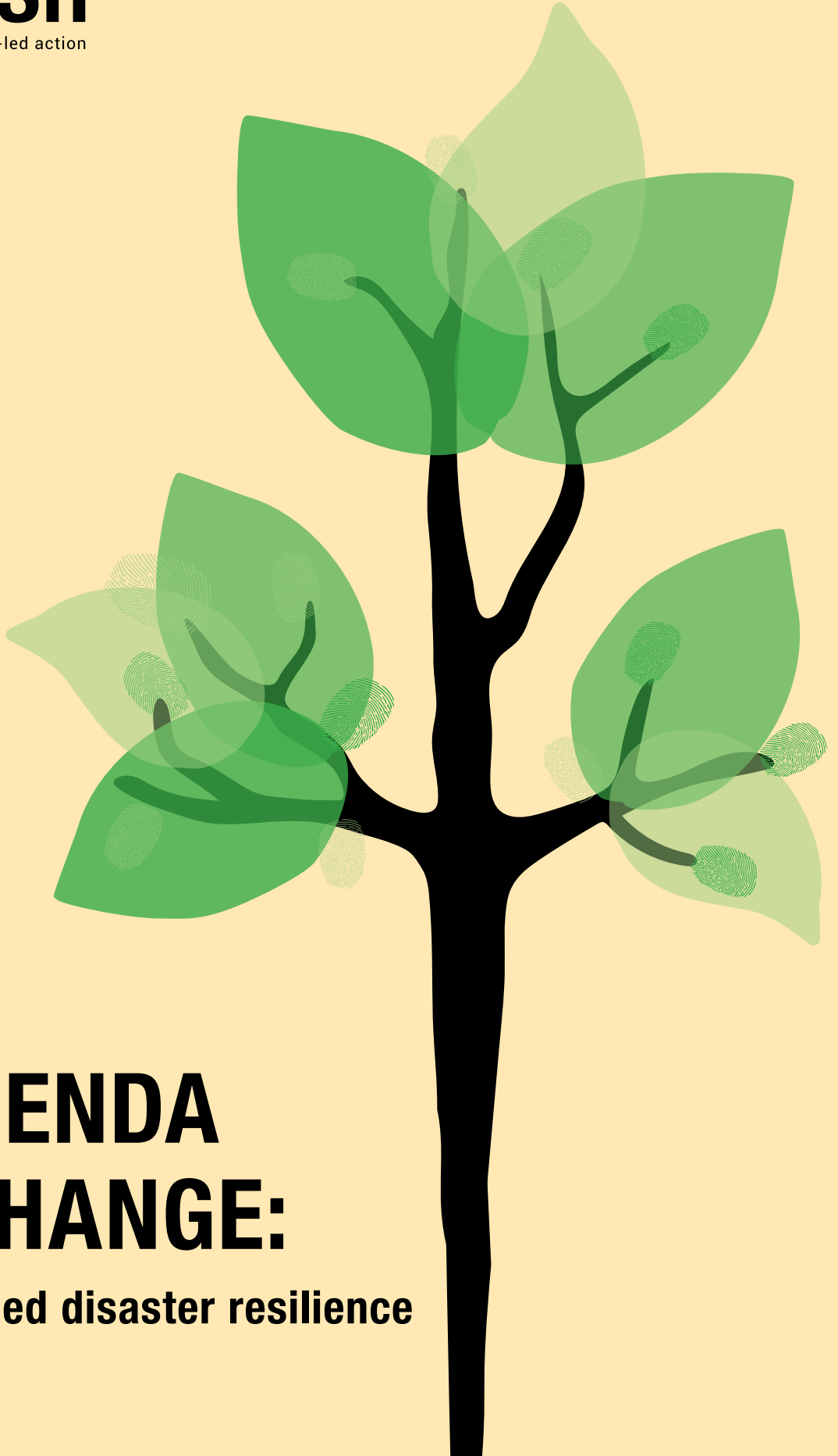
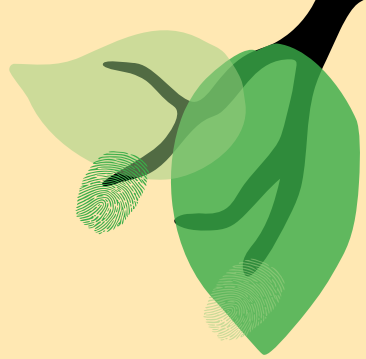


FIRE to FLOURISH

Strength through community-led action



AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE:

Community-led disaster resilience

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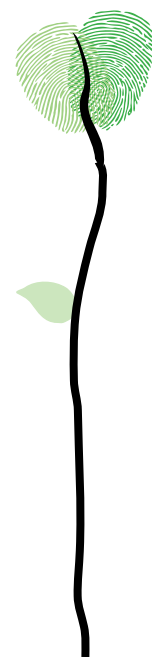
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We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and creates a better future for all.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2019/20 Summer bushfire season remains firmly etched in the recent memories of Australians. The impacts of these bushfires included tens of millions of hectares burned, thousands of properties destroyed, widespread environmental destruction and significant, long-term trauma for people who lived through them.

Among the most affected communities were those experiencing long-term disadvantage, who are therefore likely to experience barriers to preparing for, responding to and recovering from disaster. The psychological, social, economic, ecological and infrastructural impacts of the bushfires, and the challenging recovery journey, can further entrench the experience of disadvantage for communities.

Indigenous Australians were particularly and disproportionately affected by the bushfires. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences during and after disaster, including their engagement with institutional services, are influenced by their experience of historical, cultural and intergenerational trauma. Indigenous Australians are also at risk of being overlooked in many aspects of disaster response and recovery efforts without a seat at the table alongside other agencies or community members.

The 2019/20 Summer bushfires experience also saw Australian communities come together to lead local response and recovery efforts. This form of collective leadership and action is powerful and demonstrates the untapped potential for

communities to create and lead significant change. It holds particular promise to better support communities experiencing disadvantage before and after bushfire.

The Paul Ramsay Foundation, Monash University, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd have come together to explore the question: *How can community leadership and action shape bushfire recovery efforts and build long-term disaster resilience?* And in doing so, is it possible for the capabilities, social capital and agency of local communities to be strengthened in ways that can disrupt cycles of entrenched disadvantage and improve people's lives?

“ How can community leadership and action shape bushfire recovery efforts and build long-term disaster resilience?”

We have conducted systematic literature reviews, and examined Australian disaster resilience policy, practices and the numerous independent and commissioned Commonwealth and State Government reviews of the 2019/20 bushfires. We have also engaged with people and communities that lived through these bushfires. Through this work, it is clear that a shifting paradigm in disaster management is emerging. To contribute to this emerging paradigm, this report articulates **an agenda for community-led bushfire recovery processes that improve people's long-term resilience and wellbeing, particularly for communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage**. The philosophy of the new National Recovery and Resilience Agency reinforces the need for this agenda.

This agenda has four key themes.

1 First, there is an **emerging focus on disaster risk reduction**, moving from a reactive 'crisis response' to a more proactive 'disaster risk management' and 'mitigation'. Disaster risk is the combination of natural hazards, exposure and vulnerability to those hazards. Risk reduction strategies should therefore be multifactorial, focused on eliminating, reducing or mitigating (1) hazards, (2) exposure, and (3) reducing vulnerability and increasing capacity through the lens of resilience building and community development. These should be developed with an understanding of 'compound disasters', whereby disasters occur alongside other societal stressors that increase a community's vulnerability.

2 Second, **there is confirmation of a re-focus on resilience** through recovery processes, recognising the need to 'build back better' in local communities affected by disaster. This resilience focus would be strengthened by including social, relational and wellbeing considerations, broadening the

typical agenda of rebuilding critical infrastructure and housing stock. Communities need to develop collective skills to cope, adapt, learn and transform, helping them to be better prepared for the next disaster or other collective challenge. Effectively prosecuting a resilience agenda relies on (1) recognising that bushfire and other disaster impacts are experienced and responded to in highly local ways, and (2) improving the resilience capacities of individuals, communities and institutions.

3 Third, there is an **emerging focus on community-centred and community-led responses** that are tailored to the needs and priorities of local communities to improve disaster recovery and build long-term resilience. Importantly, disaster event and subsequent recovery processes are part of ongoing community development trajectories. New models and methods for understanding, aligning and strengthening community development trajectories through disaster recovery must respond to the particular needs and priorities of communities affected by bushfire and other disasters.

4 There remains a need to **give greater attention to disadvantage and vulnerability**. While there is recognition that the relative vulnerability or resilience of individuals or communities depends on access to a range of resources (material and otherwise), Australia's disaster management sector has had little systematic engagement with the diverse situations and needs of communities experiencing disadvantage. As a nation, we need to better understand how to enable and build resilience in communities facing structural disadvantage such that future disasters do not serve to further embed and increase inequities for communities or groups of individuals within them.

With crisis comes the seeds of opportunity. Just as the Banksia requires the heat of fire to germinate and flower, can we reimagine disaster recovery to be transformative in ways that help communities flourish?

Can we use the significant disruption caused by a disaster as an opportunity to reconfigure the systems that influence community development trajectories so they can be steered towards improving people’s wellbeing and disaster resilience over the long term? And for people suffering long-term hardship and adversity, can this reconfiguration actually serve to break cycles of structural disadvantage?

While these questions remain untested, the key may be in an empowerment-based approach, whereby individuals and groups increase their capacity and relational power to meet their own goals, leading to emergent, transformative change within and across communities.

A community-led and strengths-based approach to disaster recovery offers a promising pathway for shifting individuals and groups from a state of vulnerability toward one of increased resilience, and potentially out of disadvantage. We refer to this as **transformative resilience** — a holistic approach to community resilience that seeks to coordinate community resources and build capacities for coping and adapting to disaster in ways that improve outcomes in the next disaster event and facilitate larger scale shifts that serve to improve community wellbeing more broadly. It represents a paradigmatic shift away from the dominant model of disaster recovery and support, which typically focuses on what individuals, groups or entire communities are lacking and is largely driven from the top down.

Evidence suggests a number of future directions are important for implementing a transformative approach to community disaster recovery and resilience:

- **Understand communities as place-based systems.** A community’s resilience is the result of a community system that both shapes and is shaped by interconnected social, institutional, physical and environmental processes and structures. This broader context shapes flows of resources and power dynamics, and influences opportunities and barriers for individuals, groups and wider communities to participate in disaster recovery and resilience building processes.
- **Connect to Country.** Traditional wisdom held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities offers invaluable ways of thinking and knowing about place-based community systems. Indigenous people’s understanding of Place is predicated on the relationality of all things — Place is a living thing, whether it is geographically located or located as an event in time, and fundamentally informs who we are. Documents such as the Australian and International Indigenous Design Charters outline valuable frameworks for incorporating Indigenous cultural knowledge to strengthen disaster recovery and resilience building for all Australian communities.
- **Increase communities’ transformative capacities.** Coping, adaptive and transformative capacities all help to build community resilience. Coping capacities help a community in their immediate response and recovery following a disaster event. Adaptive capacities help a community to regroup and respond through experimentation and ‘learning by doing’ for recovery and future planning. Transformative capacities help communities drive proactive, creative and systemic change over a longer time period. They can also help address the root causes of vulnerability in communities experiencing disadvantage.

