged to remain passive clients of government (Vigoda, 2002). This can be exacerbated by policymakers who adopt the top-down style so completely that it takes considerable persuasion to get them to re-orientate their focus back to the normal policy procedures of consulting all involved (Rosenthal et al., 1994). Consequently, the public may lack sufficient freedom of voice and influence (Boin, 2008; Landau & Saul, 2004). Engagement processes need to

be designed and facilitated in a way that recognises this tension between the pressure on government to assume control versus the imperative to create opportunities for authentic community engagement in the recovery.

Empowerment is a complex term that must be clearly defined (Rich et al., 1995). It is often taken to mean any action that provides a community with the final decision-making power (IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum), and, as illustrated by Israel et al. (1994), empowerment can refer to an individual level construct or a multi-level community concept. It can assume the 'granting' of power or permission, or it can be used to describe the enabling of others to strengthen skills and resources to gain power over their lives. However, it was stated in the Community Engagement Handbook for Local Government in South Australia that, "the only decision making power which is placed in the hands of the public is that of electing Council Members every 4 years … delegations for decision making cannot be made to the public" (Chappell, 2008, p. 1). Engagement in the Handbook was defined as, "providing opportunities and resources for communities to contribute to solutions by valuing local talents and skills and acknowledging their capacity to be decision makers in their own lives", and not in the decision-making process of Local Government (Chappell, 2008, p. 2). Marti-Costa and Serrano-Garcia (cited in Goodman et al., 1998) note, though, that grassroots participation is a key aspect for defining and resolving needs, otherwise community empowerment is not possible and needs assessments can become a process of social control.

If empowerment is truly the objective, it is important for resources and support to be provided to communities in order to enable them to develop processes and systems to respond to and contribute to the formal and informal recovery processes. These resources must also be flexible in nature: funding opportunities that have tight rules of use can be unhelpful and counterproductive to achieving a state

of empowerment (Arnstein, 1969; Porter, Smyth, & Sweetman, 1999).

The recovery environment adds an additional dimension to community participation and engagement planning and activity. Individuals and communities that are affected by a disaster are likely to experience states of stress, distress and disorganisation to various degrees, sometimes extreme (Gordon, 2008; Spee, 2008). While empowerment is a desired stage for a community to achieve in disaster recovery, the ability for members of a community to respond at any particular moment in time needs to be understood and acknowledged (Ward, Becker, & Johnston, 2008). There can be challenges and unrealistic expectations in getting communities to participate in complex decision-making in times of stress immediately after a disaster event. "This may be alleviated by ensuring that communities are participating in similar participatory decision-making processes prior to an event, so that the process and structure is familiar to them, thus putting them in a more recognisable and less stressful environment after a disaster" (Johnston, Becker, & Paton, in press). Whilst many people suffer trauma, stress, and related conditions, it is also clear that many people rise up and embrace new opportunities to build and restore their communities (Solnit, 2009). Hence, there is an imperative to facilitate and foster community involvement in the recovery process; and highlights the importance of recovery structures that are inclusive and understanding of the community's well-being throughout the recovery phases, and recognises that this well-being may not necessarily increase uniformly over time.

This article draws upon two case studies that describe engagement activities in communities post disaster. The principle methods of data collection for this study were semi-structured interviews that were undertaken in 2006 with key agencies and individuals involved in the response to the Matata event, formal and informal feedback from key agencies and individuals involved in the Darfield event, observations from the field, and comprehensive analysis

of papers, reports and articles. A systematic content analysis of the themes arising from this material was undertaken. This article is written from a Western values position and influenced by the principles of community psychology. Thus, the terminology used may not translate across cultures or professional disciplines.

Case Study 1: Matata Flooding and Debris Flow

Matata is a small coastal community based in the Bay of Plenty, New Zealand. It has a population of approximately 800 people with a low socio-economic deprivation index of 9[1]. The community is 30 minutes travel by car to the nearest town (Whakatane) and has limited access to most services. On 18 May 2005, a band of extremely heavy rain passed over the catchments behind the community of Matata. During a 90-minute period, 124 millimetres rainfall was recorded. A total of 300 mm rainfall was recorded over a 24-hour period. This created a flood event estimated to occur on average about once every 100-1000 years (Davies, 2005). The flooding also triggered a significant debris flow with boulders up to 7 metres high travelling through the region. This resulted in major damage to the township of Matata and flooding in surrounding areas. Approximately 750,000 cubic metres of debris was deposited in and around Matata, resulting in the evacuation of 538 people, the destruction of 27 homes, and damage to a further 87 properties (Spee, 2008). Remarkably, no one was killed or injured.

