

Building Resilient Communities Workshop: Executive Summary



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Preface

The importance of disaster and community resilience planning in maintaining economic viability and critical infrastructure in the face of natural and human-caused disasters is well established. Multiple initiatives have been undertaken to build community resilience, including the development of a variety of community-level resources and tools. Yet, uptake of these initiatives beyond their initial development is uneven.

The ***Building Resilient Communities*** workshop brought together key stakeholders in Canadian community resilience planning with the goal of sharing their experiences and developing concrete strategies to support ongoing and emerging initiatives in community and disaster resilience planning. Thirty-four participants from multiple levels of government, senior practitioners, policy makers, academia, community members and a variety of agencies examined current practices and existing disaster resilience tools, then identified enablers and constraints on community participation in disaster resilience planning. Overarching themes from this discussion were used to identify priorities and specific action areas for fostering awareness and encouraging uptake of existing and emerging projects.

At a Glance

Participants in the Building Resilient Communities workshop noted that there are a variety of effective tools and processes available to Canadian communities who seek to engage in disaster resilience planning. However, these tools are generally neither well-used nor well-known. Furthermore, existing projects and initiatives tend to be fragmented and overlapping, and opportunities for synergistic action are often not taken advantage of.

Identified strategies included development of an integrated national strategy and finding ongoing sustainability funding; increasing community engagement through information sharing, giving context specific examples of anticipated outcomes, demonstrating return on investment; engaging and supporting local champions; and embedding disaster resilience within other processes. A key message was that any engagement with disaster resilience planning increases community resilience. Communities should be encouraged to use any appropriate tool or process, rather than struggling to find the perfect fit.

The primary recommendation emerging from this workshop is the need for a coordinated multi-disciplinary team or steering committee to act as an integrative force and national champion for disaster resilience activities. The roles for this group could include:

- Championing disaster resilience activities and initiatives from a national perspective
- Seeking and fostering ongoing support and sustainability for disaster resilience planning activities

Executive Summary

Building Resilient Communities Workshop February 2014

Building disaster resilience across all phases of a disaster from planning, response to recovery is the cornerstone of effective emergency management (Murphy et al, 2014). Resilience allows for increased capacity to absorb a shock to the system (such as a disaster) without disrupting structure and function (Walker and Salt, 2006, xiii), requiring adequate preparation and planning prior to any disturbance. While disaster and community resilience planning is well established as important for maintaining economic viability and critical infrastructure in the face of natural and human-caused disasters, multiple initiatives have been undertaken to build community resilience, including the development of a variety of resources and tools. Despite ongoing activity, uptake is uneven. Stakeholders need to better understand what is available and what is in development with a need to identify potential partnerships, cooperation and synergy between projects.

Building Resilient Communities Workshop

The Building Community Resilience Workshop was held February 25-26th, 2014 at the Justice Institute of British Columbia, New Westminster, BC. The overall goal of this workshop was to bring together key stakeholders to disseminate knowledge and develop concrete strategies and action for supporting ongoing and emerging initiatives in community and disaster resilience planning. Thirty-four participants attended the Workshop from across Canada, including aboriginal, rural and urban communities; representatives from federal, provincial and regional government; and private industry. Participants attended from multiple levels of government, senior practitioners, policy makers, academia, community members and a variety of agencies. Participants engaged in interactive dialogue, presented on and examined current practices and existing disaster resilience tools and identified enablers and constraints on community participation in disaster resilience planning. Overarching themes from this discussion were used to identify priorities and specific action areas for fostering awareness and encouraging uptake of existing and emerging projects.

Enablers and Constraints

The initial presentations and subsequent group activity identified lists of enablers and constraints for community engagement with the projects presented in this workshop from which emerged eight areas of discussions (figure 1). In each area, participants identified constraints and potential enablers for uptake of disaster resilience planning at the community level.



Community participants across all projects identified **terminology and language** as a barrier to participation in disaster resilience activities. Participants noted that many communities did not understand the scope and expectations of the projects that they were getting involved with. There was a common call to ensure that developers, project personnel, and community participants develop a **common understanding** of the capabilities and outputs of tools and projects, and the degree of effort required of the community.

Many communities were unsure of how the particular projects they engaged with “fit” with **the bigger picture** of their local and regional emergency planning. Participants noted the importance of taking a holistic approach to ensure that projects were not seen as “one off” activities completed in isolation of other activities. **Community context** was seen as a critical element in engaging communities. Developers faced ongoing challenges in finding the balance between generalizable processes and the need to address the specific needs and context of individual communities. In particular, community members encouraged developers and project teams to identify specific local needs and to identify at-risk and vulnerable populations.