- **Strengthen local leadership and social capital.**

Building authentic partnerships with community in disaster recovery efforts is essential to fostering trust, ensuring that activities address local needs and reflect community values, promoting a sense of ownership and collective leadership, and improving the likelihood of successful recovery. Significant and sustained investment in building the social capital of communities recovering from bushfire will empower them to lead their own recovery and increase their long-term wellbeing and resilience.

This report articulates **a way of thinking** about the intersections between disaster, resilience, community and entrenched disadvantage. It highlights a range of opportunities for place-based, mission-driven and research-supported policy and practice to take the next steps in Australia's ongoing collaborative efforts to improve community resilience and steer positive community development trajectories in the aftermath of bushfire and other disasters.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2019/20 bushfire season remains firmly etched in the recent memories of Australians. Between August 2019 and February 2020, bushfires broke out across all states and territories amidst catastrophic conditions, emanating from a country experiencing the driest and hottest year on record and the ongoing impacts of drought.

The impacts of the 2019/20 Summer Bushfires were devastating, with tens of millions hectares burned, thousands of properties destroyed, widespread environmental destruction and significant, long-term trauma for people who lived through them.

Among the most affected communities were those experiencing long-term disadvantage, who are therefore likely to experience barriers to preparing for, responding to and recovering from disaster. The psychological, social, economic, ecological and infrastructural impacts of the bushfires, and the challenging recovery journey, can further entrench the experience of disadvantage for communities.

At the same time, Australia saw communities come together to lead local response and recovery efforts during and after the fires. This kind of collective leadership and action is powerful and demonstrates the power of communities to create significant change.

The Paul Ramsay Foundation, Monash University, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd have come together to explore the question: *How can community leadership and action shape bushfire recovery efforts and build*

long-term disaster resilience? And in doing so, is it possible for the capabilities, social capital and agency of communities to be strengthened in ways that can disrupt cycles of entrenched disadvantage and improve people's lives?

We have conducted systematic literature reviews, and examined Australian disaster resilience policy, practices and the numerous independent and commissioned Commonwealth and State Government reviews of the 2019/20 bushfires. We have also engaged with a number of people that lived through these bushfires. Through this work, we have begun to articulate an agenda for community-led bushfire recovery processes that are shaped to improve people's long-term resilience and wellbeing, particularly for communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage.

With this report, we present insights from our research and ask a number of questions that have emerged through our analysis. We begin to articulate a way of thinking about the intersections between disaster, resilience, community and entrenched disadvantage that points to the opportunity for positive community development trajectories that can emerge in the aftermath of a crisis. We identify opportunities for place-based, mission-driven and research-supported policy and practice to take next steps in responding to the agenda developed through this report.

We hope it presents useful reflections as communities, governments, institutions and researchers continue to collaboratively learn how Australia can increase its resilience to bushfires and other disasters.



BUSHFIRE DEVASTATION
for **COMMUNITIES**

SECTION 2

2.1 Impacts of 2019/2020 Australian bushfires

2.2 An alarming disaster outlook for Australia

2.3 Implications for Australians experiencing entrenched disadvantage

Click to skip to section

2.1 Impacts of the 2019/20 Australian bushfires

The 2019/2020 Australian summer bushfires were simultaneously a natural disaster crisis, a public health emergency, a humanitarian crisis, an economic crisis, an environmental crisis and a crisis for the many communities affected directly and indirectly throughout Australia.

As forest fire danger ratings peaked to the highest since records began, fires burnt the length of Australia's eastern coastline over several months, in which extreme conditions drove a fire behaviour that was impossible to control.² An estimated 24-40 million hectares burned – greater than the combined area burned in the Black Saturday 2009 and Ash Wednesday 1983 bushfires and nearly double the area of any previous major fire on record.³ The unprecedented scale of these fires lead to the destruction of over 3,000 homes, with an estimated 7,500 people displaced, and an estimated financial impact of over \$10 billion.⁴ Tragically, 33 people died (25 in NSW, five in Victoria and three in South Australia) and many people were left with greater hardship than before the fires.

The fires directly affected an estimated three million people,⁵ with many more indirectly affected. An estimated thousands of Australians, locals and holidaymakers, were evacuated or became trapped, and many communities became isolated,

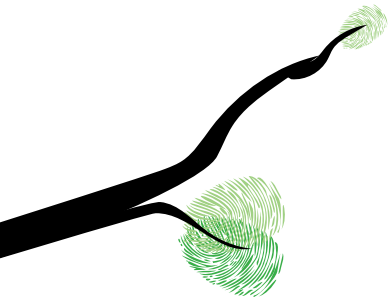
experiencing extended periods without power, communications, and ready access to essential goods and services.⁶ There are recognised but unquantified ongoing mental health effects⁷ and spikes in family violence.⁸

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were severely affected, with [The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation \(NACCHO\) report](#) noting that:

“The impact of the fires on Aboriginal communities is multilayered, with sacred sites, the habitats of culturally significant animals, and Country being decimated”.⁹

The Yuin Nation on the south coast of NSW for example, fear that these events damaged or destroyed many culturally sacred sites.¹⁰ With a quarter of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in Victoria and NSW residing in fire-affected areas,¹¹ it is clear that the emotional and physical tolls of these events will weigh heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples for years to come.

“As the events of the 2019–2020 bushfire season show, what was unprecedented is now our future”.¹



Air pollution, smoke smog and subsequent health impacts and associated community uncertainty caused a public health emergency. Extensive smoke coverage across much of eastern Australia contributed to further adverse health impacts for many Australians, with 429 premature deaths, 3,230 hospital admissions for cardiovascular and respiratory disorders and 1,523 emergency attendances for asthma being attributed to the fires.¹² Smoke related health costs were estimated at nearly \$2 billion, more than nine times the median annual wildfire associated costs for the previous 19 years of AU\$211 million.¹³

“Disruption to primary care services during and in the immediate few weeks after the bushfires led to lack of access to care and treatment for chronic and acute conditions”.¹⁴

“The demand for mental health services far exceeded availability prior to the disaster, the increased need post bushfire disaster has resulted in many more people not receiving the care and support they need”.¹⁵

“Exposures to the emergency have direct physical health effects including higher risks of respiratory symptoms, cardiovascular events, burns, eye injuries as well as significant levels of grief, trauma and other emotional distress. These effects are likely to be compounded in those communities who already experience higher levels of chronic disease and inequitable distribution of services, such as Aboriginal Communities.”¹⁶

There was also widespread environmental destruction with nearly three billion animals killed or displaced with many threatened species and other ecologically sensitive communities extensively harmed and millions of hectares of habitat burnt and destroyed.¹⁷

The recent inquiries into these events (and those of the past) indicate that the costs associated with natural disasters are significant, long-term, and lead to social, psychological, environmental and economic trauma. The widespread direct and indirect impacts of the 2019/20 Summer Bushfires events have been unprecedented throughout the Australian context, described as the worst in history for many jurisdictions.¹⁸

2.2 An alarming disaster outlook for Australia

While fire has long been part of the Australian landscape, there is now overwhelming evidence pointing to the impacts of human-induced climate change contributing to the increased frequency and severity of these events and their associated cascading pressures.¹⁹ CSIRO’s recent [Climate and Disaster Resilience Technical Report](#)²⁰ to the Prime Minister concluded:

“Climate and disaster risks are growing across Australia. This is due to intensifying natural hazards under a changing climate and increasing exposure and vulnerability of people, assets, and socio-economic activities in expanding hazard areas”.²¹

Recent studies found that human related climate change pressures had made the 2019/20 bushfires 80 per cent more likely to happen, and that if global temperatures continue to rise, bushfires in Australia with the severity of those in 2019/20 will be eight times more likely.²² As a new narrative, the CSIRO’s [report](#) links and makes explicit ‘Climate and Disaster’.

A **submission** made on behalf of the Climate Council of Australia to the Parliament of Australia noted the severity of these events had been the result of a series of compounding and cascading events including:

*“unprecedented extreme weather and cascading events including drought, heatwaves, dry thunderstorms, multiple days of Severe, Extreme and Catastrophic fire danger, and pyroconvective fires”.*²³

CSIRO projected that the direct and indirect disaster costs in Australia will rise from an average of \$18.2 billion per year to \$39 billion per year by 2050.²⁴

The Royal Commission into **National Natural Disaster Arrangements** (referred to herein as the “Royal Commission”) highlights that natural disasters:

*“are expected to become more complex, more unpredictable, and more difficult to manage...We are likely to see more compounding disasters on a national scale with far-reaching consequences. Compounding disasters may be caused by multiple disasters happening simultaneously, or one after another. Some may involve multiple hazards – fires, floods and storms. Some have cascading effects – threatening not only lives and homes, but also the nation’s economy, critical infrastructure and essential services, such as our electricity, telecommunications and water supply, and our roads, railways and airports.”*²⁵

In the words of the Royal Commission, the experiences in summer of 2019/20 provide “only a glimpse of the types of events that Australia may face in the future”.²⁶

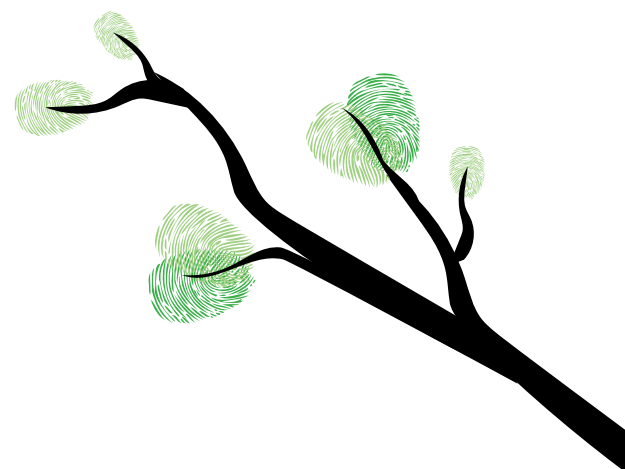
What does this future outlook mean for individuals, families and communities? The answer largely depends on the person, the community, the place and the specific circumstances of the disaster event.

2.3 Implications for Australians experiencing entrenched disadvantage

Communities and individuals that have experienced forms of disadvantage are commonly most affected by disaster events, often with fewer opportunities to access the resources and assets required for effectively preparing for, responding to and recovering from disaster.

