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# Preparation essential in managing disaster

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We are a profoundly lucky young nation. We are rich in natural and human resources. We have averted major natural disasters and responded well to large scale events such as the earthquake in Newcastle, fires in Victoria and floods in Queensland. We are the only major industrialised nation that averted the world financial crisis. In several of these cases we were simply lucky. The fires in Victoria could have reached urbanised Melbourne. But it was prudent far-sighted fiscal management that prevented us from being sucked into the global financial meltdown. In essence, luck improves with smart anticipatory actions.

The Haiti earthquake and Hurricane Katrina are warnings that something big is going to happen in our hemisphere at sometime in the not-too-distant future. Let's be realistic, the global earthquake map shows its deepest rings in the oceans and landmasses just north of Australia. A deep under water earthquake could trigger an enormous tsunami. Moreover, we are already going through some of the impacts of global warming with long spells of drought, higher than normal temperatures and floods. As Christmas Day in the US showed, one individual could do enormous harm quickly. The US was lucky, but President Barack Obama is not relying on luck next time. We need to be prepared.

Preparation has to happen nationally and locally and encourage individual self-help. We don't want an episode such as Katrina or Haiti where different levels of governments are unable to co-ordinate responses. Large-scale events need planned responses that deal with not only the emergency but clean up and restoring the community emotionally, socially, economically and physically. Scars from a disaster last for decades. For example, Kobe in Japan was one of the world's largest steel exporting ports in the world before the earthquake and fire in 1995. Kobe struggles currently to be recognised by the world shipping lines.

So, where to start?

We need to prepare from top to bottom and bottom to top. That is the national government needs to be ready with requirements for subordinate levels of government and the expectations for individuals. The issue is who plays what roles and how? I offer a modest set of proposals. First there is little need for new or more bureaucracies. We can do this with much of what we have in place already.

## National Level

\* A national disaster management council should be established. This council would be composed of the existing military, telecommunications, climate change, transportation and infrastructure agencies with designated high ranking personnel who are seconded to the council. The council would conduct national vulnerability and risk data analysis and assessments for making adjustments in resources in current entities such as the military so they can deploy resources for civil disasters quickly with known communications and organisational instruments in place.

\* Hardening the Australian National Infrastructure Council. Adding disaster infrastructure hardening and climate smartening of all public and utility infrastructures to the council's priorities is not a stretch of their organisational mandate.

\* An international disaster management team can be organised with resources we have in universities and elsewhere. We need to put this team together and train it as a unit. It will be ready, like a police SWAT team, for big events. It will meet at the event or communicate with special equipment from anywhere. It can and will be deployed to nearby nations. This aid to our neighbours is needed. These nations are too small to maintain a talent pool of this caliber. This is better aid than money and equipment. We can learn from these events and improve our teams' capacities to work together at home.

Our Pacific Island neighbours can recover rapidly from disasters with our help. If we fail to assist, we will have to accommodate new environmental immigrants coming to our shores because they can no longer occupy their homeland or make a living.

## State Level

\* The national council of premiers and the Prime Minister, COAG, announced an agreement to require all regions to develop regional plans. The criteria for these plans are under discussion. One of the criterions must be regional disaster mitigation, response and post disaster recovery scenarios. We can learn much from the Japanese on how to put these plans together and how to integrate our response systems across the nation. The aim of these plans is not to just stop the damage

but to re-position the damaged community for a new life with re-designed housing, schools, business and community services capable of surviving the next shock.

\* Decentralising electric power and water. The failures of power and water for short periods reduces food supplies, raises risk of death from exposure or inoperable health systems. Haiti and Katrina are illustrative of this. Increasingly new locally generated power using solar and other means is being deployed. In Japan, many municipal parks have large water tanks and pumping systems underground. In emergencies these systems can be operated with local generators or even by hand. Solar power with large battery systems similar to those being deployed in the US would be back ups for the grid.

\* Municipal emergency management plans should tie into the state disaster and hazard plans for evacuation and restoration. Everyone can have their house back, just not in the same locations or all be built at the same time.

\* We can learn from California's state mobilisations. The state runs regional citizens' mobilisations of more than 100,000 people to spread preparedness knowledge and deepen the capacity of citizens to help one another with professional support. Local knowledge and local systems are the most vital in time of emergency. We can see how the reliance on central hospitals and medicines leads to unnecessary and painful circumstances even death.

#### Local Level

\* Community facilities need to be designed to host people in an event rather than to evacuate clogging roads that emergency vehicles need for access. Locally designated facilities might house up to 200 people. These schools, churches or community facilities would be equipped with portable bedding and equipment for cooking etc with stored water and tinned food supplies that are rotated for freshness.

\* The State Emergency Service is a wonderful group able to respond to many type of localised event. But, research shows that large scale events need to be augmented by local neighbourhood level trained captains on the ground, known by neighbours, with modest equipment and communications gear. This approach worked for us in WWII.

\* Each community must have a plan and the leaders to carry them out. In Japan every community has an emergency warden. In most instances these local community leaders have prevented the spread of urban fires and aided in train derailments or other urban accidents. The fact the local leader/facilitator exists provides the base for more extensive mobilisations and adds a layer of comfort and communications in every community. Much of Haitian and Katrina urban unrest come from a lack of anyone locally who can get and receive information and provide direction in a crisis.

\* We all have unique circumstances but each of us needs to have a plan for contacting our family if mobile phones will not work. Rendezvous places are better. Food and supplies should be kept in portable form such as a backpack along with back-up medicines and so on. Do what is best for you so that you can do for others.

We are lucky. We can improve our luck with a bit of preparation. We have done well so far. As Winston Churchill said as London was being carpet bombed in WWII: "Sometimes your best just isn't good enough. Sometimes you have to do more."

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*This story was found at: <http://www.nationaltimes.com.au/opinion/politics/preparation-essential-in-managing-disaster-20100119-miou.html>*