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Participatory Project Management for Disaster Resilience

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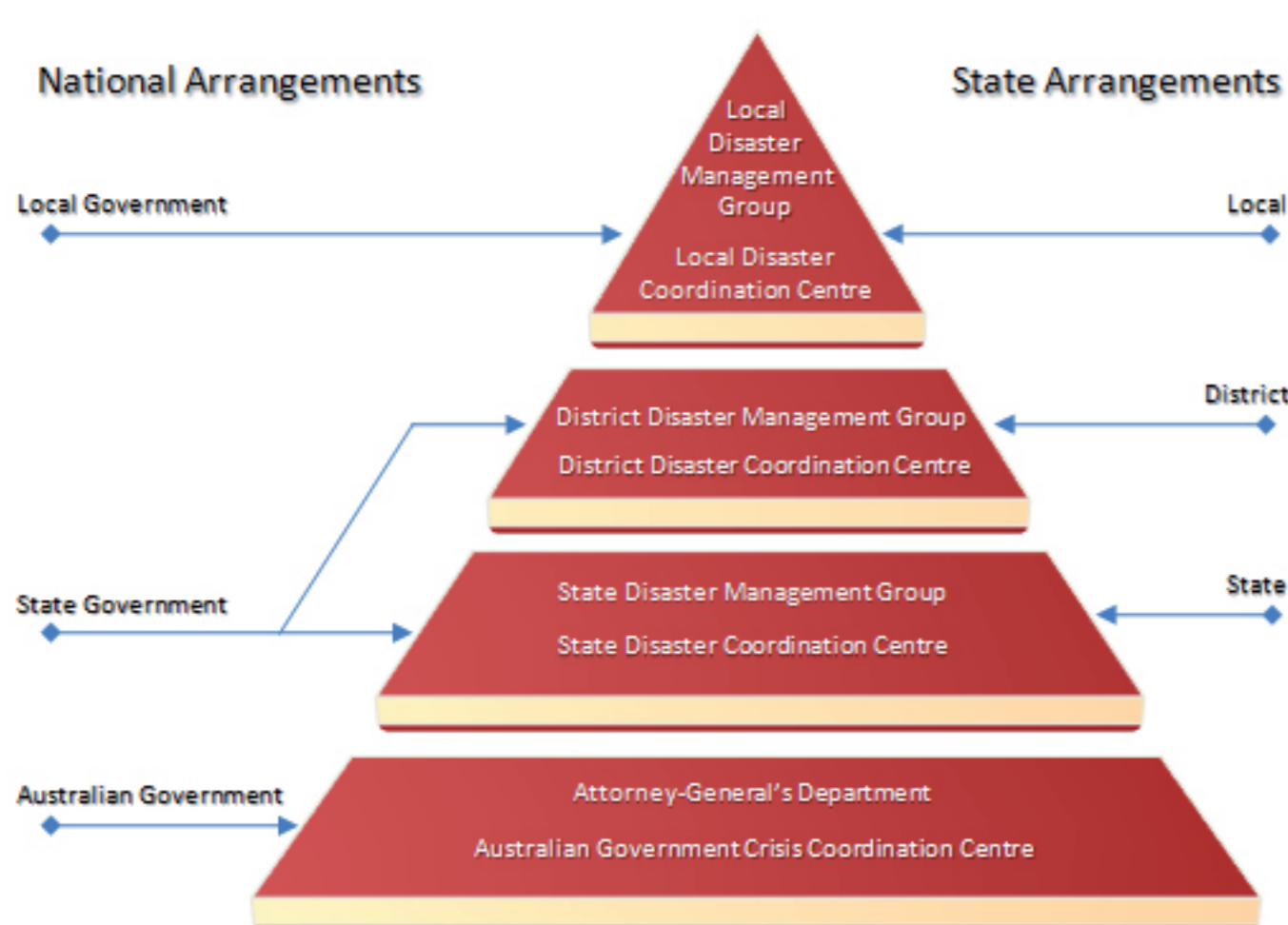
Participatory Project Management for Disaster Resilience Vice-Chancellor's Research Grant Scheme (2011-2012)

OVERVIEW

Federal and state governments are committed to achieving better community safety and disaster resilience. It requires coordination and collaboration amongst multiple stakeholders in developing capability to predict, respond and recover from disastrous events including natural hazards and bio-security risks. Disaster response and recovery is implemented through multiple projects but use of traditional project management has been criticized as too time consuming and inflexible. This research project is the first phase in an investigation of the use of innovative, collaborative, context sensitive and systemic project management approaches to support improved community disaster response and recovery capability.

BACKGROUND

In Queensland, the Disaster Management Act 2003 (DM Act) establishes structures and operational policies to deal with disasters before, during and after disaster events. Numerous policies, plans and guidelines for disaster management are available at state and local levels (Bajracharya et al., 2011) across a wide range of agencies and services including Police, Fire, Ambulance, State Emergency Services, and Defence. The www.disaster.qld.gov.au site provides a focus for disaster management initiatives in Queensland. These initiatives link to the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (National Emergency Management Committee, 2011) which calls for involvement and capability development across all sectors of the community including all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals in preventing, preparing, responding to and recovering from disasters.



Disaster management has been described as a form of public project management (Tun and Pairote, 2006). However, the applicability of traditional project management methods to the chaotic environments encountered in disaster related contexts (Steinfort, 2010) has been questioned.

Traditional project management is based on a linear and rational (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006) and top down approach most suited to what are described by Crawford and Pollack (2004) as "hard" projects, characterized by clear goals and boundaries, tangible end products, low permeability, and a focus on monitoring and control. Disaster-related projects are more likely to have ambiguously defined and evolving goals, emergent strategy and high permeability. Stakeholder involvement and flexibility are likely to be more highly valued than control.



As a form of public project management, the challenges of disaster related projects will be compounded by the uncertainty, ambiguity and stakeholder management issues characteristic of project management in the public sector (Crawford et al., 2003).

NEW APPROACHES TO PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOR DISASTER RELATED PROJECTS

In the context of disaster-related projects, application of systems thinking approaches (Checkland, 1981) have been proposed (Steinfort, 2010). Another approach with potential for disaster resilience is Agile project management (Cockburn, 2006), based on a process view of human collaboration whereby a series of relatively small tasks are defined and implemented incrementally as the situation demands, in a flexible and adaptive manner, rather than as part of a fully pre-planned process. This approach has potential to provide a framework for participation and action, progressively engaging the community in response and recovery as the situation evolves, an approach which is highly recommended in dealing with disastrous events.

The aims of this first phase of the research are to: (1) develop understanding of the existing regulatory framework for disaster recovery in Queensland and its relationship to and treatment of project management, and (2) establish a workable case study approach in terms of access and data availability. These aims have been addressed through the use of discourse analysis which also provides theoretical underpinning.

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