Participants commented on several key aspects of how the projects themselves were conducted. Successful projects required both internal and external **engagement**, and built relationships and partnerships between the community, project members, various levels of government and other stakeholders. Similarly, participation by experts and the emergence of **champions** was critical. Many projects explicitly sought to create community-driven tools and processes. Yet, all presenters noted that successful disaster resilience planning is both complex and comprehensive, and the strongest projects required both guidance from external experts and a strong local champion to move the process forward. **Resources** – time, people, money – remain a central challenge, as does **sustainability**. All levels of government face resource limitations and there are few incentives and requirements for communities to participate in these processes. The cost and complexity of the processes and the lack of follow-up funding to implement strategies and recommendations from the processes present a significant barrier to both initial engagement and subsequent sustainability of disaster resilience planning efforts.

Factors limiting community uptake

One of the driving questions for this workshop was how to further engage Canadian communities in taking up the existing disaster resilience processes and tools. Participants identified a series of challenges. There is often a lack of perceived need and political will at the local level, compounded by lack of funding or support from all levels of government. The lack of expertise at the community level makes it difficult to define the problem, interpret academic and planning literature, make informed choices, and manage the complexity of disaster resilience planning tools and processes. Communities that do engage in planning find a variety of competing processes and the lack of an objective, reliable source from which to obtain unbiased information and match community needs to appropriate options. Resources and sustainability remain ongoing challenges, particularly as planning processes are rarely integrated with implementation phases. Project outputs, such as prioritized actions and strategies for further action, all require further funding and participation from the community.

Finally, but perhaps critically, participants noted that the project-based nature of many planning processes and funding sources leave communities without the means to integrate and extend the work done on individual projects.

Strategies for Increasing Community Uptake

Participants identified a number of strategies for increasing uptake of community-level disaster resilience planning:

- Fostering common understanding of core terms and concepts through development of a glossary that interprets core terms and concepts within local context and terminology.
- Ensuring that the “right” people are in the room – disaster resilience planning, projects, and communities are all complex systems, and having the appropriate people engaged from the beginning helps ensure common understanding and broad participation.
- Recognition that community context counts, particularly in relationship to obtaining buy in from the community and obtaining support. Local leaders and experts (“champions”) are critical to understanding community context and needs within the project.
- Emphasizing the importance of broad engagement. Those who participate drive the inputs and outcomes of any process. Who participates and how they engage has significant implications on the sustainability, accountability, and validity of any project or initiative.
- Linking disaster resilience planning to other, already successful processes and activities. Disaster resilience is not a discrete process and is most effective when embedded as part of the way communities “do business.”
- Recognizing that expertise is both internal and external to a community. Disaster resilience planning requires both subject matter expertise and knowledge of the community to ensure adaptation to local sensitivities, language, and context. For processes to have a life beyond their first use, they must involve the development of local knowledge and skill in their use.

- Finding the resources – time, people, money – required for disaster resilience planning. Several strategies were suggested, such as volunteer development to leverage resources within a community and plugging disaster resilience planning into other, ongoing activities (e.g. risk management planning).

Recommendations

The primary recommendation emerging from this workshop is the need for a coordinated multi-disciplinary team or steering committee to act as an integrative force and national champion for disaster resilience activities. Participants noted that the group need not necessarily be a government entity, although substantive participation is necessary from **all** levels of government, as well as relevant agencies, and community stakeholders.

Such a group would have two primary functions: to champion and raise awareness of disaster resilience activities and initiatives from a national perspective, and to seek and foster ongoing support and sustainability for disaster resilience planning activities. Other activities could include serving as a clearinghouse for the various programs, projects, initiatives, and communities across Canada as well as facilitating shared resources and expertise, the development of synergies, and increased coordination at both the national and local level. Participants also called for the development of a national consensus or policy framework for disaster resilience efforts in Canada.

Participants closed the workshop by posing several questions to guide the next steps in moving forward an integrated disaster resilience planning initiative for Canada:

- How do existing programs and initiatives interact and support each other?
- Who (agency or individual) should or can take leadership to advance these recommendations?
- How can sustainable resources and funding be found and/or accessed?

If you wish to read the full *Building Resilient Communities Workshop Report* go to:
www.jibc.ca/research/publications-reports/jibc-research-reports