

# Public-private partnership in disaster management: A case study of the Gold Coast

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## ABSTRACT

Public-private partnership has important roles to play in disaster management, including building business and community resilience, developing community risk awareness and providing essential services. This paper reports on two recent initiatives in public-private partnerships on Queensland's Gold Coast. The first is an initiative by a local community group 'Varsity Lakes Community Limited' to prepare a disaster management guide for the masterplanned community of Varsity Lakes with support from NRMA insurance company and the local council. The second is the 'Community Watch' program initiated by the Gold Coast City Council to involve local community groups in various parts of the City for building disaster resilience. These two examples provide insights on evolving disaster management public-private partnerships that are more community-based and bottom-up by nature. The study indicates that there is potential for including an additional layer of 'community' when conceptualising the existing four-tiered (commonwealth, state, district and local government) disaster management framework of Queensland. <sup>®</sup>

## Introduction

Building partnerships between the government (public) and non-government (private) sectors is widely accepted as crucial to achieving sustainable, disaster-resilient communities (National Research Council of the National Academies, 2011). These so-termed "public-private partnerships" are advocated internationally by the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 as a means to organise and share expertise, resources and services in order to maximise their continuity and efficacy in disaster management and response (UNISDR, n.d.). This is particularly important where critical resources,

services and infrastructure are operated by private enterprises and other non-government organisations. In these cases, supporting business resilience and continuity is a priority. Furthermore, public-private partnerships may not only facilitate post-disaster response and recovery - as is generally acknowledged - but potentially enhance pre-disaster prevention and preparedness through: developing risk-sharing arrangements; planning for community-wide response; awareness-raising and advocacy; social investment and philanthropy; and core business partnerships for mutual economic advantage and hence resilience-building (UNISDR, 2008; 2009).

The key objective of this paper is to examine the nature of public-private partnerships in disaster management (DM) in Queensland using the Gold Coast as a case study. The paper will focus on two recent initiatives in the Gold Coast region. The first is by private enterprise to develop a disaster management plan for the housing estate of Varsity Lakes with guidance and support from Gold Coast City Council. The second is the Gold Coast City Council's recent 'Community Watch' program, designed to engage the local community groups in disaster management in various parts of the city. To provide the context for the local case study, a short account of public-private partnerships in disaster management is presented first.

## Public-private partnerships in disaster management

In general, the development of public-private partnerships originally emerged in the 1980s as an administrative reform with the aims of debureaucratising the public services and promoting privatisation (Dunn-Cavelty and Suter, 2009). Such partnerships were seen as a solution to improving public administration efficiency, having the goal to 'exploit synergies in the joint innovative use of resources and in the application of management knowledge...' (Dunn-Cavelty and Suter, 2009, p. 180). In the context of disaster management, private sector involvement was increasingly discussed during the 1990s' United Nations International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, when the mobilisation of support from both the public and private sectors was encouraged to achieve the aims of disaster reduction

(UNISDR, 2009). Cues were taken from a growing propensity for support agency programs, including those of the United Nations, to involve the private sector in partnerships to provide basic infrastructure and services to disadvantaged regions. Later, the UN Global Compact of 2000 defined the United Nations' engagement with the private sector and 'requests businesses to integrate disaster prevention into their decision-making throughout the value chain' (UNISDR 2008, p.v). In the United States, the concept of public-private partnerships in its critical infrastructure protection had been adopted in policy by the end of the 1990s, and they are now seen as a key mechanism for building community capacity (Dunn-Cavelty and Suter, 2009; National Research Council of the National Academies, 2011).