A formal response and recovery structure was established, contributed to by central government agencies, local government, and support agencies. An evacuation centre was

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[1] The New Zealand Deprivation Index ranks areas from 1-10 with 10 being the highest level of deprivation.

established and people were bussed out to the nearby town of Whakatane. Support services established a 'one-stop shop' in the Matata Community Resource Centre for approximately one month after the disaster. The recovery focus moving forward was mainly on the physical rebuild of the town with little emphasis on the psychosocial needs of the people and community.

The first author's involvement began in September 2006 at the request of the Whakatane District Council (Council). I was then employed as the Bay of Plenty Social Development Manager for the Ministry of Social Development.

Despite on-going community consultation, 16 months on from the event, the relationship between the Council and the community was difficult and strained. In the first instance, conversations were held with key staff at the Council and members of the Matata community. These conversations highlighted issues with engagement and participation. People in the community felt unheard through the on-going mitigation process. The mitigation works comprised five regeneration projects involving physical work to "protect the community from future debris flows" (Whakatane District Council, 2010). Council staff, while running community meetings, felt the community was not 'hearing' or understanding what they were saying.

It was agreed that a community information day should be held with displays of the proposed mitigation works and having people on hand to answer technical questions. In addition to the displays, a questionnaire was developed to gauge the usefulness of the information day, to gauge the well-being of the people, and to determine their interest in working together moving forward. The questionnaire was optional and people could complete it themselves or work with an interviewer.

Fifty-five people completed the questionnaire. People indicated that there was value in the information day. However, the most significant findings from the questionnaires were

of people feeling isolated and forgotten, increased levels of stress and anxiety, and property and financial concerns. Of the 45 people who answered the question about community action, 42 indicated they were interested in increasing social activity and rebuilding a sense of community.

The Matata Community Resource Centre was identified as a key social hub in the community. It offered community members access to computers and the Internet, a space to meet and chat, and somewhere community groups could use to run meetings and events. Funding enabled a colleague, a community psychologist, to be employed part-time based in the Matata Community Resource Centre to assist with further planning. Contact was made with key people who were active in the community and had played a significant role in the disaster response and recovery work, and were invited to contribute to the development of the initial work programme. This was loosely designed to include a focus on individuals, families and the community.

Community planning

Invitations were sent to all the community groups in Matata that were able to be identified, inviting them to send a representative to a meeting about community planning. Attendees at the meeting were asked if they would like to be involved in community planning activity and to share this invitation with the members of the groups they represented. It was agreed that there was merit in working together to create a community profile and plan. This group formed the basis of a community organising committee that met regularly.

The facilitation of the committee meetings was initially shared by my colleague and me. Our role was to provide guidance and to work with committee members to develop their skills and tools to assist the process. Two surveys were developed. The first was based on the principles of Asset Based Community Development and focused on gathering data about existing skills and interests of

members in the community. This then informed the second survey that asked people to look forward and describe what they wanted their community to be like in the future and to choose activities they would support. The committee shared responsibility for the construction, distribution and analysis of both surveys. Marti-Costa and Serrano-Garcia (cited inGoodman et al., 1998) identify that grassroots participation is key in defining and resolving needs, otherwise community empowerment is not possible and needs assessments can become a process of social control.

A community planning day was also organised where 70 residents provided their recollections of the history of the town, their assessment of the town's current state, and ideas on how they wanted their community to look in the future. The inclusion of the historical data was based on Goodman et al.'s (1998) suggestion that it is important to understand how a community interprets its history as this may influence their willingness to become involved in change processes that affect their future. The data from these activities, supported by on-going conversations with community members, provided the information to develop a draft community plan. This was made widely available for people's comment. However, people did not wait for the plan to be finalised and moved ahead, organising activities that were identified in the draft plan. The process of developing the plan was as valuable, if not more so, as the actual plan. The process brought community together with a focus on a positive future that they had defined and were responsible for.

