

Building resilience not ramparts: Reimagining emergency management in the era of climatic disasters

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What has emergency management learned from global movements like #metoo and local heroes like Dylan Alcott? That the demands of people with lived experience cannot be silenced and the status quo and its systems must change. 'Nothing about us without us,' is the mantra and call-to-action.

Over the past 2 years, I have been immersed in designing a new model of disaster resilience at Fire to Flourish: a collaboration between 4 bushfire-affected communities, and a wonderful mix of frontline workers, academics and philanthropists. I have seen up close, what a response led by the local community - their ideas and their solutions - would look like. And what scaffolding, in the form of external expertise and resources, they need. Early indications suggest a potentially transformative effect.

Fire to Flourish is not alone in this vision. Community-led innovations around the country following the 2019–20 bushfires show similar promise. What does this look like in practical terms? Like Mallacoota's community-led recovery program¹, run by a committee elected by an estimated 500 locals, and even registered to take public donations. Like Cobargo's community-run incorporated association², which receives funds and supports collective decision-making about grants for community projects. And like Kangaroo Island's community³, equipping residents with the knowledge, skills and assets to be self-sufficient in the event of another bushfire disaster.

What do we all have in common? An emerging consensus that community-led is the key principle.

'Nothing about us without us.'

The case for change

Systems have long been at the heart of emergency management. As we know, they enable speed, efficiency and scale. But in recent years, it's

become clear that business-as-usual forms of support for community recovery and resilience are flawed.

Flawed because they have traditionally operated through power-based hierarchies, with government and its agencies at the top, and communities at the bottom. While well intentioned, this unwittingly reinforces a model of community as the helpless recipient of benevolent policies dictated from a distant capital. What's more, this model is often wasteful, as it directs funds to cookie-cutter 'solutions' rather than targeted at localised needs. And it is often harmful, as it disempowers local skills and knowledge, buttressing the status quo and reinforcing disadvantage.

Never has the need to change this model been more urgent. But never has it been more challenging. As Greg Mullins, former NSW Fire and Rescue Commissioner and a serving volunteer firefighter recently pointed out, climate-change-driven extreme weather records have been broken on every continent on Earth⁴ in the past 12 months. 'To put it bluntly, Australia's disaster planning, management and recovery systems are regularly overwhelmed,'⁵ said the founder of Emergency Leaders for Climate Action.

It would be easy to stay in reactive mode in the face of this new warp-speed disaster cycle. Instead, we should take stock, join up the innovative projects dotted around the country and outline the future systems we need to bolster this new model. A new model in which community-led disaster resilience is enabled and supported.

And then we need to muster our collective strength to drive the change and ensure the transformation is strategic and sustainable.

The birds-eye view

The seeds of Fire to Flourish's model of recovery germinated in the experiences of communities affected by the 2019–20 bushfires. These insights, coupled with evidence from policy, practice and literature reviews, gave shape to the program.

In 2021, we conducted a survey of people's preparedness for and resilience to disasters. The findings⁶ confirmed our lived-experience-led program was not only right, it was critical.

Stunningly, more than two-thirds of those surveyed who survived a disaster felt more confident their communities were prepared for the next one. While a sizable third of respondents did not share this confidence, the research suggested the two-thirds majority offered an unrealised asset in helping the broader community. To help them not only recover from disaster, but build pre-disaster resilience.

Armed with this insight, Fire to Flourish established partnerships with communities in East Gippsland in Victoria (Gunaikurnai, Monero and Bidawel land), and in 3 sites in New South Wales: Eurobodalla (Walbunja and Djiringanj land), Clarence Valley (Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr and Yaegl land) and Tenterfield (Kamilaroi and Bundjalung land).

Fire to Flourish has a 4-stage process, taking time to build strong community foundations and trusting relationships. Initial scoping and co-design allows us to connect with local people from a diverse range of backgrounds and drill down into what the community identifies as their strengths and needs (we deliberately avoid the deficit language of 'gaps' and 'failures' common to disaster planning). Priorities for building capacity, so far, have varied from needing emergency UHF radios, to tackling trauma from previous emergencies, to creating leadership opportunities for young people.

