Evaluating in traumatic contexts: Not for the faint-hearted

Annie Weir
Impact Research NZ
Honorary Research Fellow (CRSTIE)
Carol Mutch
School of Critical Studies In Education
University of Auckland
Presentation outline

• The evaluation
• The design
• The findings
• Our learning
  • Setting
  • Ethics
  • Evaluators
  • Outcome
  • Advice
The purpose of the evaluation

• **Context**: The Salvation Army’s (TSA) response to the Canterbury earthquakes, September 2010 and February 2011

• **Aim and objectives**

• **Timeframe**: The evaluation was undertaken during July – September 2014
The evaluation design

- **Co-designed**

- **Sample selection**: key stakeholders were identified to be interviewed with the help of TSA

- **Methods**: international literature review on disaster management to identify best practice, document review, F:F and telephone interviews and conversations. The interview data was triangulated with the document review and the literature review.

- **Analysis**: Thematic analysis
Some key findings

• Able to respond to a disaster in a quick and timely manner.
• Capacity to supply extensive on-the-ground staff and volunteer personnel at short notice for extended period of time.
• Logistical capacity to organise extensive support services: catering, care packages/vouchers, psychosocial services.
• Trustworthy and approachable service provider.
A learning organisation

- From the experiences of the first major earthquake in Sept 2010 TSA was better prepared in the Feb 2011.
- The enormity of the Feb 2011 earthquake with significant loss of life and infra-structure damage, stretched TSA.
- Opportunities to learn from the best practice disaster management included reviewing e.g.: governance structures, operational leadership and key staff training, infra-structure and resources, internal and external relationships and communications.
Learning from the experience

• **Setting**
  – Unprecedented
  – No blueprint
  – Constantly changing
  – Volatile
  – Traumatic
  – On-going
  – Complex
  – Compressed time
  – Intensification of emotions
Learning from the experience

- **Ethics**
  - Gaining access
  - Sensitive approach
  - Careful lead-in
  - Building trust
  - Tensions within organisation
  - On and off the record
  - Interviewee catharsis
  - Giving voice
  - Fair representation of issues
Learning from the experience

• Evaluators
  – Understanding of the context
  – Range of experiences
  – Empathy with objectivity
  – Insider vs outsider
  – Stepping into their shoes and then back
  – Peeling back the layers
  – Awareness of the nuances
  – Responsibility to the emerging story
  – Need for debriefing
Learning from the experience

• Presentation of findings
  – Giving voice to the issues
  – Honouring the participants
  – Articulating their experiences
  – Providing different perspectives
  – Supporting with evidence
  – Getting to the heart of the matter
  – Framing for impact and acceptance
  – Suggesting solutions
  – Writing for multiple audiences
Learning from the experience

• Advice
  – It takes more time
  – It needs more flexibility
  – It requires careful navigating
  – It uses all the knowledge, skill and facilities an evaluator has
  – It is exhausting for both parties
  – It needs debriefing, reflection and review