*“The poor...bear disproportionately higher economic and social costs if disaster occurs, irrespective of their levels of preparedness, because they tend to be in more exposed areas and have fewer options to respond, cope and recover”.*²⁷

There is clear evidence that the relationship between disadvantage and disaster impact can compound inequalities. Resource deficiencies in one area can impinge upon resource access in others, creating further vulnerabilities or perpetuating cycles of entrenched disadvantage.²⁸



The 2014 Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) report on [Social Vulnerability in Emergency Management](#) revealed how disaster events such as bushfires, hurricanes and extreme heat can deliver a devastating blow to communities and individuals in socially vulnerable circumstances due to disadvantages such as:

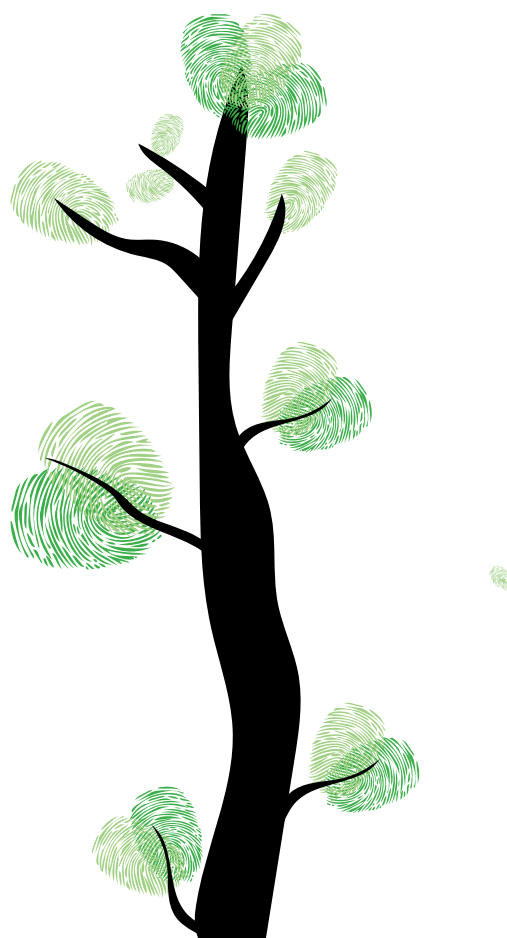
- a lack of choice in deciding where they live, and often being disproportionately concentrated in areas at high risk of negative environmental impacts;
- fewer economic resources to assist with preparing for and managing extreme weather, including being able to take out insurance;
- chronic physical and mental health conditions that affect their mobility and resilience;
- barriers to accessing mainstream sources of information about impending danger such as language barriers, remoteness, and poverty (no mobile phones or internet access);
- a need for greater support in evacuation and recovery, including to mobilise wheelchairs and maintain ongoing access to care and medication in the immediate aftermath of a disaster; and
- having less voice and being less able to influence decision-makers such as governments.²⁹

Through these factors, community members experiencing disadvantage pay a higher price in disaster events, with the impacts continuing well past the immediacy of the event, and contributing to what one participant in the VCOSS [report](#) described as a 'cascade of sorrows'.³⁰

Information on the lived experiences of people who have experienced long-term hardship and were affected by the 2019/20 bushfires is sparse. In these fires, at least 3,500 homes were destroyed, along with thousands of other buildings³¹, which

means approximately 8,000 people nationally (including 6,340 in NSW) were rendered homeless, representing a nationally internally displaced population (assuming an average of 2.6 residents per household³²). These figures would not include the entrenched homeless or others sleeping rough. There is little information on this silent population.

It is clear that all levels of government, not-for-profit organisations and the private sector need to work together to strengthen Australia's resilience to bushfires and other disasters, and that particular attention must be given to the individuals and groups that have been found to be most affected by and susceptible to disaster impacts. Further, communities experiencing disadvantage are typically the least able to fully participate in recovery processes, often lacking the capacity, agency and opportunity to steer local efforts.



OPPORTUNITY

Give focus to the human dimensions of disaster impacts and disaster resilience

Greater understanding of the social, relational and wellbeing impacts of bushfire and other disasters is needed. These are less tangible than typical measures of burned area, property damage, mortality, livestock loss and injury, and wildlife loss and injury. Insight into how factors such as the geographic concentration of mental health deterioration, displacement of people, fragmented social cohesion and disruption to business continuity affect a communities' recovery from disaster in the short-term, as well as their pathway to long-term resilience is needed. This would create an evidence base for strengthening community recovery and resilience building, and for tailoring support efforts to the needs of communities experiencing disadvantage. Specific opportunities include:

- a. Collect evidence of the lived experiences of individuals and communities affected by disaster and during their recovery, including with those whose vulnerability may be exacerbated by forms of disadvantage.
- b. Measure the cost that disaster has on individuals, families, communities and governments in terms that reflect the full range of human impacts.
- c. Tailor support efforts to the particular needs of different parts of the community, including those who are more vulnerable to disaster and typically less able to fully participate in recovery and resilience building processes.

UNPACKING DISADVANTAGE *for* COMMUNITIES



SECTION 3

3.1 Understanding entrenched disadvantage

3.2 Vulnerability of disadvantaged communities in disasters

3.3 Bushfire disaster and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

3.4 Compounding effects of trauma

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3.1. Understanding entrenched disadvantage

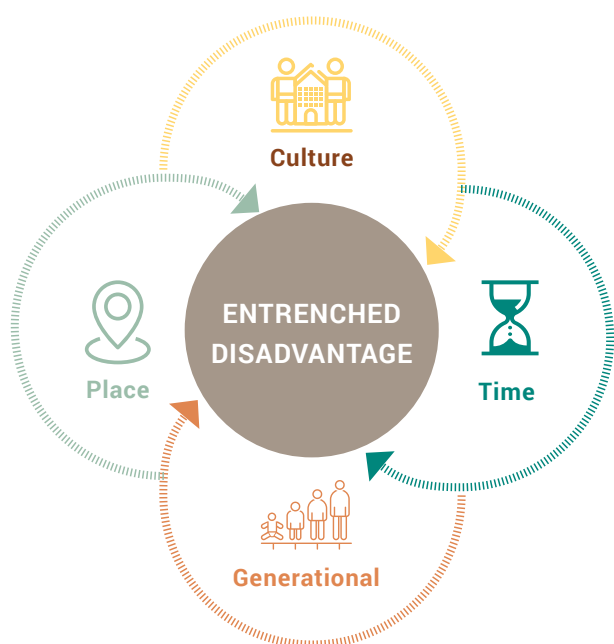
Disadvantage can be experienced by individuals and communities in a number of intersectional ways,¹ including:

- **socioeconomic:** Income at individual, community or national scales,
- **education level:** Literacy and numeracy,
- **health:** Physical and mental health,
- **sociopolitical:** Social capital, political power,
- **access to public resources:** Infrastructure (e.g. water, information technology, roads); sport and leisure facilities; emergency services; public transport,
- **age:** Elderly, children under 5,
- **gender/sex:** Female and LGBTQI+,
- **disability:** Variable cognitive and/or physical ability,
- **institutionalised:** Prison, aged care and drug rehabilitation facilities,
- **social identity:** Race, ethnicity and other minorities, and
- **caste:** Social, tribal, hereditary and hierarchical groupings.

When people face more than one form of hardship, their disadvantage is multiplied (i.e. multiple disadvantage). This can lead to an experience of “poor outcomes across a range of dimensions of life including health, education, work, financial hardship, crime, family and community”.²

Commonly, these factors are the result of the experience of discrimination, lack of resources and/or opportunities, low social or financial capital, exclusion, marginalisation, inequality and other barriers to a fulfilling life. In summary, a lack of access to resources, power and assets that people require in order to meet their present needs and build capacities. The concentration and coalescence of these structural characteristics can lead to entrenched poverty and persistent social problems that cluster in geographical areas.

This spatial polarisation of disadvantage is well-evidenced.³ It emphasises the importance of place in influencing a person’s experience of disadvantage. Neighbourhoods are both physical and social constructs with a variety of attributes, including environment, location, infrastructure, demographic, social, political and service characteristics, spatial and temporal characteristics, and the variety of perspectives that people bring based on their involvement and stake.⁴ Spatial privilege and disadvantage therefore refers to both structural sources (such as employment, income and education) and the qualities of places (such as environmental and social conditions, access to ‘goods’ and proximity to ‘bads’).⁵



*Disadvantage is considered entrenched when it is structurally embedded through **culture** (i.e. a function of wider societal factors such as attitudes to race or gender), over **time** (i.e. persistent disadvantage over a person’s life), over **generations** (i.e. spanning over generations of a family), and in **place** (i.e. relative stability in the socio-economic profile of different neighbourhoods over time).*

As such, structural disadvantage can be understood as a “deep and divided structure in the concentration of wellbeing across multiple dimensions”.⁶ Examining structural disadvantage involves focus on how and why the geographic concentration of poverty becomes entrenched in particular places (rather than how and why individuals change).⁷

The experience of entrenched disadvantage often goes hand-in-hand with social exclusion. When people are socially excluded, they have reduced ability to fully participate in social, economic and political life, and to assert their rights.⁸ This situation derives from exclusionary relationships based on power, and overlaps with a range of other concepts including poverty, social capital (relationships and networks) and social integration.⁹ The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) produces Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) to summarise the socio-economic conditions of an area using relevant information





from the Census of Population and Housing. The SEIFA indexes are widely used measures of relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage.

Analysis of the SEIFA index shows that across Australia there is wide variation between communities and within communities. A recent report on *Inequality in Australia* by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)¹⁰ finds that levels of income and wealth inequality in Australia are significant and increasing. Those in the highest 20% income group have approximately six times higher incomes than those who are in the lowest 20% group. When looking at wealth inequality, the effects are even more striking. Those in the highest 20% wealth group have 90 times more wealth than those in the lowest 20% wealth group.¹¹

Recent Senate and Parliamentary enquiries into intergenerational welfare and income inequality in Australia¹² highlight common determinants to alleviating entrenched and acute forms of disadvantage and poverty including:

- access to appropriate and stable housing, rental assistance and decent wage,
- access to reliable and sufficient income to meet daily needs and rising living costs,
- access to quality health services,
- secure employment and meaningful work,
- access to education and training, and
- skills and services to break out of localised or inter-generational poverty.

At a global scale, several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) are focused on addressing structural disadvantage, poverty and their causes, including:

-  **Goal 1** – No Poverty
-  **Goal 3** – Good health and well-being
-  **Goal 8** – Decent work and economic growth
-  **Goal 10** – Reduced inequalities

“ It is clear that material conditions of societies [are predisposed to] some extent to face serious problems in case of floods, quakes and other disasters.”¹³

3.2. Disaster vulnerability in communities experiencing disadvantage

Disadvantage heightens vulnerability to disaster

While all people are vulnerable when facing a bushfire, the different ways that disadvantage can be experienced creates preconditions for heightened vulnerability to the impacts of disasters. For example, after disasters the poor typically become poorer.¹⁴ Further, this vulnerability is clustered in particular geographical communities.

