New Books

Australian Volunteers at Work– 101 Stories.

Edited by Joy Noble and Roger Dick

Reviewed by Conrad Powell, Executive Officer, South Australian Volunteer Fire Brigades Association

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Released on 5 December 2000 at the launch of International Year of the Volunteer 2001, the book contains delightful interviews with volunteers throughout Australia and from a spectrum of volunteering activity that will amaze readers. In the self effacing way of volunteers, most interviewees said 'Why interview me? I'm nothing special — you must see "so and so"'. Fortunately the editors stuck with their first choices to represent the sector.

Story after story shows what can be achieved by individuals joining together in a common vision and demonstrates that most volunteers are activists — doing something about real needs which range from saving lives to saving the environment. Views range from immense satisfaction and fulfillment in their roles, to on occasion, 'I don't want to be a volunteer, I want to be paid'.

Some patterns can be discerned from the whole, including;

- at present most volunteering is alive and well, with some sectors starting to show strain
- as governments withdraw from the services sector, the replacement volunteer effort is not being resourced to ensure long term sustainability
- most volunteers are involved in several areas of volunteering activity
- most new volunteers are head hunted one on one by other volunteers
- nolunteers incur significant personal costs as part of their commitment

The book contains seven emergency service stories, including two from the South Australian Country Fire Service, and the cover is a CFS picture with two firefighters in action.

As a whole, the book is an optimistic story, written by representative people in the volunteering sector who are making a difference in their own lives, their communities and the world. Alice Shirreff from Melbourne sums it up with 'The love in your heart wasn't put there to stay, love isn't love till you give it away'. Young Matthew Charlton of Perth who volunteers in a range of areas says it this way — 'I think volunteers are underrated. When you watch the news about 98% is about bad stuff that is happening in the world, but when you look into it there is really about 95% of good stuff and only 5% of bad stuff'.

The book was sponsored by Volunteering Australia with the support of Emergency Management Australia, Canberra. It is a wonderful record of our civilisation and those who make it work, and a significant contribution to International Year of the Volunteer.

Review of Aberfan: Government and Disasters

Iain McLean and Martin Johnes

Reviewed by Philip Buckle
RMIT University

Published by Welsh Academic Press
274pp
ISBN: 1 86057 033X

'In 1984 a judge presiding over a libel case ruled that the word Aberfan "had passed into the currency of ordinary language and that it requires no explanation". What happened at Aberfan on 21 October 1966 left an indelible mark on the valleys of South Wales. Even today, the name of Aberfan evokes sadness and contemplation. The shock was felt beyond south Wales too. Most British people born before 1960 remember what they were doing when they heard the tragic news... Aberfan...has become part of the nation's collective memory. Certain historical events assume such positions because of the signals they give out about our lives and place within society. Disasters in particular are laden with such cultural resonances' (pp84–5).

Aberfan is a banner to human loss and suffering like Chernobyl and Biafra. In this case especially poignant because so many of the victims were schoolchildren who carried the hopes and aspirations of a small Welsh village.

The authors of 'Aberfan: Government and Disasters' start their book with a first chapter composed of statements from villagers, media and officials at the time of the disaster as well as recollections all the sadder for being made many years after the event.

This chapter is graphic and intensely sad and threw the rest of the book into contrast. The reader is left seeking some relief from the surrogate experience of the tragedy. The next 2 chapters do not provide it.