The next stage is to build on these insights to co-design visions for better community preparedness and resilience. Getting this right means capturing the community's diversity in the people who lead each project: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples representation, people living with disability, people from non-English speaking communities, young people, community elders and people from the isolated parts of the region. We strive for a balanced gender representation too. We have heard from communities that women have tended to lead long-term recovery projects while men led the immediate disaster response. Through this process, community co-designers identify where they need to access resources or acquire new skills.

We are well underway with these stages. In 2023, we look forward to supporting each community to put its plans into action, including through decision-making about grant funding allocation.

Communities will then implement their resilience-building projects, networking with others in the community, ranging

from local councils to service providers, from non-government organisations and to volunteer communities. This broad participation will help foster stronger social cohesion as a critical foundation for long-term community thriving.

Qualitative and quantitative evaluation will help us understand what works, why and for whom. Community empowerment will be tested through quarterly surveys and metrics such as participant diversity, skills and capabilities, and resilience tools calibrated to assess economic, social and environmental outcomes.

This will generate an important evidence base to support the scaling of community-led approaches across Australia - achieving what command-and-control systems do in terms of coverage and outcome, but with localisation that means the legacy for communities is profound, fit-for-purpose and long-term.

The grass-roots view

I think that if I hadn't done Fire to Flourish, on a very personal level, when the floods hit, the despair ... could have been insurmountable. The projects that we funded through Fire to Flourish have already started to have some definite benefits to community.

Cate, Community Co-designer, Whiporie, Clarence Valley, Bundjalung Country

Cate is one of the co-designers from Fire to Flourish's early pilot in the Clarence Valley. Her testimony demonstrates what participant-led, locally-focused disaster resilience means in practice.

Other early practical outcomes include the employment of 7 leaders from Indigenous communities among our 13 community staff members, including 3 of the 4 community leads. Such employment practices are crucial, as we know Indigenous communities are significantly and disproportionately affected by disasters, including the 2019–20 bushfires and 2022 NSW floods, and yet historically there have been systemic barriers to their leadership. Their voices are vital to removing these barriers, growing their influence and ensuring the entire community's priorities are heard.

This can be challenging for some community members, accustomed to seeing programs led by non-Indigenous peoples or seeing programs as binary – as either indigenous- or non-indigenous focused. The opportunity is to change mindsets and practices beyond the important role of jobs and skills. How? By embedding caring for Country within disaster resilience practices, for example – a key goal of our new 4-year National Indigenous Disaster Resilience Project.

So much attention to emergency management is on the hard, physical stuff - the levee walls and sandbags, the firetrucks and shelters. These are all, of course, critically important at moments of acute crisis. But it is the 'softer' side of resilience, things like improving social cohesion and reducing disadvantage, that is crucial to a community flourishing in the long months and years



Fire to Flourish staff, including community teams from Clarence Valley, Tenterfield and Eurobodalla.

Image: Wayne Carberry

after the acute phase of a crisis has passed. Thinking holistically about disaster resilience – across social, economic, built, natural and wellbeing indicators – is where the real systemic opportunities lie.

As we bed down the co-design phase, and look forward to kicking off broader participation in our four localities in 2023, we are so energised by early responses from community members and colleagues who work in disaster resilience. The principles that guide us – including self-determination, foregrounding indigenous wisdom, tackling inequality and being strengths-based – are critical ingredients for creating an Australia that is resilient to disasters and disrupting cycles of disadvantage.

By the community, of the community, for the community. As one participant in a recent review session said: '[Bringing] lived experience of the challenges [means] you see things others can't see.'

Now, doesn't that sound familiar?

Fire to Flourish is seeding a national Resilient Communities Network, building a growing movement of people and communities connecting with each other, learning together and driving systems change. Activities are gearing up in 2023 and the community-led action group is keen to expand its membership from the Network's group of founding members. If you are interested in finding out more, please email kate.fawcett@monash.edu.au.

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Endnotes

1. Mallacoota recovery program at <https://madrecovery.com>.
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