Although public-partnerships for disaster management are being adopted, as will be illustrated, discussion is ongoing in regard to their efficacy in specific contexts. For example, The National Research Council of the National Academies (2011) note 'challenges' to successful collaboration that involve sensitivities to: capabilities of sectors and stakeholders for capacity building; public perceptions of risk; diverging interests of stakeholders; the need to span organisational boundaries and scales; levels of coordination, trust and information sharing; and difficulties in measuring outcomes, among others. Dunn-Cavelty and Suter (2009) suggest that problems (they observe) arising from public-private partnerships for critical infrastructure protection reflect tensions between the new 'security' aspirations sought versus the more traditional 'efficiency' goals of such partnerships. Egan (2010) points to the increased complexities introduced by public-private partnerships into disaster management, for example, suggesting that the private sector may not honour their obligations in disasters.

While critical discussions have continued, public-private partnerships in disaster management have become a reality. Several international and national organisations, including the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), World Economic Forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency of the United States (FEMA) are collating, publicising and analysing contemporary global case studies of disaster management public-private partnerships in a range of scales and socio-economic contexts (APEC Emergency Preparedness Working Group, 2011; UNISDR, 2008, 2009; World Economic Forum, 2008; FEMA, n.d.). In doing so, some attempt has been made to identify good practice and, hence, suggest frameworks to develop and maintain partnerships (notably UNISDR, 2008 and APEC Emergency Preparedness Working Group, 2011).

To date, the more common public-private partnerships publicised across these sources include those which:

- support business resilience and continuity
- support essential services/ infrastructure continuity
- develop community risk awareness programs

- establish integrating communication forums, platforms and networks;
- effect risk assessment and mapping,
- support access to finance and insurance.

UNISDR (2008) and FEMA (n.d.) have collated numerous case studies of local-scale public-private partnerships and outlined their organisational and operational frameworks. County and city-based public-private partnerships in the United States, described on a dedicated public FEMA website, are commonly aimed at pre-disaster planning to enhance business and service continuity in disaster response and recovery. Furthermore, they generally aim to facilitate systematic interaction and strategic information exchange between public and private stakeholders. Although often initiated by government-related bodies (e.g. local authority offices of emergency management), specific multi-sectoral administrative bodies and dedicated personnel are usually appointed to manage such partnerships and facilitate liaison.

In Australia, developing partnerships between government, business, volunteer and not-for-profit sectors is explicitly promoted by the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience to promote community resilience (COAG, 2009). "Community resilience" here (and consequently in this paper) is conceptualised in terms of recognising common attributes of resilient communities including: functioning well while under stress; successful adaptation; self-reliance; and social capacity. At the national level, the Trusted Information Sharing Network (TISN) for Critical Infrastructure Resilience is a key public-private partnership that provides a framework of information exchange concerning the security and continuity of critical infrastructure (commonly privately owned and operated commercially) against "all hazards" (COAG, 2009; Commonwealth of Australia, 2010 ). Telstra has also partnered with governments to provide emergency service support in the development of mobile phone alert systems (APEC Emergency Preparedness Working Group, 2011).

The Australian disaster management system affords significant responsibilities for disaster management to the state and local levels. Queensland's Disaster Management Strategic Policy Framework and State Disaster Management Plan (Queensland Government, 2010; 2011) promote the coordination and integration of the private and volunteer sectors into local-level disaster management and resilience-building but do not specifically define roles for the private sector as they do for government agencies. The policy emphasis is on enabling the continuity of business and services during and after a disaster. Supporting legislation currently under development will require mandatory partnerships, particularly in regard to some critical services. At the local government level, which bears primary responsibility for disaster management planning, King (2008) noted only limited involvement of the community and businesses with local councils in such planning. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence collected when conducting later research (Childs et

al., 2010) suggests that public-private partnerships are being negotiated by some local authorities. For example, these include agreements with local hardware suppliers and logistics companies. The capacities for some local governments to effect comprehensive disaster management, however, including the development of partnerships, may be limited by resource, skill and political constraints (Childs et al., 2010; King 2008).