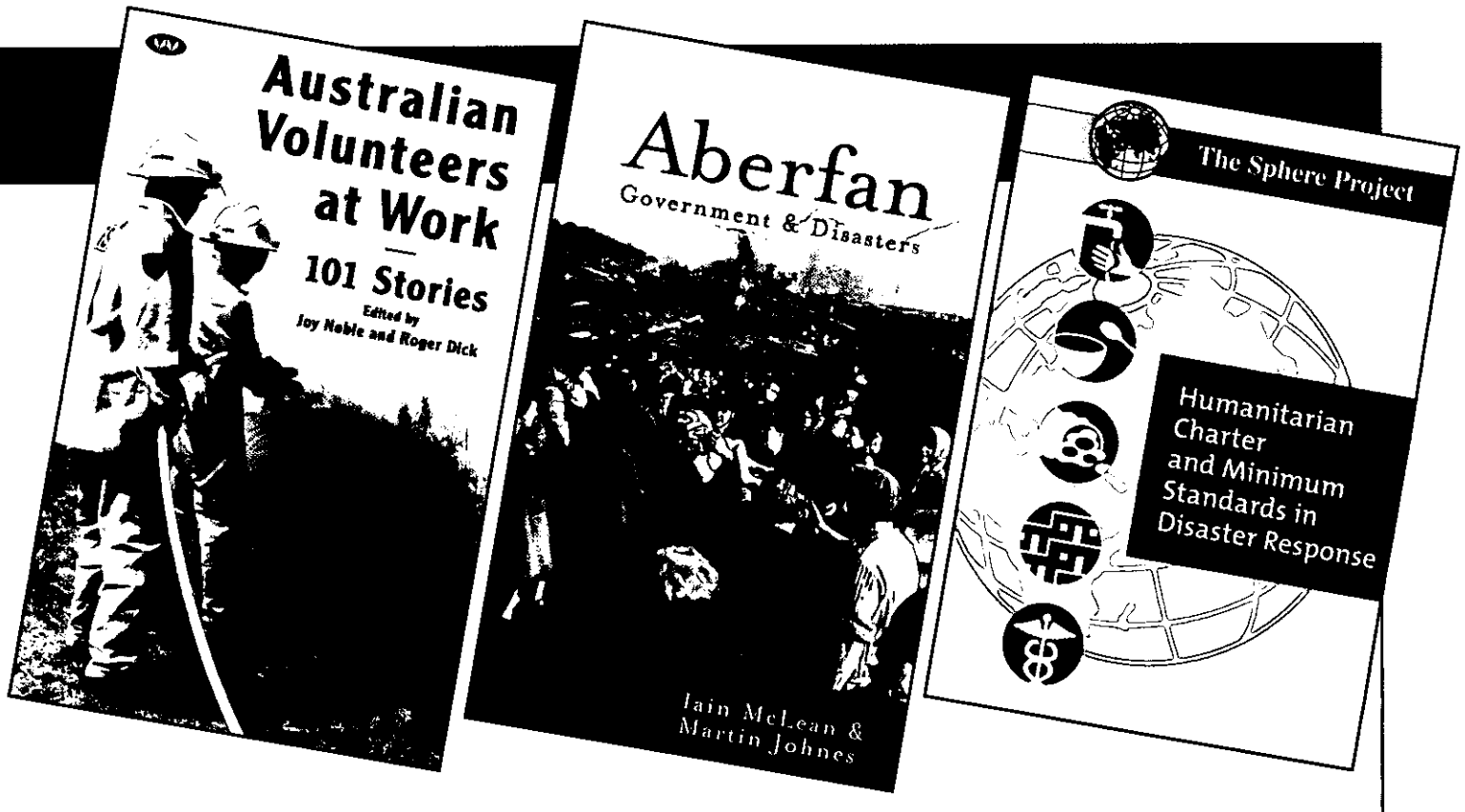
Instead they deal in a detailed and academic way (almost pedantic) with the response of the National Coal Board, the Government, the local municipal Council and the villagers to the search and rescue and recovery process and to the efforts to assign responsibility for the event. As such these chapters are thorough, if uninspiring.

Towards the end of chapter 3 there are some isolated statements that point to a greater depth of sympathy and understanding from the authors. Page 70 and following has some tantalising glimpses into the dynamics of disasters. The relationship between municipalities and the community, the difficulties in administering appeal funds, the commitment of local people to move their communities forward and the complex interactions and considerations that enmesh disaster operations in the political process. On page 78 lessons for emergency management are suggested, but very briefly.

What we are left with are hints for better practice, rather than issues or lessons that can enlighten us about how to do better in the future.

Chapter 4 discusses definitions of disaster in a workmanlike if uninspiring manner and chapter 5 goes on to discuss psych-social responses to the Aberfan disaster and strategies for their amelioration. The various responses, and the ways in which different groups reacted, are put into the context of Aberfan and this usefully highlights key issues and support and treatment regimes. The authors note that for all the good and innovative work done at Aberfan, lessons were not learnt — at least in Britain — and at subsequent disasters such as the Bradford football stadium fire and the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, the practical work of supporting the bereaved, injured and distressed had to be re-learnt.