In addition to this process, the group discussed how the relationship with the Council could be improved. People identified two key concerns. The first of these was that people in the community were sharing conflicting information about Council decisions on land use and the mitigation projects. This was adding to the distress of individuals and maintaining the fractures in the social fabric of the community that occurred after the disaster (Gordon, 2008). It was decided to trial a 'myth busting' sheet where people could submit

questions to Council with the response to the questions published in the recovery newsletter. The recovery newsletter published by the Council was regarded as useful by community members. They wanted it to continue but to shift the focus to include more information about community activities and to profile community members. The Council agreed to both of these requests. The newsletter is still being published at the time of writing (August 2011) with a shared focus on recovery and community development.

Personal stories

Community narratives and the process of gathering these have been shown to be empowering and a way to develop shared meaning and purpose (Norris & Stevens, 2007; Saul & Landau, 2004). Thus, one other key area of work involved collecting narratives or stories from individuals and families about the disaster. Some people chose to write these themselves while others worked with an interviewer. The stories provide a rich recollection of the events on the night and an opportunity for people to reflect on how things were for them now.

People were offered support by referral to specialised services through this activity if they indicated they were not coping. During the interviews the participants were also asked to indicate where they were on the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril, 1965). The top rung indicated feeling extremely satisfied and the bottom rung extremely dissatisfied. The findings showed that generally people were satisfied with their lives before the disaster, they were dissatisfied soon after the disaster, and extremely dissatisfied or placed themselves off the ladder one year later. At the time of the interviews, most people placed themselves at a midpoint on the ladder.

Matata six years on

The intention was to continue to work with the community, to find a publisher for the residents' stories and to provide support with the implementation of the plan and

community events. However, this was not possible as on-going funding was not available to continue the employment of my colleague and changes in my work plan minimised my on-going involvement in the community. Eighteen months on from the disaster, the community of Matata was still struggling with its recovery. While the actions of agencies in the immediate response phase was well coordinated, the on-going, longer-term recovery of the community was neither acknowledged nor planned for beyond the physical infrastructure works. Six years later, the Matata community is still rebuilding in both the physical and emotional sense. The community has continued to organise community events and activities and the Council continues to engage with residents as the physical rebuild continues. A collection of events and accounts was published by the Council in 2010 that reflects on the disaster event and current views in the community.

Not all communities are able to mobilise and influence the agencies that provide services and develop recovery plans in a disaster. At the time of the Matata disaster, agencies lacked awareness of the need to develop a recovery structure that included community members and planned for recovery many years into the future from the disaster. This disaster highlighted the potential importance of using a range of engagement tools that involve community in its recovery.

It also provided an opportunity to reflect on how well Government agencies responded to the community in the immediate phase and longer term. Conversations and planning at a Government agency level began to identify who was responsible for particular roles and actions in a disaster. This planning provided the basis to again mobilise the Government response to a more recent natural disaster in New Zealand.

Case Study 2: Darfield Earthquake

The second case study focuses on the Darfield earthquake. This was a 7.1 magnitude earthquake felt in

Canterbury, New Zealand, in the early hours of 4th September 2010. This was to be the first of many earthquakes and aftershocks experienced by the region in the following months. Considering the intensity of the Darfield earthquake, it was surprising that there was no loss of life and only a small number of serious injuries. This was attributed to the time of the event (4.36 am) when most people were in bed. However, the earthquake did cause considerable damage to homes, buildings, land and essential services such as power, phone lines, water and sewage. The impacts were fairly localised to a number of communities in Christchurch City and the Kaiapoi, Pines Beach and Kairaki Beach communities of the Waimakariri District, and surrounding rural areas. These communities were significantly affected with either homes 'red stickered' as uninhabitable, or habitable but needing significant repairs to the house and land. Badly affected streets in both districts were emptied of residents or only had a few families still living in them. The earthquake also caused disruptions to social and economic activity with community buildings, schools and buildings in the business sector unfit for use.