A growing body of Australian research analysing and evaluating processes of community engagement in disaster management, though broader in community scope, does provide a further, complimentary framework within which to locate the activity of developing local public-private partnerships (Elsworth et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2010a, 2010b; Blair et al., 2010a, 2010b; Frandsen et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2011). Outcomes from this research, including identifying good practices in community engagement, appear broadly compatible with those described above in relation to the establishment of public-private partnerships and particularly those proposed by National Research Council of the National Academies (2011). That is, communities, including private enterprises and other non-government organisations engaged in disaster management through the development of effective learning networks that feature regular strategic conversations and information exchange between multiple stakeholders. These are typically administered by robust arrangements and open to adequate assessment.

## Gold Coast case studies

This paper focusses on explaining public-private collaboration in disaster management between the Gold Coast City Council and the Varsity Lakes masterplanned community, and the 'Community Watch' program initiated by the Gold Coast City Council to involve local community groups in various parts of the City for building disaster resilience. An empirical, case study approach was chosen in order to capture and contextualise the detail and complexities of the developing relationships. This approach is consistent with the method employed internationally to articulate examples of public-private partnerships in disaster management (e.g. UNISDR, 2008) Qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured, personal interviews conducted by the researchers with a key representative from each of the Varsity Lakes management and the Gold Coast City Council. The latter further agreed to directly contribute to the development of this paper by detailing these public-private initiatives.

## Varsity Lakes disaster management initiative

Located close to Robina and Bond University on the Gold Coast, Varsity Lakes is a master planned community of about 8700 people with a range of amenities including offices, shopping villages, schools and local parks (see Figure 1 for location of Varsity Lakes). Varsity Lakes Community Limited (VLCL) was established as a not-for-profit organisation,

represented by a volunteer board of directors, that seeks to provide leadership, support and coordination to the Varsity Lakes community (Bajracharya and Khan, 2010). It continues and advances a range of community engagement initiatives of the original developers, Delfin Lend Lease. As part of its activities, VLCL has adopted a leadership role in developing local disaster management for the community, including the production of a local disaster management guide and checklist for collating a household emergency kit. In 2010, Varsity Lakes was certified by the World Health Organisation as an International Safe Community.

Two important catalysts promoted VLCL interest and action on local disaster management. First, VLCL members and directors engaged directly with the Gold Coast City Council disaster managers, who presented their framework for whole-of-city disaster risk management. This is further detailed in the following section. Secondly, financial support by way of a one-off grant was secured from insurer NRMA's Emergency and Readiness Program to enable VLCL to develop local disaster management materials.

The Varsity Lakes Disaster Management Guide was produced by VLCL with the aims of: identifying significant risks; assisting the community to be better prepared for an emergency or disaster; to be more self-sufficient in the wake of an actual event; and to provide pointers to further information. A guiding vision was to vertically integrate a localised, community disaster management "plan" with Gold Coast City Council's disaster management plan. VLCL's intention was to not make their guide overly detailed or prescriptive as the organisation did not want to take on the risk of "telling people what to do". A limited print run of the guide, together with an emergency kit checklist, was made available to the community upon request and via download from the community online network. The emergency kit checklist is designed to enable self-sufficiency for several days and complements Council's disaster management welfare framework. To date, the current guide and kit have been promoted at local community events and via communications including community newsletters in both online and printed formats. Engagement through public meetings or other direct forums has not been attempted.

Figure 1. Location of Varsity Lakes on the Gold Coast.



Key to localising content in the current guide is the nomination of six community “champions” (contacts) comprising the local college and university, police station, post office, bank and VLCL itself. The envisaged process is that during a hazard event, these contacts can act as a hub of information exchange between the Varsity Lakes community and the Gold Coast City Council Disaster Coordination Centre, which ultimately liaises with emergency managers of all agencies and coordinates operations during an event. The local contacts would access, and make available to the community, information from the centre. In addition, local situation reports can be collated and more effectively communicated by the local hubs to the Gold Coast centre for taking appropriate action. The community contacts, therefore, provide a focus for community enquiries and importantly, an opportunity for face-to-face engagement for those who desire it. VLCL and Gold Coast City Council disaster managers view such a network as complementary to the range of established communication options and definitely not a replacement. It does, however, appear to reflect the establishment of a new community-scale “sub-layer” located under the local government arrangements within the current Queensland disaster management system.

