# Coping with emergencies: Bushfires in Chile and in Australia

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Disasters are sudden events that have increasingly challenged the capacity of governments to react on time, to save lives and to restore damaged infrastructure. They are understood as "a punch to the system" where, on the one hand, concepts of stability, order and normality are challenged and, on the other, institutional consensuses or disagreements are visible.[1]

Disasters seem to be more frequent, more expensive and more severe, particularly with growing populations living in hazardous areas. They are social phenomena that usually affect those more vulnerable. Since 2000, there has been an annual average of 341 disasters associated with weather conditions, 44% more than those that took place between 1992 and 2000 and about twice the average between 1980 and 1989.[2] The changing environmental conditions have put more pressure on economies that must deal with unexpected and more complex disasters.

Most APEC economies have been affected by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods and hurricanes. The Pacific Ring of Fire in the region accounts for 90 per cent of the world's earthquakes and 75 per cent of its volcanoes, so 70 per cent of the world's natural disasters occur in the Asia Pacific.[3] Focused on emergency preparedness work, APEC created in 2005 the APEC Task Force for Emergency Preparedness (TFEP) which became the Emergency Preparedness Working Group (EPWG) in 2010. This body seeks to help APEC economies to better prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. Chile and Australia, both active members of APEC, have a serious exposure to disasters, and more recently bushfires in the urban-rural fringe. Chile has become the world's ninth country for most costly disasters and since 1992 has had to invest around US$31 thousand million to rebuild infrastructure, particularly after the 2010 earthquake.[4] Australia, on the other hand, has been shaped by natural disasters. In 2015, they represented a cost 50% higher than previously estimated and this cost is forecast to increase to $33bn by 2050.[5]

Disasters have been usually managed from a top-down or command and control perspective where the state has a strong role in an emergency, particularly in the response and recovery phases. Over the last two decades, decision making in Disaster Risk Management (DRM) has been refocused to include more community centred approaches.[6]

These perspectives look for increased stakeholder participation, more transparency and a more visible role for the community in an emergency. Bushfires, as a particular type of disaster, have increasingly threatened populated areas where the role of the community at risk becomes a key factor. Timely evacuation implies fewer losses of life, but people's attachment to assets also introduces complexities and challenges regarding the interrelation between residents, their properties and their perception of risk exposure. A more empowered community requires more state efforts placed in the preparedness phase, relying on proper and permanent engagement strategies with populations at risk.

Preparedness was a contentious issue in the worst bushfires which occurred in Chile and in Australia over the last eight years: the 2009 Black Saturday in Australia and the 2017 Great Fires in Chile. Both emergencies posed questions regarding prevailing state models in case of a disaster. The distinct cultural and governmental contexts shape the way the community reacts in a bushfire. In Chile, the prevailing command and control system implies that most decisions are made in a centralised and hierarchical way, the community being less visible and more dependent on the state. In Australia, the dominant scheme of shared responsibility implies that the state leaves most decision-making in the hands of the community, particularly as to when they must leave an area at risk. However, the response level of the community might vary depending on the circumstances of individuals. The notion of combined responsibility considers responsibility for all concerned, albeit not necessarily equal responsibility. The scheme of shared responsibility between the government, agencies, business and the community has driven to develop shared solutions to local problems, "strengthening relationships and sharing local knowledge and experience".[7] Shared responsibility implies also that tenants should maintain their properties in a way that reduces risk from bushfires and that the community members need to be open to receive educational material on risk given by the state.[8] This scheme offers new spaces to engage and to empower the community at risk.

The interrelation between the state and the community in case of bushfires in Chile and in Australia might be extrapolated to other countries in the Pacific Basin to contribute to a better understanding of community priorities in disaster management. The Australia-APEC Women in Research Fellowship is currently financing a four-month research project on bushfires that should help boost a better understanding of disaster management in Chile and in Australia. It not only explores the social dimensions of bushfires in these two countries, but it also contributes to mutual visibility. In terms of research, the increasing vulnerability of populations at risk suggests the need of improving the capacities of the state and agencies in relation to quick response and community empowerment. In contrast to Australia, a leading country in the social dimensions of bushfires research, Chile offers ample room to enhance the development of more research in this area. This can contribute to boost public policies and to better understand of the particularities of bushfires and the actors involved regarding shared responsibility and timely decisions.

1 Tironi, M. 2014. "Atmospheres of indagation: disasters and the politics of excessiveness", The Sociological Review, vol. 62, no. S1, p. 115.

2 Palau, J. 2015. "Desastres naturales: cada vez más, cada vez más mortales", El Mercurio, May 16, p. A 12, (Author's translation).

3 APEC Preparedness Emergency Working Group. 2011. Building a Safer Future in Our Region, APEC, accessed 29 September 2017, http://www.apec-epwg.org/web_newsletter/newsletterDetail/30.

4 Passi, F. 2012. "ONU: Chile es el noveno país del mundo en gastos por desastres naturales en los últimos 20 años", La Tercera, 26 November, accessed 1 October 2017, http://www.latercera.com/noticia/ nacional/2012/11/680-495383-9-onu-chile-es-el-noveno-pais-del-mundo-en-gastos-por-desastres-naturales-en-los.shtml, (Author's translation).

5 Slezak, M. 2016. "Natural disasters costing Australia 50% more than estimated", The Guardian, 2 March, accessed 1 October 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/02/natural-disasters-costing-australia-50-more-than-estimated.

6 Jörin, J., Patt, A., Prior, T., Schröter, D. and Scolobig, A. 2015. "Towards People-Centred Approaches for Effective Disaster Risk Management: Balancing Rhetoric with Reality", International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, vol. 12, pp. 202-12.

7 Emergency Management Victoria. 2014, State Bushfire Plan 2014, accessed 5 October 2017, http://files.em.vic.gov.au/EMV-web/State-Bush-Fire-Plan-2014.pdf

8 Parliament of Victoria. 2011. 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, accessed 5 October 2017, http://www.royalcommission.vic.gov.au/finaldocuments/volume-2/HR/VBRC_Vol2_Chapter09_HR.pdf