Recovery structure

This was the first significant, large-scale disaster in recent years in New Zealand. A formal recovery structure was quickly established, calling on a number of people who had some or no experience in managing such a significant disaster. Management groups were formed, including a Welfare group. This group was comprised of a number of agency, local government and NGO representatives. The responsibility for facilitating the psychosocial recovery lay with this group with links to other groups such as the economic group. Coordination was a primary function of the group; i.e., managing the need for social support with the available services. Initial actions included the development of a psychosocial sub-group and the development of a strategy to inform actions. A communications response was established with a range of information developed and distributed

including factsheets on self-care, access to support services and, financial support, and how to respond to children's fears and anxieties. A multimedia project informing people about the on-going aftershocks was also developed.

Community engagement

Communication providing residents with information was initially limited to mass media campaigns, televised updates from officials, print documents, radio messages and website information. These forms of communication reflect the lower end of participation (Inform) on the IAP2 spectrum. While public meetings were being held, these were mainly being organised by elected officials, often using a 'typical' public meeting format; i.e., people standing in front of an audience delivering messages and taking questions from the floor. As the weeks rolled past, these meetings evolved in form and became a space for residents to voice their concerns and frustrations. The responsibility for leading community engagement was assigned to local government, specifically to the councils concerned. In the first few months, there were no clear plans apparent to include residents in decision-making processes, let alone fostering an empowering environment as described by Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969). This could be attributed to a number of factors, including the continuation of command and control type behaviours that were operating in the initial response phase and the lack of emergency management experience of those leading the response.

Frustrations were being voiced not only from residents but also the business sector about the lack of information and perceived lack of transparency in decision-making. Emergent community groups were formed and initiated contact with Councils and agencies with requests for information and participation in the recovery processes. In response to residents' frustrations, the local Councils began to plan meetings to engage with those living in the more damaged areas. This process was complex. Many residents had moved from their homes and, due to confidentiality issues, personal details were not available to enable people to be contacted directly. Due to the numbers of residents affected and a desire for a meeting structure that offered a more interactive experience, invitations were limited to two people per household in the most damaged areas of Christchurch and the Waimakariri District. However, this rule was not enforced.

Advertisements promoting the meetings in the Christchurch district were placed in newspapers. Residents were asked to phone a Freephone number and register to provide an indication of numbers attending. Meetings were held in local venues in different suburbs on different nights. In one case, this resulted in a tight fit in the local community hall. In the Waimakariri District, all the meetings were held in the Kaiapoi High School gymnasium. This meeting format was not used in the Selwyn District as they chose to develop their own engagement process, which involved community meetings run under a different format.

The same meeting format was used in both the Waimakariri District and Christchurch City. The intention of the meeting format was to provide a 'listening space' with a focus on feedback and to create a sense of mutual support through facilitated small group work. Residents were initially welcomed to the meeting and then asked to move their chairs to form groups of approximately 10 – 15 around pre-established stations. Each station had a facilitator and scribe with large sheets of paper headed with set themes for people to put forward their key questions. There was also an open question of 'what haven't we covered?' when the theme areas did not fit the participants' questions. People were asked for ideas about staying in contact with agencies and staying in contact as a community.

Once questions had been recorded each group was asked to vote for the top three questions for each theme to be answered on the night. The sheets were collated with the other groups and the top three questions for each theme transferred to a computer slideshow presentation. Later in the evening, agency and business representatives were asked to provide answers to these questions. The questions that did not make it to the computer slideshow presentation were later collated by each of the Councils and published in a booklet form and on the Council's websites with answers as they were made available.

On the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum this level of engagement relates to the lower levels of 'consulting and involving', residents feedback was not guaranteed to influence the decisions that were being made by recovery managers. However, feedback from facilitators and residents indicated that the meetings were well received and provided value (Table 1).

In addition to the residents' meeting, a service provider workshop was organised for the Waimakariri District and held in the township of Kaiapoi. Agency representatives were asked to participate in a number of activities, including identifying community leaders or networkers in the community, their agency's focus of service delivery, and priority of vulnerable groups. They were also asked to form working groups to develop actions to support the priority groups and the broader community. The actions support the process of building community capacity through leadership and participation (Goodman et al., 1998).