Definitions of vulnerability (in the disaster context) tend to relate directly to a person’s or group’s “capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard”.¹⁵ Vulnerability can be considered the pre-event, as inherent in a community system that creates the potential for future harm.¹⁶

The Australian Government, through Emergency Management Australia, portrays two dimensions of vulnerability in the disaster setting: (a) pre-existing vulnerabilities in a system that contribute to a scale of impact; and (b) post-event vulnerabilities that emerge as consequences and cascading impacts following the occurrence of a severe to catastrophic event.

Others unpack the concept further by examining the underlying reasons for the lack of community capacity that results in vulnerability. For example, vulnerability is a multidimensional process that is influenced by social, political, and economic forces.¹⁷ It is more than hazards and risks — it includes complex problems with habitat, power, response mechanisms, and human, informational and logistical resources that are related to geopolitical systems and

historical structures.¹⁸ It can be considered a “function of exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity”, which are influenced by access to resources, governance, culture, and the multidimensional nature of knowledge and information.¹⁹ More simply, vulnerability occurs in places where a lack of access to power, resources and assets prevent people or groups from properly and effectively anticipating, coping with and recovering from the effects and impacts of risks or disasters.²⁰

In summary, individuals, communities and organisations can be vulnerable to disaster because of their:

- geographical residence,
- access to resources (level of protection and services including individuals e.g. professionals and volunteers; logistical e.g. supplies, transport),
- access to knowledge (informational e.g. media and messages; differential access),
- governance (how societal problems are addressed by governments and other organizations),
- culture (shared and patterned meanings held by members of social groups), and
- resilience (hierarchy of response mechanisms to manage resources).

The potential ways that disadvantage creates vulnerabilities to disaster are multidimensional, centring on how it limits opportunities and capacities. People experiencing poverty are less likely to prepare for hazards, buy insurance, or respond to warnings, and more likely to perceive hazards as risky, to die, suffer injuries, have proportionately higher material losses, have psychological trauma, and face more obstacles during response, recovery, and reconstruction phases.²¹

Box 1: Multidimensional ways that disadvantage creates vulnerabilities²²

- **Risk perception** has been reported in some studies to be heightened in disadvantaged groups (while others report no relationship).
- **Preparedness behaviour** of disadvantaged groups before disasters are reported to be lower (although other studies contest this²³).
- **Warning communication and response** may be lower for some disadvantaged groups (e.g. homeless, unemployed, low income, public housing).
- **Physical impacts** such as property damage, homelessness and physical harm (including loss of life) are greater in disadvantaged groups including those with low socioeconomic status. Quality of health care can be lower in ethnic minorities.
- **Financial impacts** are also greater in disadvantaged groups, which can include higher likelihood of having insecure employment, less likely to have access to paid leave, and lower or zero savings to draw upon in the case of emergencies.
- **Psychological impacts** may be greater in ethnic minorities due to disparities in relation to accessing mental health services, partially relating to stigma and mistrust.
- **Recovery and reconstruction** is often hampered in disadvantaged areas due to difficulty in obtaining and receiving aid (barriers include lack of knowledge of aid, discomfort with the associated systems and logistical issues such as transport, child care and work schedules).

These factors could be considered social determinants of disasters, paralleling the concept of social determinants of health.



Figure 1: The dynamic impacts of disaster on vulnerability and disadvantage

Disaster exacerbates vulnerabilities and can further entrench disadvantage

A dynamic relationship exists between disadvantage and vulnerability. People experiencing disadvantage tend to be more vulnerable to risk and are more likely to fall into crisis if they encounter shocks or stresses. In addition, vulnerability to certain threats can be a catalyst that plunges people into disadvantage, creating forms of acute or 'new disadvantage' (see Figure 1)²⁴. Again, these experiences are concentrated in certain communities. There is evidence of inequitable impact on income for particularly vulnerable communities after a disaster – what people, communities and countries had before a disaster, tends to shape what they can access afterwards. Income gaps often widen after disasters.²⁵

In short, the impacts of disaster can result in reinforced disadvantage. This is termed "chronic disaster syndrome".²⁶

Evidence suggests post-disaster policy can increase the vulnerability of already vulnerable communities. For example, funding approaches can serve to entrench disadvantage when they include inaccessible processes, exhaustive applications and unrealistic timelines. Particular cohorts experiencing disadvantage tend to be the most disconnected from the service system, find prescriptive funding processes alien, and lack confidence to apply.²⁷

This was emphasised by Craig Fugate, the former Administrator of the USA Federal Emergency Management Agency, who observed that

parts of the community not at the table during emergency planning often those experiencing forms of disadvantage immediately become more vulnerable. He argues that more inclusive planning with participation reflecting the whole community is needed to counter this.²⁸

Compounding disasters present increased risk for communities experiencing disadvantaged

When communities lack capacity to adequately prepare for, respond to and recover from each consecutive impact of compounding disaster events, their vulnerability is exacerbated.²⁹ There is significant risk that as compounding disasters become more frequent, they will serve to further entrench structural disadvantage in communities.

In Australia, natural disasters are increasingly affecting communities facing entrenched disadvantage.³⁰ In these communities, people or groups that are experiencing disadvantage will continue to suffer disproportionately from the adverse and compounding effects of climate change via three main avenues: (a) increased exposure to the adverse effects of climate change; (b) increased susceptibility to damage caused by climate change; and (c) decreased ability to cope and recover from the damage suffered.³¹ The vulnerability of a community in terms of mental health also tends to increase with each disaster, with prior disaster exposure seeming to increase vulnerability to symptoms of depression soon after a newly experienced disaster.³²

3.3. Bushfire disaster and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

"Like you, I've watched in anguish and horror as fire lays waste to precious Yuin land, taking everything with it – lives, homes, animals, trees – but for First Nations people it is also burning up our memories, our sacred places, all the things which make us who we are. It's a particular grief, to lose forever what connects you to a place in the landscape. Our ancestors felt it, our elders felt it, and now we are feeling it all over again as we watch how the mistreatment and neglect of our land and waters for generations, and the pig-headed foolishness of coal-obsessed climate change denialists turn everything and everyone to ash."³³

"The sight of this old tree with her crown removed brought warm, stinging tears to my eyes. It was a deep hurt of losing someone far older and wiser than me. Losing someone who was respected and adored. Someone with knowledge I cannot fathom or comprehend. When I told my mum that evening she reacted similarly, a personal and family loss. To others she might just be a big tree."³⁴

Indigenous Australians were among the most severely affected by the Black Summer fires

"For Aboriginal people disasters can be particularly profound due to the deep connections between land, culture, history, colonisation and identity."³⁵

Bhiamie Williamson told the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements³⁶ that 96,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including 35,000 children, were "disproportionately affected" by the 2019/20 Summer Bushfires in Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia.³⁷ Over 84,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, or one quarter of the

“ For Aboriginal people disasters can be particularly profound due to the deep connections between land, culture, history, colonisation and identity”.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of NSW and Victoria, live in the bushfire-affected areas.³⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in NSW and Victoria are more highly represented in the bushfire-affected areas than non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander people, relative to state population averages. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples comprise nearly 5.4% of the 1.55 million people living in fire-affected areas, they are only 2.3% of the total population of NSW and Victoria.³⁹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are among Australia's most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities to disaster. The [Australia's Welfare 2017: in brief](#), by Australian Institute of Health and Welfare⁴⁰ reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are consistently in lower income groups, disproportionately engaged with the criminal justice system, and are at greater risk of educational developmental delays in childhood.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the bushfire-affected areas have younger population profiles. More than one tenth of children in the bushfire-affected area identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, raising the diverse effects of bushfires on infants and children as a particular concern – including, trauma, health, and access to education and housing.⁴¹



Disaster impacts compounded by historical, cultural and intergenerational trauma

The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples during and after a disaster, including their engagement with institutional services, is influenced by their experience of historical, cultural and intergenerational trauma.

"Without considering the historical, political and cultural contexts that continue to define the lives of Aboriginal peoples, responses to the crisis may be inadequate and inappropriate".⁴²

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, colonialism is not historical, but a lived experience, the anxieties of which are exacerbated by the growing reality of climate change.⁴³

Not only do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the fire-affected areas suffer historical trauma stemming from the colonisation of their homelands, they continue to live in a system that perpetuates ongoing trauma. This includes the continued suppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' rights and access to their homelands, the ongoing removal of children from families and communities, and the continued marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in influential policymaking settings.⁴⁴

"Colonial legacies of eradication, dispossession, assimilation and racism continue to impact the lived realities of Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander Peoples]. Added to this is the widespread exclusion of our peoples from accessing and managing traditional homelands. These factors compound the trauma of these unprecedented fires".⁴⁵

Cultural trauma has been caused by the contemporary and historical interventions into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life, including the destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law, spirituality, social structure, and the possession of sacred lands (the central foundations of cultural life-ways).⁴⁶ These interventions into "Indigenous cultural knowledge and practices are likely to completely undermine the effectiveness of their cultural worldview as an anxiety-buffer, and lead to anxiety related cognitions and behaviours".⁴⁷

The Stolen Generations was perhaps the most critical assault on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as it undermined and destabilised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social structures central to cultural practice, and thus, transmission.⁴⁸

Inadequate institutional disaster responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

The numerical minority status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples means they are at risk of being overlooked in disaster resilience initiatives by not being at the table alongside other agencies or community members to discuss preparedness, response or recovery.⁴⁹ In conversations with community members affected by the 2019/20 Summer Bushfires and institutional representatives involved in disaster response efforts, this report's authors heard concerns that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples had been under-represented in accessing post-bushfire recovery services and grants in a particular area, and that some were denied support from relief centres. We heard that 'making a difference' was ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples survived a winter living in tents, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's social and emotional wellbeing continued to be affected throughout 2020 due to the social isolation imposed by COVID-19 restrictions.