VLCL is presently collating a local flood guide that will more specifically illustrate local flood risks, including those related to inundation of land and infrastructure and loss of access to the community. It is hoped that guidance can be given to the community in translating external information such as precipitation and flood forecasts to potential local impacts and, hence, prompt timely, appropriate responses.

VLCL view their initiatives to be ongoing. Although resource and funding constraints were frequently cited as a barrier to program maintenance and further advancement, the organisation does recognise needs and opportunities in relation to more effective community engagement in disaster management. These include:

- the identification and recruitment of community “champions” to facilitate community engagement;
- maintenance of ongoing engagement with nominated community contacts and external disaster/ emergency managers to ensure currency and relevance of information;
- enablement of community feedback and contribution to the development of VLCL’s local disaster management initiatives/ guides – encouraging community ownership of these;
- search for greater, strategic community engagement through personal contact, meetings and forums;
- formalisation of evaluation of local disaster management initiatives;

- continuance of efforts to locally contextualise disaster management information, including greater understanding of local vulnerability and resilience; and
- documentation and formalisation of community-level disaster management planning, processes and coordination within existing disaster management arrangements.

### **Gold Coast City Council’s Engagement with Varsity Lakes**

Gold Coast City Council’s Corporate Plan 2009-2014 specifies “a safe city where everyone belongs” as a key focus. Within this focus, an outcome of achieving a safe and secure community where people live and visit without fear is nominated. Disaster management planning and response capability is seen as one means to achieve this. As such, the Council, through its Gold Coast City Local Disaster Management Group, maintains a Local Disaster Management Plan, which, among many key objectives, seeks to encourage an all-agencies, all hazards approach to disaster management. The Local Disaster Management Group has developed a framework for increasing community safety through a coordinated approach to community awareness and education. The framework underpins wide community engagement, through multiple channels, aimed at increasing awareness of risk, accessibility of information and effecting behavioural change for enhanced community preparedness and resilience.

Against this background, Gold Coast City Council’s disaster managers do not see that they, or any other agency or group, are exclusively responsible for progressing community preparedness and resilience, and support the concept of community groups, such as Varsity Lakes Community Limited (VLCL), taking active roles in the local disaster management system. Their inclusive approach views such private sector groups as providing “another voice” by which to engage the public and promote the ideal that disaster management is the responsibility of all.

As mentioned in the previous section, Gold Coast City Council’s disaster managers were invited to meet with VLCL directors to discuss how the Varsity Lakes community could be developed to enhance disaster preparedness. The content presented by Council included their principles of disaster management and understanding risk. A second meeting was then held with the VLCL executive to workshop the application of city-wide risk assessments to the local area. In anticipation of VLCL initiating their own local disaster management activities, materials including disaster guides were provided by the Council for both distribution to the community and to provide guidance to VLCL in designing locally contextualised extension materials and plans. Ensuring that local messages aligned with those of the Council and the Queensland state government was a key motivation for

this approach. Localising disaster management was then passed to VLCL, which produced the materials previously described.

The above engagement was considered by the Gold Coast City Council’s disaster managers as a relationship based on conversation and cooperation rather than Council imposing its systems on the private development of disaster management for the community. The Council assessed materials produced by VLCL to be sound, particularly with regard to message coherence with other sources and localisation of content, but did not seek to formally endorse the content – nor were they asked to do so by VLCL. A bottom-up, community-based process within the general disaster management framework was therefore clearly advocated.