The discussion that follows is insightful and useful in identifying some of the reasons behind the un-learning of lessons. Poor funding, lack of mechanisms to distribute information, poor coordination between agencies. The same issues we hear again and again. A useful review. It would have been more useful still had it looked at structural issues behind disaster management. Whether, for example, there is a class bias to disaster management in the (still) stratified society of the United Kingdom; if there were slag heaps in Knightsbridge they would better managed and more closely monitored than was the case at remote, working class Aberfan. Whether disasters are such infrequent events that they do not capture



public or political attention beyond the immediate dramatic impact (this seems a bit ironic when talking of Britain at the moment) and whether this is an outcome of how the media is managed as entertainment, or whether events such as the slag heap at Aberfan are inherently risky activities built into the competitive and cost-minimisation nature of capitalist enterprise or whether we are all willing to live with certain degrees of risk (usually accepting higher levels of risk for people remote from us than for ourselves or our community).

Putting the debate and the review into a broader context would have been useful.

This applies also to the chapters that deal with the management of appeal funds, compensation claims for bereavement and holding corporations accountable for the public riskiness of their activities.

The final chapter on Government and disasters reviews the British Government's actions in dealing with certain risks in the twentieth century, particularly risks at overcrowded football stadiums. For the authors risks such as overcrowding or fire seem largely dependent on inadequate regulation and monitoring.

This highlights the general approach of the authors who view disaster management — at least disaster prevention — as a function of the legal and regulatory systems of contemporary society. Without doubt these systems do focus the attention of Government and society in particular ways and on particular issues. But they are in turn themselves sub-systems or derivatives of broader systems comprising mores and values, power relationships and structures and economic relationships. For a deeper understanding of risks, hazards and disasters we need, eventually, to look at these broader systems and structures.

In the end I am left wondering who the audience is for the book. If it is the research community, then this is indulging a group that needs to more clearly assess its relevance to the practice of emergency management. If it is emergency service organisations then the book is too heavy going for most practitioners to take time to read — given their responsibilities for actually doing the job. If it is the community then the book is too dense and insufficiently engaging for most people and does not draw out practicable lessons for local activists. If it is for government, then the book only points to important issues and offering glimpses of solutions to recurrent problems in emergency management; but it does not offer usable solutions or strategies.

A worthy but in the end disappointing book. It is scholarly and has many points that are lucid and insightful. But it does not pursue them or draw out their practical consequences — at least not in a way that can be used by practitioners or planners or communities. This book seems to me, therefore, to be a useful review of some important social issues in disaster management and to be a mine of ideas, which can well be the start of further serious research

In the end perhaps this work stands in the shadow of the first chapter with the many stories of grief and bewilderment and anger which still express such anguished feeling after more than 3 decades.

The Sphere Project: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response

Reviewed by Robyn Layton QC
LLM Barrister, Member of International Labour Organization Committee of Experts (Geneva); Chair of the Human Rights Committee of the Law Society of South Australia

The past few decades have seen a growth in the number of humanitarian organisations and relief agencies demonstrating an increased willingness to provide international assistance in situations of disaster, armed conflict and other major emergencies. Such change, whilst being welcome, also brings with it the challenge of coordinating the 'humanitarian circus' which descends upon an affected area, bringing with it all the confusion and chaos of a multitude of organisations with differing methodologies, philosophies and resources.

In recent years, a concerted effort has been made by various organisations to operate in a coordinated manner to more effectively meet the needs of persons affected by disasters. This book is the impressive result of some of that work.

The Sphere Project is a programme of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and InterAction with VOICE, ICRC and ICVA. It was launched in 1997 for the purpose of developing a set of universal minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian assistance.

The Humanitarian Charter and the accompanying Minimum Standards are the product of the Sphere Project. A first trial edition of this book was released in 1998 and this first final edition was published in 2000. An acknowledgment section at the back of the book, lists on my crude estimation, at least a thousand individuals, agencies and organisations having contributed a wealth of

....continued overleaf

experience and expertise to the publication.

The significance of this work lies in the ambitious nature of the project itself. It is remarkable that the extensive consultation process involving such a broad range of interest groups, was able to reach consensus. That in itself demonstrates that the contents of the Charter and the Minimum Standards are truly reflective of the core values and practices of humanitarian assistance.

The book is a comprehensive, well structured and easily read 'what to do' guide for persons and organisations coping with disaster management. It is divided into three parts. The first part contains the Humanitarian Charter. The second, being the bulk of the book, sets out the Minimum Standards. The third part consists of annexes which include a summary of the Minimum Standards, the Code of Conduct for the ICRC and NGO's in Disaster Response Programmes, a detailed index to the book and pro-forma reporting forms.