Evidence suggests that disaster response services lacked cultural awareness. For example, no agencies at the Disaster Recovery Centres (DRCs) had protocols or guidelines on assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁰ Representatives of agencies that did not ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status felt it was racist to ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and that ‘everyone should be treated the same’, or ‘we are all equal’.⁵¹ The cultural appropriateness of DRCs needs improvement. Elders and community members tend to be overwhelmed, with many forms to be completed, which is challenging for those who are illiterate and require assistance to fill them out. There is no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Liaison or focal point to assist in DRCs.⁵² There are also accounts of interpersonal racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples during the recovery process. One incident reported in Far East Gippsland was of a relief centre worker turning away an Aboriginal elder, saying ‘we’ve helped enough of you people today’.⁵³

Noting the shameful rates of child removal from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly in NSW and Victoria, it is quite reasonable that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may be fearful and hesitant to engage with family services, putting them at risk of accessing sub-standard support or indeed, not accessing support at all, leading to further risks and vulnerabilities.⁵⁴

3.4. Compounding effects of trauma

“Trauma occurs in a context, and that affects our experience. Time can decontextualise trauma. Trauma decontextualised in a person looks like personality, trauma decontextualised in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in a people looks like culture.”⁵⁵

Trauma has been defined as: “a ‘sudden harmful disruption impacting on all of the spirit, body, mind and heart’ that requires healing.⁵⁶ Psychologically, trauma has been defined as:

“[A]n emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor’s sense of invulnerability to harm’.⁵⁷

“Trauma is qualitatively different from other negative life stressors as it fundamentally shifts perceptions of reality’.⁵⁸

All communities that lived through the 2019/20 Summer Bushfires will be experiencing collective trauma – the shared ongoing experience of a traumatic event(s). Communities, composed of individuals and groups, are bound together to respond to a disaster collectively.⁵⁹ But the disaster “can cause social disconnection, which can profoundly disrupt community life. This ‘debonding’ undermines the social fabric of community, which is one of the most important recovery resources we have’.⁶⁰ When the community on which people depend for support is disrupted, fractured or dislocated, it is more difficult for people to recover from trauma.⁶¹

Unique dimensions of trauma affect individuals and groups in complex ways, particularly for those living in disadvantaged communities. For individuals and groups who have experienced cycles of strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity, disaster impacts exacerbate already high levels of stress. Traumatic events overlay with existing traumas related to their experiences of disadvantage, which may affect people's ability to think clearly, make sense, problem solve, self-organise and make decisions.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, the impacts of bushfire and social disconnection are further compounded by historical, intergenerational and cultural trauma rooted in colonisation and systemic racism. This can be "particularly profound due to the deep connection between land, culture, history, colonisation and identity".⁶²

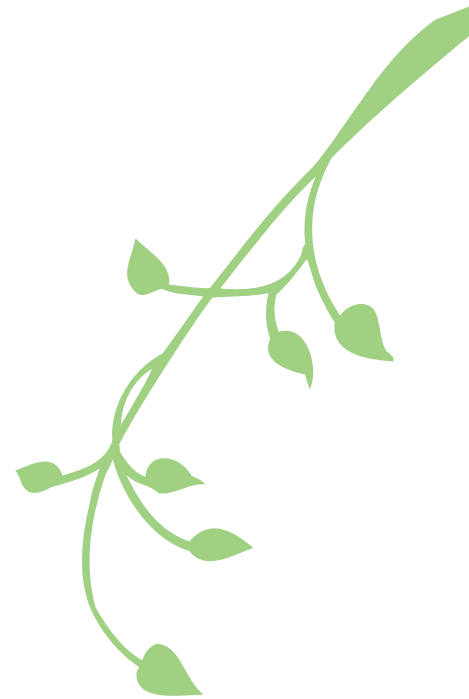
Historical trauma can become embedded in the collective, cultural memory of a people and is passed on by the same mechanism through which culture, generally, is created.⁶³ Intergenerational trauma recognises that trauma will continue down the generations until a healing action breaks the cycle.⁶⁴

"The legacy of institutional racism and systemic racism in economic, governmental and social systems has resulted --and continues to result-- in the disproportionate distribution of the cost and benefits of society".⁶⁵

Cultural trauma is a state wherein "cultural knowledge and practices have been weakened to the extent that they fail in their capacity to imbue individual existence with meaning and value".⁶⁶ A culture is susceptible to trauma when it has suffered widespread and persistent suppression of cultural practices.⁶⁷

"Negative effects of evacuations and relocations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples include inability to maintain proper relations with Country, disconnections from Country and family and loss of resources, all of which occurs in the historical context of dispossession and forced relocation under settler colonialism".⁶⁸

In a disaster event such as bushfire, these compounding dimensions of trauma within a community experiencing entrenched disadvantage hinders their collective capacity to cooperate, collaborate and coordinate, which are important ingredients for their recovery and healing.



A SHIFTING PARADIGM *in* DISASTER MANAGEMENT





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SECTION 4

4.1 Taking stock after the 2019/20 Summer Bushfires

4.2 Emerging focus on disaster risk reduction

4.3 A renewed focus on resilience

4.4 Emerging focus on community-led recovery

4.5 Need for greater focus on disadvantage and vulnerability

4.1. Taking stock after the 2019/20 Summer Bushfires

There have been numerous independent and commissioned Commonwealth and State/Territory Government reviews into the 2019/20 Australian bushfires. These build on previous reviews and inquiries into Australian bushfires. The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub provides a useful [summary](#) of these.¹ Two national-level reviews are particularly notable: the [Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report](#)² and the [CSIRO Report on Climate and Disaster Resilience](#).³

The Royal Commission's Terms of Reference required examination of how Australia is prepared and coordinated to respond to bushfires and other natural disasters, Australia's arrangements for improving resilience and adaptation to changing climatic conditions, as well as how to mitigate the impact of such disasters when they occur. Its Final Report was tabled in Parliament on 30 October 2020.

The Royal Commission received over 1,770 submissions from both the community and government agencies about their lived experiences of the summer season. It did not critique the management of these events and avoided proportioning blame relating to the events of the summer season, but rather focused on reviewing and recommending 'what should be done' to improve national arrangements in relation to all phases of natural disasters – before, during and after – for the future safety of all Australians. The Royal Commission did not set out to provide commentary on 'how to' achieve their recommended improvements.

Three principles can be extracted from the [Royal Commission's Final Report](#).⁴

1. State and territory governments have primary responsibility – and accountability – for emergency management. The Royal Commission did not propose that this should change.
2. During the 2019/20 Summer bushfires, the Australian public expected greater Australian Government action, including achieving an effective national approach to natural disasters. This requires a clear, robust and accountable system capable of both providing a comprehensive understanding of, and responding to, the aggregated risks associated with mitigation, preparation for, response to and recovery from natural disasters.
3. Such a system must have unbroken linkages in place from the highest levels of government to individuals in the community; provide decision makers with timely, consistent and accurate information; be structured for decisions to be made at the most appropriate level; allow decision makers to understand and mitigate all risks so far as reasonably practicable; enable stakeholders to understand the residual risk and inform others so that they may take appropriate actions; and it must be resourced to fulfil these functions.



Alongside the Royal Commission, the Prime Minister commissioned CSIRO to conduct a concurrent review and report in January 2020. This delivered an independent study recommending ways Australia can increase its climate and disaster resilience. The Review was chaired by Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel, with the support of an Expert Advisory Panel. Their report, entitled *Climate and Disaster Resilience*,⁵ was released in August 2020 and includes recommendations on building Australia's climate and disaster resilience for consideration by governments and is underpinned by a more detailed technical report.

A narrative literature review produced by the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre examined barriers and enablers to successful recovery.⁶ Barriers include the type, scale, location and social impact of the disaster; the built environment; economic impact; outward migration; age; gender; vulnerable, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse populations; and mental health. Key ingredients to successful recovery include community resilience, government as a vital player in recovery, community engagement, greening (restoring social-ecological systems, for example through community gardens), and monitoring recovery.

While there is extensive evidence on initiatives to support disaster preparation and response, there are few studies examining longer-term recovery processes.⁷ There is therefore a need for strengthened knowledge on the types and timing of initiatives that promote and enhance long-term recovery following natural disasters like bushfires.⁸

One recent sentinel research study, the *10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report*,⁹ helps address the gap in our understanding of long-term disaster recovery. Gibbs and her colleagues followed a large cohort of individuals affected by the Victorian 2009 bushfires, with a focus on the mental health and wellbeing of community members, for 10 years. The Report makes 45 recommendations grouped under community members, support for school communities, and government and service providers respectively.

Many of the insights and recommendations published in the Royal Commission, the CSIRO Report and other recent publications from the disaster management sector reflect a shifting paradigm – calling for a focus on disaster risk reduction, longer-term resilience and local community. We explore these emerging areas of focus in the following sections, as well as highlight one area in need of greater attention: disadvantage and vulnerability.

4.2. Emerging focus on disaster risk reduction

The emerging emphasis in Australian disaster management reflects a shift from a reactive ‘managing response’ to the more proactive ‘disaster risk management’ and ‘mitigation’. Guiding this shift are links between the mainstream injury prevention paradigm, disaster resilience, behaviour change and community development. Specific tools influencing the operationalisation of disaster risk reduction approaches in Australia are the international [Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 – 2030](#)¹⁰ and the recently released [Australian National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#).¹¹

The Royal Commission embraces disaster risk management and mitigation as a national imperative. It identified three factors that contribute to disaster risk¹² (Figure 2):

- **hazards:** a natural process or phenomenon that may cause loss of life, injury or other adverse impacts, including on mental and physical health, property, the economy, communities, and environmental assets;
- **exposure:** people, property or other assets present in hazard areas that are subject to potential losses; and
- **vulnerability:** the conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards.