**Gold Coast City Council’s “Community Watch” program**

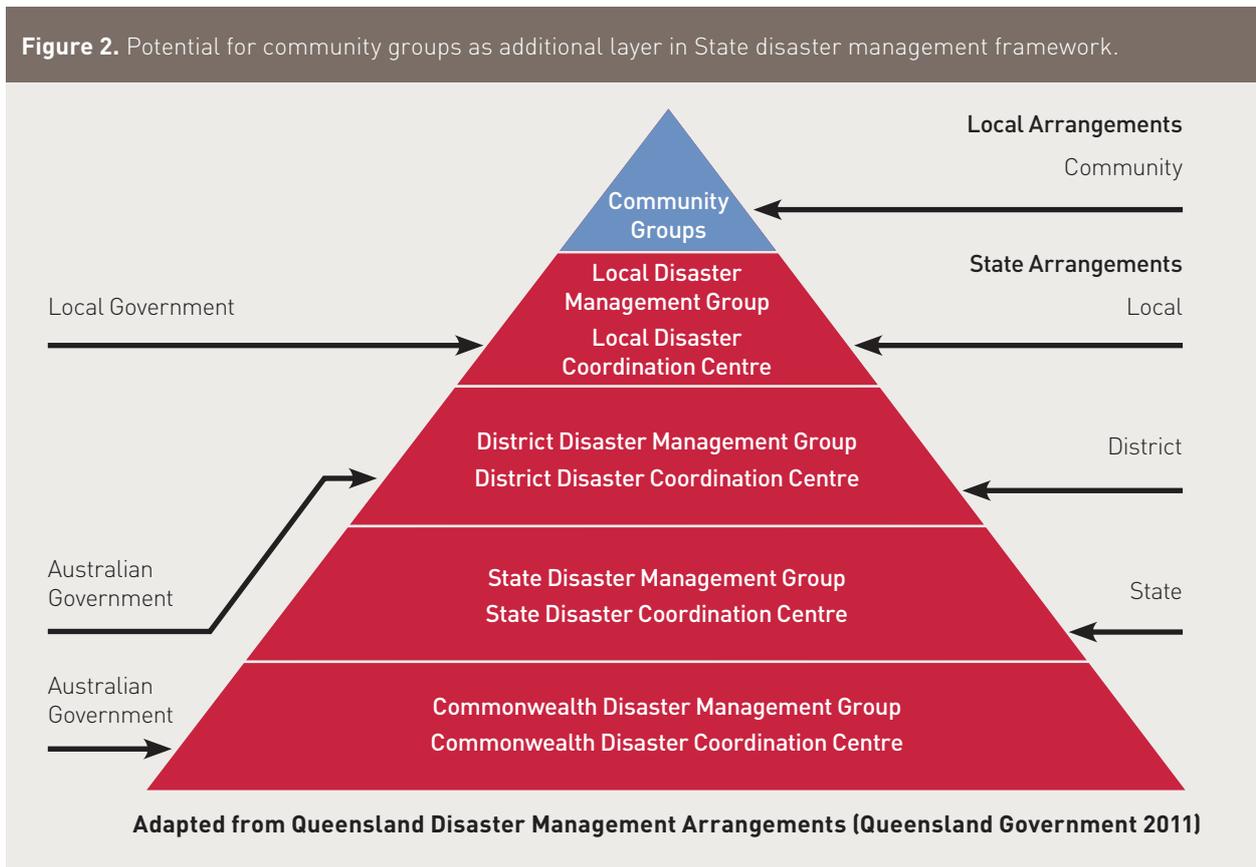
The Gold Coast City Council is currently formalising and advancing a broad engagement approach via its “Community Watch” program. This initiative was jointly funded under the Natural Disaster Resilience Program by the Australian Government, Queensland Government and Council. The program seeks primarily to improve the resilience of the Gold Coast community by raising awareness of disaster risks and what should be done during times of crisis, and to provide leadership skill-sets into local community “sub-layers” of the type demonstrated during the January 2011 Queensland Floods crisis. As secondary objectives, these groups will seek to recruit and empower existing

community groups such as Rural Fire Brigades, State Emergency Service, Australian Red Cross and others (eg, VLCL emergency functions), to provide a conduit for the exchange of disaster-management-related information and warnings with the community. In essence, through Community Watch community groups are able to adopt disaster management functions in addition to their existing roles and are valued as part of the local disaster management arrangements in the Gold Coast.