The Humanitarian Charter provides the legal and theoretical framework which supports the Minimum Standards. It is a succinct document embodying the core principles to be adopted by humanitarian agencies when providing assistance. The Charter commences by stating the belief that all possible steps should be taken to alleviate human suffering and asserts the right of affected civilians to receive protection and assistance. This expresses the core ideology underlying the Sphere Project and underpins the developed Minimum Standards.

The Charter then outlines the three principles governing the provision of humanitarian assistance: the right to life with dignity, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants and the principle of non-refoulement. All three principles draw extensively from the existing body of international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights instruments.

The Charter also defines the roles and responsibilities of the primary parties involved in a disaster or conflict, noting that the initial responsibility for ensuring that basic needs are met in fact lie with those persons affected by the calamity. In the event that this proves inadequate, the Charter affirms that primary responsibility for assistance then lies with the state, according to obligations which are outlined in international law. The role of humanitarian organisations only arises when the people and the state are unable or unwilling to adequately fulfill this function. In defining the role and responsibilities of these organisations which fill the gap of humanitarian assistance, the Charter recognises the unique legal position of the ICRC and UNHCR. The Charter also acknowledges the need for organisations to exercise caution when providing assistance in a conflict zone, so as not to further jeopardise the safety of civilians.

Finally, the Charter refers to the Minimum Standards which are adopted as the minimum accepted norms for the provision of humanitarian assistance. It expresses the intention that agencies be held accountable for maintaining these standards through their internal accountability structures. Whilst the Charter is a general statement of humanitarian principles, the standards do not purport to deal with the complete range of possible humanitarian concerns or forms of assistance, Further they do not attempt to deal with larger issues of humanitarian concern, for example the strategies appropriate in circumstances of armed conflict.

The Minimum Standards are divided into five main areas of disaster response: water supply and sanitation; nutrition; food aid; shelter and site planning and health services. Each area is divided into separate sections of the book, easily distinguished by thumb tabs.

The commencement of each section reaffirms the three core principles of the Charter and highlights the significance of achieving universal minimum standards in each area. There is also a description in each section of 'Finding you way around this chapter' and an overview of the content including bibliographies and guidance notes.

Each section is broken down further into sub-sections relevant to the nature of the disaster response required. Shelter and site planning, for example, is broken down into components of analysis, housing, clothing, household items, site selection and planning and human resource capacity and training. Under each of these headings are a series of 'standards', which consist of a general statement of a desired outcome, for example: 'Families have access to household utensils, soap for personal hygiene and tools for their dignity and well-being'. This structure is adopted throughout the book.

The standards themselves are by no means revolutionary and are recognised as reflecting the existing objectives of many humanitarian agencies. They are, however, consolidated and adapted to reflect current knowledge and best practice. This text is distinguished by Key Indicators which accompany each of the listed standards. The Key Indicators reflect the actual measures for determining whether the standards have been achieved. In this way, the Minimum Standards provide a detailed, functional tool for providing, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.

The Key Indicators are listed in simple bullet-point format and specify such detail as: 'Each person has access to 250g of soap per month' and 'The covered area available per person averages 3.5–4.5m^2'. The nature and level of detail provided in the Key Indicators varies depending on the standard to be met, but overall is very precise.

A significant aspect of the Minimum Standards is the frequent reference to the recognition of culture and religion. The Standards emphasise the importance of adopting a consultative approach and in many instances specifically urge consultation with the community on issues of cultural significance such as burial practices, food preparation and clothing.

The Minimum Standards also place great emphasis on gender equity and attempt to ensure that women are specifically included in consultation processes. There is recognition of the particular vulnerability of women and children, especially young women, as the subjects of sexual and other violence. It is also recognises that cultural and social factors have a major influence on the roles performed by women within society, resulting in some forms of assistance affecting women in different ways to men. As a result, several of the Key Indicators require that the specific needs of women be considered by agencies in seeking to achieve the minimum standards.

Despite the labeling of these standards as 'minimum', there is recognition that the ability to achieve these aims is entirely dependent upon the resources available and circumstances in each situation. Thus, the standards can also be viewed as objectives to work towards during the period of assistance.

This work is not only relevant to those working in international humanitarian organisations, but can also provide significant assistance to any agency or individual involved in emergency assistance or community development at any level. The simple, bullet-point style and the practical measures used for standards assessment can be applied to any scale of event and provides a good working tool for the preparation of emergency operational procedures.