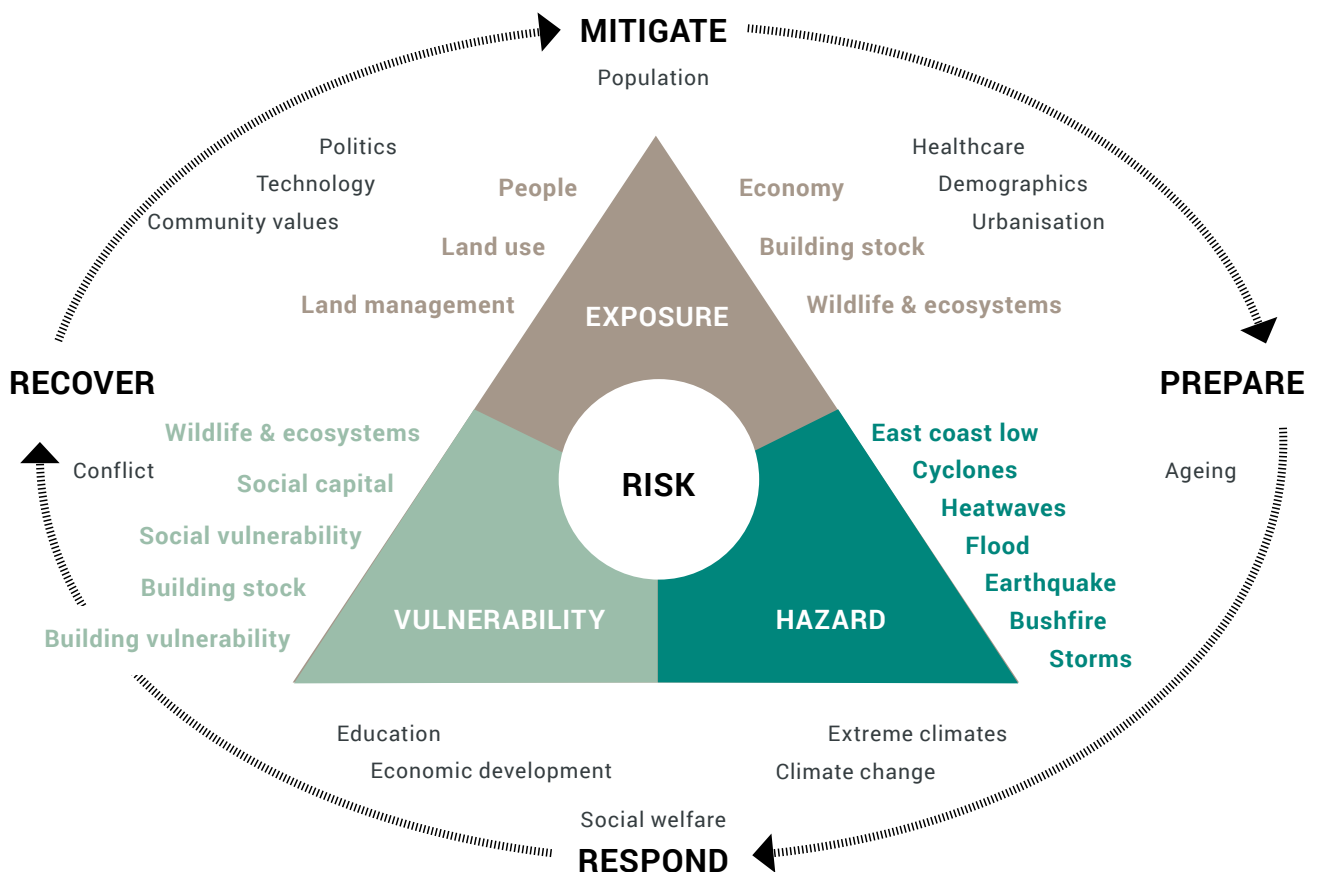


Figure 2: Elements of disaster risk associated with natural hazards.¹³

Giving attention to each of these factors can, therefore, help in the management of disaster risk at each of the before, during and after stages of disasters.¹⁴ Importantly, the Royal Commission notes that the recovery phase from one disaster can also be the mitigation and preparedness phases for the next.¹⁵ Risk reduction strategies should be multifactorial and consider: (1) eliminating, reducing or mitigating hazards; (2) eliminating, reducing or mitigating exposure; and (3) reducing vulnerability and increasing capacity through the lens of resilience building and community development. Whilst not reflected in the diagram, it is important to remember that the process of recovery comprises different phases, some of which can take years. This temporal dimension can play a key role in influencing how these risk reduction strategies are best implemented.

As well as considering risk in the various stages of disasters, Figure 2 (previous page) also conceptualises a range of other factors portrayed around the central concept of risk which may influence 'risk management'. These factors could be seen as the social determinants of disasters, a concept introduced in Section 3.

Disaster impacts are extensive, connected, complex and long term. The Royal Commission emphasises the emerging concept of 'compound disasters' in which disasters occur alongside other societal stressors that increase a community's vulnerability (see Section 3 for earlier discussion). The recent Australian experience suggests consecutive and cascading events adds to this complexity.

As the Royal Commission commented,

“It is no longer suitable or appropriate to assess disaster risk at an individual hazard level. We must assess the risk of multiple hazard events occurring concurrently or consecutively. We must look for opportunities to reduce the exposure of communities to natural hazard events and increase the capacity of communities to prepare for and recover from their impacts”.¹⁶

Initially led by the National Resilience Taskforce, two national papers: *Deconstructing Disaster: The strategic case for developing an Australian Vulnerability Profile to enhance national preparedness*¹⁷ and *Profiling Australia's Vulnerability: The interconnected causes and cascading effects of systemic disaster risk*¹⁸ informed the evolution of the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework.¹⁹ This national Framework, together with the 2011 National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, provides direction for addressing this national imperative. The Framework identifies four national priorities that guide action to reduce disaster risk. The priorities include:

- understanding disaster risk;
- accountable decisions;
- governance, ownership and responsibility; and
- enhanced investment.

Each priority has five-year outcomes that are supported by strategies for action over 2019–2023. Above all, the Framework embeds 'mitigation' in the disaster lexicon.

4.3. A renewed focus on resilience

Taken together, the recent Royal Commission, CSIRO Report and state/territory-based reviews commissioned in the wake of the devastating 2019/2020 bushfires suggest a growing appetite for a re-focus on resilience, originally introduced by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as the [National Strategy for Disaster Resilience](#)²⁰ in 2011.²¹ While short-term recovery responses remain essential, building a stronger foundation of longer-term resilience is critical in the face of projections of more frequent and severe natural hazards. Resilience is identified as an essential ingredient in helping mitigate the impacts of natural hazards when they occur, and facilitating a swift recovery.

This renewed focus on resilience is evident through initiatives such as [Emergency Management Victoria's 'Community Resilience Framework'](#),²² the recent establishment of [Resilience NSW](#)²³ as the coordinating State Government institution for disasters/emergencies, and the many resilience-related recommendations coming out of the [Royal Commission](#).²⁴ New national resilience-based institutions are being established including, the [National Recovery and Resilience Agency](#),²⁵ and [Australian Climate Services](#)²⁶ both supporting a newly enhanced [Emergency Management Australia](#).²⁷

The Royal Commission confirmed the need for a greater focus on the concept of resilience in the context of disaster. As the Commission described, “there needs to be a fundamental shift in strategic thinking about national natural disaster management. If there were one word that encapsulates this shift, it would be ‘resilience’”.²⁸ The Royal Commission went further, specifically calling for a national approach to resilience-building that rests on “strategic imagination” and “big country thinking”.²⁹ While national leadership is required, the Royal Commission made clear that this is a shared responsibility, requiring greater cooperation and coordination between the various levels of government, business, community and individuals.

The Royal Commission draws on [COAG's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience](#)³⁰ to describe resilience. It notes that experiences of the 2019/20 Summer bushfire season, as well as experiences of other disasters, illustrate a continuing need to promote and encourage disaster-resilient communities. A disaster-resilient community, according to the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, is one where people in that community have (among other elements):

- an awareness of the hazards and risks that affect them in their local area, including an awareness of who is most vulnerable, and understand what actions they need to take in order to prepare for and mitigate these risks;
- taken action to anticipate disasters and protect themselves, their assets, their livelihoods and their possessions, and to commit the necessary resources to organise themselves before, during and after a disaster; and
- an understanding of the mechanisms and processes through which recovery assistance may be made available.³¹

Disaster recovery is presented in the Royal Commission as a core part of resilience, particularly when it aims to ‘build back better’ – that is, recover in a way that makes the nation better prepared to withstand the next disaster, and make recovery more responsive to local needs.³²

The CSIRO Report similarly recognised the need to foster long-term resilience in order to reduce industry, community and environmental exposure to natural disaster. It states:

*“the concept of resilience must be incorporated into planning, land use and investment decision processes, including critical infrastructure and capability investment, to influence how and where we build and drive ongoing improvements in the standard and design of the built environment and critical infrastructure. This essentially forms the foundation of the next cycle of planning and preparation on which future resilience can be built.”*³³

Despite the widespread use of the word by the disaster management sector, along with descriptions of what it might look like in practice, resilience is a concept that has been borrowed from other disciplines. It is typically framed through a biophysical lens, thought of in terms of infrastructure, investment and planning cycles. It is embodied in the concept of 'building back better', referring both to where we should rebuild, as well as how. For the most part, disaster resilience is used to give focus to protecting critical infrastructure and housing stock within and across communities, informed by the insurance industry and its detailed understanding of risk.

While this biophysical focus is undoubtedly necessary for resilience, it is not sufficient for developing community resilience. It misses the collective social, relational and wellbeing aspects of resilience, and the importance of the interconnectedness between people and place. This risks minimising the potential of a holistic resilience-focused approach to lead to long-term disaster preparedness and community recovery efforts.

As such, there is not yet a clear definition for what resilience means for people living in these communities, or indeed how to operationalise and measure it in practice.³⁴ Further, there is a lack of evidence on the lived experience of communities as they mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters (see Figure 2). This is problematic, particularly when considering the resilience needs of communities who experience forms of disadvantage and therefore typically have increased exposure and vulnerability to disaster hazards.

The literature on disaster resilience provides useful insight on terms, definitions and principles that start to engage with the social contexts and opportunities that are integral to a holistic understanding of resilience. Two underlying and interrelated principles can be identified:

1. **The recognition that bushfire and other disaster impacts are experienced and responded to in highly local ways**, often interacting with other societal and natural processes, stressors and events. A 'place-based' understanding of and approach to resilience is therefore needed. Such an understanding should be both:
 - holistic – acknowledging the interconnections and influences of broader societal (top-down) processes, and
 - contextually sensitive – particularly to (bottom up) attributes, properties and values of communities, community groups and individuals in the resilience building process.
2. **A focus on the capacities of individuals, communities and institutions** to access resources, learn from experiences and develop constructive ways of dealing with common problems, stressors or change.³⁵ These resources can relate to human attributes (such as skills, knowledge, health and energy), social capital (including networks and connected groups and institutions), physical capital (such as infrastructure, technology and equipment), financial capital (savings and credit) and natural capital (natural resources, water land and geography).³⁶

Importantly, it is the nature of these resources, the relationships between them and the ways they are perceived and made accessible to different individuals, groups and broader communities that determines the extent of resilience people and communities possess in the face of different types of threats and disasters.





4.4. Emerging focus on community-led recovery

The Royal Commission noted the importance of a locally-led approach that is tailored to the needs and priorities of local communities to build resilience and improve disaster response. It commented, “while natural disasters on a national scale are likely to become more common, all disasters large and small require a local response”.³⁷ A locally-led approach means that initiatives respond to the needs of local communities, and take account of differences in climate, geography, ecosystems, demography, culture and resources. In submissions to the Royal Commission, a locally-led response was described as ‘one of the strengths of the disaster management system’ and a ‘foundational principle’, and was strongly supported by state, territory and local governments.

The increasing adoption of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land management practices was identified as an example of the benefits of incorporating local knowledge. The Royal Commission noted the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and fire management practices in mitigating the effects of bushfires and improving disaster resilience. With approaches tailored to specific places, and engaging local people in development and implementation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land management differs widely across Australia, demonstrating the value of locally-led responses.

Despite recognising the need for action at the local community level, the Royal Commission does not provide a definition of ‘community’. It does not set out to provide guidance on the scope of action needed at this scale, nor how to understand the concept of ‘community’ in this context. Similarly, while it clearly calls for a locally-led approach to improving resilience and disaster recovery, the Royal Commission does not provide guidance on how this is best achieved.

The [CSIRO report](#) also notes the key role local communities play in building a foundation of long-term resilience. It states that it is:

“important to recognise that individuals and communities, with their intrinsic and planned resilience also play a critical role in effective preparation and subsequent recovery. They need to be well supported with regular engagement, trusted information and education, particularly on understanding and managing risk. This is a key factor in further building resilience.”³⁸

And further:

“individuals and communities are key to determining levels of acceptable risk and enabling the uptake of prevention and risk reducing resilience measures within their control. Hence capacity building, education and learning must be factored into the design and implementation of resilience frameworks and measures at all levels.”³⁹

To advance work in this space, CSIRO identified the need to develop, test and prioritise resilience-building approaches. This in turn relies on: (1) understanding exposure and vulnerability of communities, natural assets and infrastructure; and (2) undertaking inclusive community-involved development of goals and objectives for interventions.⁴⁰

The [AIDR/EMA National Handbook on Community Recovery](#)⁴¹ highlights that a disaster event and subsequent recovery processes are part of ongoing community development trajectories, emphasising strengths-based approaches and Asset-Based Community-Driven Development (ABCD). Each community experiences its own local dynamics before a major disaster event occurs, the disaster disrupts the community, and relief and recovery services are typically present for a short period before leaving the community to continue its long-term recovery and ongoing community development (Figure 3).