On-going meetings were proposed in both Council areas, but unfortunately these did not take place before the Region was struck by another devastating earthquake in February 2011. The effects of this earthquake were mainly centred in Christchurch City and far more significant with loss of life and the closure of the Central Business District. This delayed the proposed processes for Kaiapoi-Pines Beach-Kairaki Beach and returned Christchurch City to a state of National Emergency with a focus on initial response and then months of on-going recovery efforts.

Facilitator's feedback	Residents' feedback
General process was good - nice balance of 'talking heads', small group work (with use of individual 'votes') and large group discussion (people seemed to like this meeting format - face to face format is so important as some people have noted.)	This was the best community meeting that we've ever been to.
	I loved this meeting style much better than the other one (i.e. one with large audience and questions from floor) - after which people left and they were still frustrated.
The energy was positive. There were rounds of applause at the end!	
At the start of the meetings people seemed a little on edge, frustrated, closed off. But by the end they were relaxed, no longer agitated, and even enjoying small moments of humour, and openly saying positive things about the meeting. People stayed at the end to chat with agency staff and also with each other.	I was at the earthquake meeting last night and I would like to thank you and the council staff that were there very much. I found it very constructive and I know everyone really appreciated that you and the other staff were prepared to spend their evenings helping.
	I felt I needed to drop you a line and give you my thoughts on what an outstanding job I think you and your team are doing. While some of the information we thought we were going to get was not forthcoming, the reasons for this were made clear. You showed what a vast amount of hard work has been going on behind the scenes and gave us some insight into our pathway forward.
People really appreciated being listened to at 'their place' - but this needs to be the beginning of a longer process (feedback from a participant).	
They liked the 'face to face' aspect and the overall impression I gained was that above all else, they want a personal level of communication whether it is written or in person. Communication was the key!	

▲ **Table 1**. Facilitators' and residents' feedback from the resident meetings held in November and December, 2010, in Canterbury

Summary

The response to the Darfield earthquake again highlights the importance of using a range of engagement strategies to meet the complex needs of communities in a recovery environment. There were tensions between agencies and communities on how engagement should take place, what it constituted and the appropriate level of community participation. While this case study recounts the actions that were eventually put in place, the willingness of the councils to engage and develop a relationship with their communities differed in both Districts. There were on-going challenges to the development of a comprehensive engagement plan that included community in Christchurch City. While emergent groups formed in both Districts and began to lobby for inclusion and influence in the recovery process, this was only beginning to be realised in the Waimakariri District, where more proactive and inclusive efforts were championed by Council staff.

Discussion

Both of these case studies highlight the complex and contested nature of engaging communities actively in the recovery process as a mechanism to promote individual, family and community recovery. They also serve to raise awareness of the importance of using a range of strategies to empower communities in post-disaster recovery. As noted by Norris et al., (2007, p. 128) "post disaster community health depends in part on the effectiveness of organisational responses" as well as community engagement. The onus is on agencies and organisations to provide vital information, to listen and encourage active participation in decision-making, and to support communities to create their own recovery plans. Recovery is a complex process, with tension-provoking political and economic challenges, diverse leadership styles, and a mixed level of awareness of effective ways to engage with communities and to acknowledge community contributions. It is important to work in a way that supports a community's ability to understand and manage complex information and to actively shape its own recovery.

The use of the terms 'engagement' and 'participation' must be clarified for all of the stakeholders in the recovery process. Community engagement is more than Government agencies providing information to people, holding community meetings or inviting the public to comment on draft documents such as strategies or recovery plans. It is unlikely that Government can 'do recovery' on behalf of the community. It is imperative for Government (at various levels) to create meaningful opportunities for communities to determine their own recovery destiny through inclusive and collaborative recovery planning, decision-making and implementation thus facilitating resilience to withstand future events such as earthquakes.

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Author's note:

Professor Bruce Glavovic, School of People, Environment and Planning, is the Associate Director of JCDR and holds the EQC Chair in Natural Hazards Planning.

Sarb Johal, PhD, is a Research Associate in the School of Psychology.