Report announcement

Economic Costs of Natural Disasters in Australia. Report sheds new light on disaster costs

A report released by the Bureau of Transport Economics (BTE) sheds new light on the costs to the Australian community of natural disasters. The study was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government, to set out to determine the costs of disasters to Australia over the period 1967 to 1999 and to come to a robust method for costing the economic impact of natural disasters. The report concluded that natural disasters cost Australia $37.8 billion over the period, an average of $1.14 billion per year or around $85 per year per person. Most of the costs of natural disasters that are reported in the media are really just educated guesses.

The report is the first step in a Disaster Mitigation Research Study which is a collaborative Australian and New Zealand effort with participation from the insurance industry. The next step is to look at the benefits of undertaking mitigation. Senator Macdonald the Minister for Regional Services and territories and Local Government said that *Emergency Services and Disaster Management was largely a State responsibility and the study would also help States examine the impact of disasters and the benefit of the States providing mitigation measures.*

'The Commonwealth currently assists the States and disaster struck communities with a significant proportion of the disaster relief bill through Defence assistance, the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements, one-off disaster relief packages and a number of mitigation measures. For example the Commonwealth has provided $667 million in NDRA payments to the States over the past ten years and implemented the Regional Flood Mitigation program to provide $60 million in flood mitigation works over three years.'

The next stage of the study will assist the States to quantify the savings and benefits from mitigation and make better long term decisions about targeting areas at risk, and by directing government funds to mitigation projects that will give best value for money.

Key findings of the BTE report 103 on the Economic Costs of Natural Disasters in Australia are:

Disaster costs

- Natural disasters, with an individual event cost of over $10 million, cost the Australian community $37.8 billion in 1999 prices over the period 1967 to 1999 (including the costs of deaths and injuries).
- The average annual cost of these disasters between 1967 and 1999 was $1.14 billion (including the costs of deaths and injuries). Approximately $85 per year per person.
- The estimated total cost of fatalities and injuries due to disasters during the period 1967 to 1999 was $1.4 billion at an average cost of $41 million per year
- The average annual cost is strongly influenced by three extreme events—Cyclone Tracy (1974), the Newcastle earthquake (1989) and the Sydney hailstorm (1999). If the costs of these three events are removed from the calculations, the average annual cost declines to $860 million, which may be a better 'baseline cost'.
- The annual cost of disasters is highly variable. As a result, it is not possible to assess whether the annual cost is increasing or decreasing over time.

Numbers of disasters

- There have been 265 natural disasters, costing more than $10 million each, during the period 1967 to 1999.
- There is some evidence that the number of disasters per year is increasing due partly to better reporting in recent years and possibly to increasing population in vulnerable areas.

Regional findings

- New South Wales and Queensland accounted for 66 per cent of total disaster costs and 53 per cent of the total number of disasters over the period 1967 to 1999. The other States and Territories were Northern Territory (13 per cent); Victoria (9 per cent); Western Australia (6 per cent); South Australia (4 per cent) Tasmania (2 per cent) and Australian Capital Territory (0.02 per cent). No events were recorded for Norfolk Island or the Indian Ocean Territories.
- Floods were the most costly of all disaster types, contributing $10.4 billion or 29% of the total cost. Storms (26 per cent of total cost) and cyclones (24 per *cent)* caused similar levels of damage. The combined cost of floods, storms and cyclones was almost 80 per cent of total disaster cost. They also accounted for 89 per cent of the total number of disasters. The costs of bushfires were a relatively small proportion of total disaster costs, but bushfires are the most hazardous type of disaster in terms of deaths and injuries.
- The two most costly hazard types for each State and Territory are:
  - New South Wales (floods and storms)
  - Queensland (floods and tropical cyclones)
  - Victoria (floods, bushfires)
  - Western Australia (tropical cyclones and storms)
  - South Australia (floods and storms)
  - Tasmania (bushfires and floods)
  - Northern Territory (tropical cyclones and floods)
  - Australian Capital Territory (bushfires and storms)

Findings on methods of estimation

- There is considerable variation in the methods used to estimate past disaster costs, mostly in the estimation of indirect costs.
- The use of a consistent framework for estimating cost, based on that developed in this report, can provide a better basis for assessing mitigation proposals.
- There are very few methods for the adequate estimation of intangible costs and more research is needed in this area.

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