Response

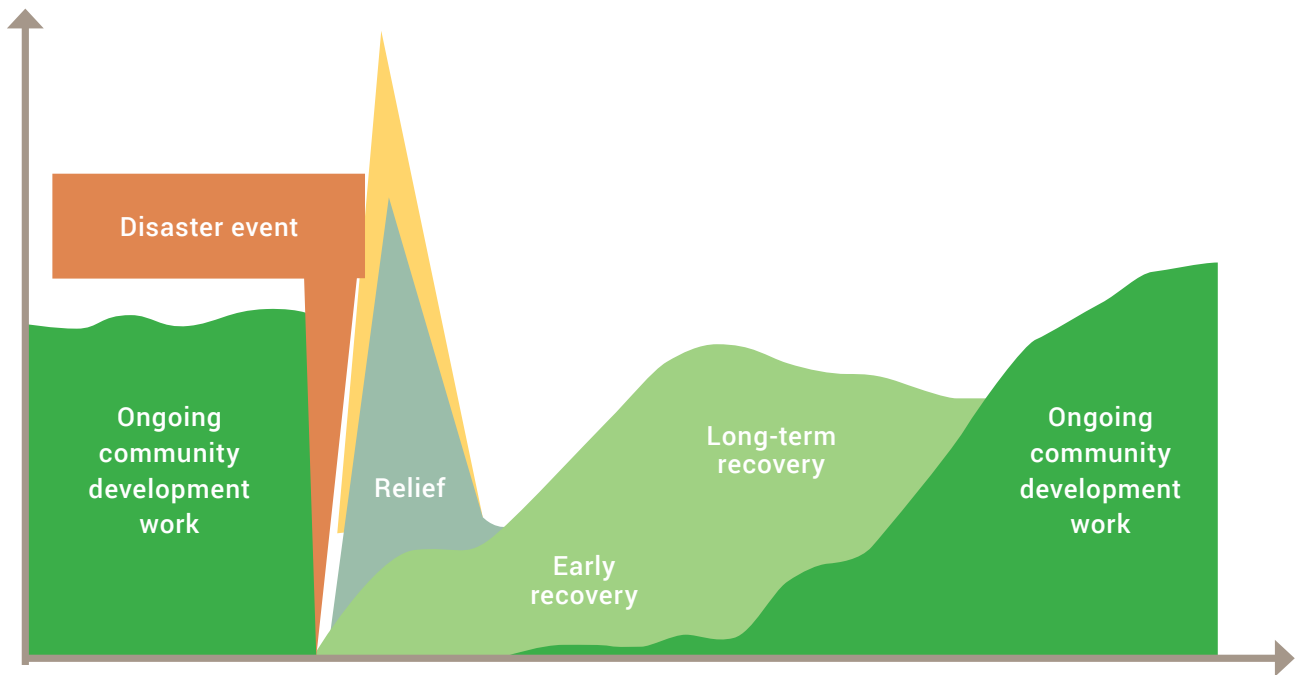


Figure 3. Effect of disaster on ongoing community development and interface with relief and recovery.⁴²

To support recovery efforts that can strengthen ongoing community development work, a number of Australian state and national governments, NGOs and community groups developed the National Principles for Disaster Recovery.⁴³ These principles emphasise that successful recovery must be based on local considerations and needs (see Box 2). They provide guidance on how communities need to be understood and engaged with for disaster recovery to be successful in improving their social, economic and environmental conditions, and ultimately contributing to their greater resilience.

These recovery principles and associated guidance are helpful starting points. They underpin the recently released [National Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Disaster Recovery Programs \(2018\)](#)⁴⁴ and the associated National Disaster Recovery Monitoring and Evaluation Database. However, existing models of disaster response and recovery do not yet sufficiently conceptualise community or provide guidance on how to progress this agenda. While the notion of ‘community’ is contested, particularly in the context of disaster events, it is nonetheless important to identify and operationalise the concept of community as it relates to specific endeavours undertaken to enhance resilience. In this context, it is imperative to consider resilience of what, to what and for whom, and to develop an agenda that adequately considers the various expressions and experiences of ‘community’.

Our review of the sector literature leads us to believe that there is demonstrable and increasing evidence of governments and agencies engaging with communities in the disaster setting. However, we have less confidence in evidence of actual community-led initiatives. Terms such as 'community-centric', 'community-based', 'community engagement' and 'locally-led' confound the intent of 'community-led' initiatives where the community is empowered and resourced to initiate, develop, deliver and evaluate their own disaster recovery activities. Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the new National Recovery and Resilience Agency both have 'community-led' at the heart of their philosophies. The latter explicitly promotes 'locally led, locally understood and locally implemented' as its 'rallying call'.

There is now opportunity for further reflection and experimentation to develop new models and methods for working with communities to build resilience in practice. In particular, it is important to develop evidence and experience of the needs, priorities and opportunities of communities experiencing disadvantage that are recovering from bushfire and other disasters.

Box 2: The six National Principles for Disaster Recovery⁴⁵ are:

1. **Understand the context** and base recovery in each community's own history, values and dynamics;
2. **Recognise complexity** and the dynamic nature of both emergencies and the community;
3. **Use community-led approaches** that are community-centred, responsive and flexible, engaging with community and supporting them to move forward;
4. **Coordinate all activities** with a planned, coordinated and adaptive approach between community and partner agencies and based on continuing assessment of impacts and needs;
5. **Communicate effectively** between the affected community and other partners; and
6. **Acknowledge and build capacity** by recognising, supporting and building on individual, community and organisational capacity and resilience.

“Poverty reduction can be considered as disaster risk management, and disaster risk management can be considered as poverty reduction”.⁴⁶

4.5. Need for greater focus on disadvantage and vulnerability

While there is recognition that the vulnerability or resilience of individuals or communities depends on access to a range of resources (material and otherwise), there is limited exploration of the particular needs of communities experiencing forms of disadvantage, and how they can best be supported and engaged in these processes. In fact, there has been little systematic engagement in Australia’s disaster management sector with the diverse situations and needs of especially vulnerable groups. However, evidence suggests it is critically important to pay differentiated attention to specific groups (e.g. children, adolescents and young adults, older adults and vulnerable populations) who may bring new insights and particular needs. A gender lens and a disability lens are also noticeably lacking in the literature and in practice.

While the Royal Commission emphasises the importance of community, it does not provide consideration of the diversity *within* communities, and the particular needs of specific cohorts. For example, there is no specific consideration of vulnerable groups, nor any gender-based

implications. Additionally, there is no commentary on the diversity *across* communities. Most notably, the Royal Commission is largely silent on the issue of disadvantage, and how pre-existing disadvantage may influence a community’s experience of disaster and ability to engage with recovery or resilience-building activities.

There is some recognition that some matters are outside a person’s control. The Royal Commission notes that:

“a person’s exposure to natural disasters is not, however, entirely a matter of choice, but rather is affected by many factors outside their control. While responsibility for resilience and disaster risk management is shared between governments, individuals and others, it is often not shared equally. Individuals simply do not control many of the levers needed to reduce their exposure and vulnerability to natural disasters. There are other differences in people’s ability to mitigate the risks they face from disasters, aside from where they live. The decisions people make concerning where they live and how they manage risk are also affected by government decisions and laws”.⁴⁷

Beyond this acknowledgement that individuals and communities are differently prepared and resourced to deal with natural hazards, there is no specific consideration of disadvantage. Yet in conversations this report’s authors had with bushfire-affected community members and institutional representatives who engaged in relief and recovery services during and following the 2019/20 Summer bushfires, we heard a range of on-ground experiences that emphasise the importance of better understanding and responding to the particular needs of disadvantaged communities experiencing forms of disadvantage. For example, institutional funding flows were not reaching communities on the ground, a lack of institutional coordination overwhelmed community social infrastructure

through duplicative consultation and activity, and formal support systems involved complicated processes that were difficult to understand – particularly for people who were traumatised. Some people experiencing disadvantage did not reach out for support until twelve months after the bushfire event and some community members were still seeking to connect with the people who had been seemingly ‘overlooked’ by the system.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples are particularly regarded as being inadequately considered in response and recovery programs run by external organisations.⁴⁸ Further, historically there has been an “extraordinary absence” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in post-fire reviews, including the McLeod Inquiry (which followed the 2003 Canberra bushfires) and the 2009 Black Saturday Royal Commission – both critical processes of reflection and recovery for Australia.⁴⁹ This includes policies acknowledging the need to reduce the impact of fire on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples⁵⁰ and a lack of specific needs analysis and scoping studies.⁵¹

Communities (as defined by ABS Statistical Area 2) facing structural inequality are more likely to rank low on the Australian Disaster Resilience Index (ADRI).⁵² The ADRI takes a

structural view of disaster resilience by factoring in emergency services, planning and the built environment, economic capital, social character and demographics, community engagement, information access with telecommunications and internet, governance and leadership. The low resilience ranking of communities facing deep inequality are explained by entrenched social and economic disadvantage and limited opportunities for adaptive learning and problem solving.⁵³

The fact that entrenched social and economic disadvantage more likely leads to a low rank on the ADRI indicates that current knowledge, policies and processes for disaster resilience in Australia are insufficiently developed for individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage. Despite the growing institutional awareness of the need to support communities facing structural disadvantage in Australia to build their resilience to compounding disasters, it is yet to receive dedicated attention in terms of tailored policy and on-ground responses. This is a significant gap that needs to be addressed through new evidence, policy advice and practical guidance.



For example, the [Australian Academy of Health and Medical Science](#) argues that to mitigate the exacerbation of health inequalities,

“targeted advice and plans are needed for vulnerable population groups. Targeted interventions and early warnings are needed to prevent impacts such as respiratory problems and heat stress in vulnerable populations groups, including infants, children, the elderly, individuals with pre-existing conditions, pregnant women and Aboriginal and Torres Straits Island Peoples and communities.”⁵⁴

The Victorian Government’s ‘Victorian Vulnerable Persons Registers’ was one attempt to provide support to the vulnerable in times of disruption (suggested as a strategy by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission). However, they have proved difficult to implement, requiring one to be

on the list for the service to be effective. A 2020 evaluation of the [Victorian Vulnerable Persons Registers](#) identified many limitations in existing services and suggested:

“While the evaluation findings demonstrate limitations of registers in system design and implementation, there is strong acknowledgement from the sectors, through the responses to the discussion paper and the evaluation, of the need for a more contemporary approach in Victoria to support people who face greater risk in emergencies;

Contemporary approaches to community preparedness and resilience in emergencies require strong connections at the local level between people and the services, systems and structures that support the community to function. These approaches recognise that communities have varying strengths, challenges and emergency risks; and

While promoting and supporting community and individual resilience to emergencies is crucial, the Department acknowledges that building resilience may take time and people who face the greatest risk in emergencies must be supported at all points in the shift of approaches.”⁵⁵

As a nation, we need to better understand how to enable and build resilience in communities facing structural disadvantage so that future disasters do not serve to further embed and increase inequities for communities or groups of individuals within them.