Professor David Johnston is the Director of JCDR.

For further information contact Susan Collins, at susan.andy@xtra.co.nz.
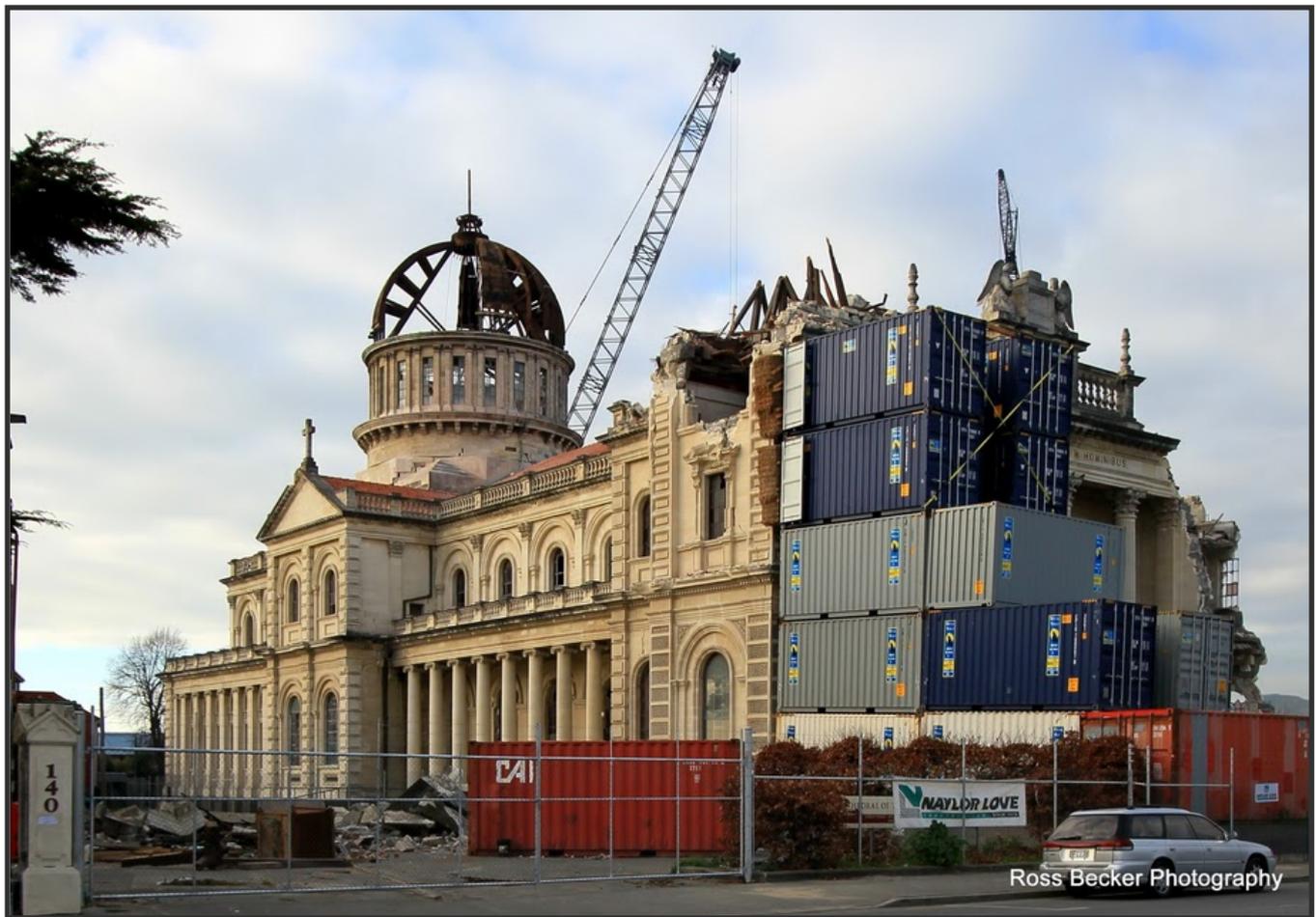
▲ Basilica of the Blessed Sacrament, with damage 'containered', September 2011 — ©2011 Ross Becker