During an incident, local community groups are potentially a hub of information exchange between the local disaster coordination centre and local communities. Messages and warnings can be accessed by the group from the coordination centre, locally interpreted and disseminated through community networks. Conversely, the coordination centre can secure information regarding local community needs and well-being via local groups who are in close contact with their communities. Even in the absence of an event, greater access to detailed community profiles via local groups may enhance disaster management planning and engagement by the Council.

Through Community Watch, it is envisaged that information and messages can be locally contextualised, disseminated and supported by the groups through penetrative local community engagement with the overall aim of increasing local community resilience. Ultimately, it is hoped that the groups may be able to establish local “sub-plans” that apply the Gold Coast City Local Disaster Management Plan to local conditions and communities. The council

**Figure 2.** Potential for community groups as additional layer in State disaster management framework.



is creating templates and training materials to support local groups in these endeavours, but again, does not see itself in a strongly prescriptive role other than promoting consistency within the wider local, district and state disaster management systems and providing the tools to support this “ground up” approach to building community resilience.

Currently the program seeks to engage thirty local groups throughout the Gold Coast region with their identification being currently based on geographical communities that have higher exposures to natural hazards. Council, however, recognises the potential to extend the program to support, for example, communities of functional interest that share risks beyond geographical boundaries, interest groups, networks of vulnerable people (e.g. the elderly, lower socio-economic groups, disabled, etc.), and business groups. If implemented, under such an approach, individuals could belong to geographical and/or several functional communities, thereby enhancing penetration of preparedness programs, but again underpinning the importance of coordination of approaches.

It is important to note that Gold Coast City Council views the Community Watch program as a complementary addition, and not a replacement, to current local, state and national information dissemination and engagement systems. It is one program within a coordinated framework, and as stressed above, preserving message consistency and coordination amongst the potentially several sources in times of crisis is vital. Nevertheless, the program effectively adds a new local layer to the existing, four-tiered Queensland disaster management arrangements (Figure 2).

## Discussion/Conclusion

Building community resilience is a complex and important task that requires effective partnerships. This includes the development of public-private partnerships. This paper has provided two different but related case studies of how such partnerships have formed within the Gold Coast: the partnership between Gold Coast City Council and Varsity Lakes Community Limited; and the partnership between Gold Coast City Council and local community-based organisations. Unlike traditional emergency management approaches to “partnerships” in which government applies a top down approach to determining partners and program, both case studies reviewed by this research illustrate a different approach – one in which the non-government partners have “emerged”. The Varsity Lakes community did not need to be “authorised” by government to have an interest in emergency management – as explained above, this grew naturally out of the development process. Likewise the Gold Coast Community Watch program seeks to identify community-based groups which have an interest in sharing the goal of making their communities safer places. Together, these initiatives illustrate the apparent development of a new “community layer” in the State’s disaster management arrangements.

To adopt this more ‘organic’ or “ground-up” approach to building resilience through partnerships, requires a shift in traditional thinking by government on community engagement. For Gold Coast City Council, this has meant going beyond the crafting of careful resilience messages and the construction of appropriate delivery media, to assisting local people to take ownership of messages and information. It has also meant recognising that to build resilience requires a local community to internalise resilience-building into daily life practice. For Council, this approach has meant adopting a greater focus on coordination of messages, as opposed to simply managing the distribution of a single message into multiple communities.

While early indications to date are that both programs outlined in this paper appear to have been successfully received within the Gold Coast region, it should be noted that their longevity will be dependent on the willingness and the commitment of the groups to continue. At some point in the future, however, these groups may cease to perform these roles, or multiple groups may form to complement the community resilience role played by existing groups. What this means is a departure from traditional “hierarchical” notions of how community emergency management groups are formed and maintained, to a more “naturalistic” approach reflective of the lifecycle of community-based activity.

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