OPPORTUNITY

Embed disaster resilience strategies in a community's development context

A community's experience of disaster impacts and recovery is situated in their ongoing community development processes. While guidance on how communities need to be understood and engaged with in disaster planning and recovery settings is emerging, further evidence and insight is needed to work effectively with diverse community groups to build resilience in practice. Specific opportunities include:

- a. Embed continued focus on understanding, mitigating and managing disaster risk within a longer-term and more holistic community development focus.
- b. Proactively seek out community voices not typically represented in disaster recovery and resilience building processes and develop evidence of their experiences, strengths, needs, priorities and opportunities.
- c. Provide tailored recovery and resilience building support to subgroups within communities – particularly those whose experience of disadvantage make them especially vulnerable during and after a disaster – in ways that respond to their differentiated needs and diverse capacities.
- d. Experiment with new models and methods for working with diverse communities to strengthen their community development processes in ways that build resilience in practice.



Forward agenda:
**A TRANSFORMATIVE
APPROACH TO
COMMUNITY RESILIENCE**



SECTION 5

- 5.1 Disaster as a transformative opportunity
- 5.2 Understand communities as place-based systems
- 5.3 Connect to Country
- 5.4 Increase people’s transformative capacities
- 5.5 Strengthen local leadership and social capital

5.1. Disaster as a transformative opportunity

The 2019/20 Summer bushfires were devastating for communities all around Australia. Recovery is a long and complex process that is often fraught, particularly for communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage. Yet with crisis comes the seeds of opportunity. Just like the Banksia requires the heat of fire to germinate and flower, can disaster recovery be transformative in ways that help communities flourish?

By this we mean using the significant disruption caused by a disaster as an opportunity to reconfigure the systems that influence community development trajectories so they can be steered to improve people’s wellbeing and disaster resilience over the long term. And for people experiencing long-term hardship and adversity, can this reconfiguration actually serve to break cycles of structural disadvantage?

While these questions remain untested hypotheses, the key may be in empowerment approaches that places the community at the centre of recovery and resilience-building processes geared towards transformative change. Broadly defined, empowerment represents the process of an individual or group increasing their capacity and relational power to meet their own goals, leading to transformative action.¹

A community-led, strengths-based approach to disaster recovery offers a promising pathway for shifting individuals and groups from a state of vulnerability and dependency, toward one of increased resilience, and potentially out of disadvantage (see Figure 4). We refer to this as transformative resilience – a holistic approach to community resilience that seeks to coordinate community resources and build capacities for coping and adapting to disaster events in ways that facilitate larger scale transformative change.

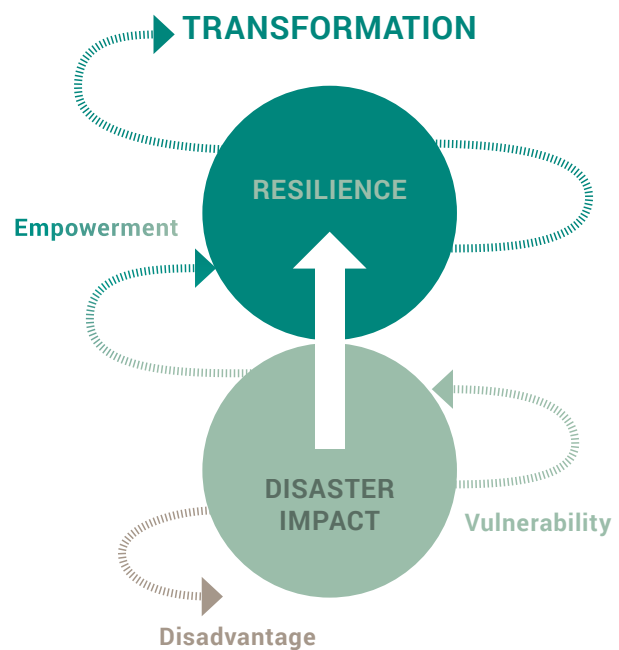


Figure 4. Disrupting entrenched disadvantage and disaster impact through a model of empowerment and transformation that supports communities to build resilience

Transformative resilience gives a long-term focus to community resilience and considers how short-term incremental steps and strategies (e.g. disaster recovery) can be coordinated in ways that support broader goals of community strengthening and quality of life enhancement. It is the result of coherent efforts by multiple stakeholders, all aligned towards a common vision, each reinforcing the others and together building momentum towards broader system transformation. These efforts can support small, fast and in-depth change along a transformative community development trajectory, enabling and amplifying small wins through sense making and integration, taking a broader whole-of-system approach.²

Key to transformative resilience is strengths-based community development that supports individuals and communities to marshal their strengths to deal with adversity. This represents a paradigmatic shift away from the dominant deficit model of disaster recovery and support, which typically focuses on what individuals, groups or entire communities are lacking, or based on what government agencies think they need.

Some may see 'community-led' as too polarising and not achievable, given communities' heterogenic compositions and lack of designated resilience resources. A recent literature review commissioned by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services in support of the national Social Recovery Reference Group (SRRG) entitled *Government's role in supporting community-*

*led approaches to recovery Literature Review*³

provides insight into operationalising a shared responsibility in addressing this conundrum. There are many stakeholders playing an important role in leading recovery initiatives and that this domain of the disaster spectrum remains dynamic. We have a collective opportunity to be complementary (rather than duplicative) in our efforts to embrace and operationalise community-led transformative resilience.

There are a number of future directions that evidence suggests are important for implementing a transformative approach to community-led disaster recovery and resilience:

- Understand communities as place-based systems
- Connect to Country
- Increase people's transformative capacities
- Strengthen local leadership and social capital.

5.2. Understand communities as place-based systems

"Every aspect of how we live is affected, even determined, by these [broader, interconnected] systems: what we understand about the risks where we live; where and how well we build our homes; how we design and where we locate our infrastructure; how we access and use power, water and food; how we communicate with one another; the transport options we have; our levels of health and wellbeing and the health and care system we access; how much we engage socially and participate politically; and whether we learn from our experience."⁴

A community's resilience is the result of a community system that both shapes and is shaped by interconnected social, institutional, physical and environmental processes and structures.⁵ Their interplay influences the extent of vulnerability and resilience for individuals and groups, and mediates their actions and capabilities.



OPPORTUNITY

Explore the potential of a transformative approach to disaster resilience

While the disaster sector's calls for emphasis on community leadership and action are clear, there is much to be learned about how communities, governments, NGOs and practitioners can partner in practice to strengthen disaster resilience. In particular, evidence and insight is needed on how to most effectively support diverse parts of a community to come together around a shared future vision that informs short-term recovery initiatives and guides transformative shifts over the long-term. Specific opportunities include:

- a. Design, conduct and evaluate** diverse trials of envisioning, empowerment and resilience planning processes that help align and mobilise diverse community members to implement innovative community-led resilience initiatives.
- b. Develop evidence** of processes, strategies and solutions that are effective for operationalising a transformative resilience approach for different people in different situations, including a focus on communities experiencing forms of disadvantage.
- c. Explore new governance models** that enable community leadership and institutional partnerships for driving and funding a transformative resilience approach that contributes to systemic shifts in a community's social, economic and environmental development.

It is essential to expressly acknowledge and work within this broader context, which shapes flows of resources and power dynamics, and in turn influences opportunities and breaks down barriers for individuals, groups and wider communities to participate.⁶ A systems perspective enables a consideration of all the factors that enable, constrain and influence a community. It can therefore foster a better understanding of how resilience building can be supported when communities face stressors such as natural hazards.

A community system is also grounded in a particular place. A systems perspective requires consideration of place-based characteristics, and their influence on community processes and resilience. There is great variability and complexity among communities, and the road to resilience

for one may not work in another. It is therefore imperative that recovery and resilience building work is informed by the impact of place, geography and change strategies on key issues (e.g. racism and racial injustice).⁷ The disaster resilience of place (DROP) model provides an approach that helps to take account of these place-based differences.⁸ It defines resilience as:

"the ability of a social system to respond and recover from disasters and includes those inherent conditions that allow the system to absorb impacts and cope with an event, as well as post-event, adaptive processes that facilitate the ability of the social system to re-organize, change, and learn in response to a threat".⁹

Box 3: Resilience factors for individuals

There is limited evidence on which (pre-disaster) individual or family characteristics – resilience factors¹³ – determine whether a person will have a resilient response to disaster, largely due to a lack of longitudinal and prospective studies. Nevertheless, three factors are often demonstrated to be important: self-efficacy, social support and past adverse life events.

Self-efficacy is the most commonly highlighted psychological resilience factor. It is the belief that one can perform novel or difficult tasks to attain desired outcomes, and therefore represents a self-confident view of one's capability to deal with life's stressors.

Social support or social capital is often hypothesised to be a key resilience factor, although the evidence remains mixed. The evidence is particularly strong for the importance of 'perceived' social support – a person's self-assessment that they have family or friends they can rely on in times of trouble. Other common measures of social support, such as involvement in clubs and community groups, are less consistently associated with resilient outcomes. In the context of Australian natural disasters, one study found that Australians with low self-efficacy and low perceived social support experienced less resilient outcomes following the occurrence of a natural disaster that damaged or destroyed their home.¹⁴

Occurrence of **past adverse life events** – such as disaster, divorce or unemployment – have also been shown to be an important resilience factor.¹⁵ These types of adverse events reduce the stock of (psychological) resources a person requires to deal with such events. A series of adverse events can therefore exhaust a person's resources, leading to serious deleterious outcomes if the person is then exposed to a disaster (for example). Given that people experiencing entrenched disadvantage are likely to face many types of adverse life events, it is unsurprising they are more negatively affected by disasters.

Other studies have identified the following additional factors influence individual resilience:

- inoculation and coping through brief exposure to risks;
- mental characteristics to support increased agency;
- experience of success and ability to exert control;
- 'turning point' effects (e.g. marriage, armed forces experience);
- social relationships;
- biological factors (development, responses to abuse and neglect);
- and gene-environment interactions.¹⁶

This place-based systems understanding also helps to distinguish between individual resilience and community resilience. Box 3 provides an overview of the social and psychological determinants of individual resilience. However, a collection of resilient individuals does not guarantee a resilient community – community resilience is more than the sum of its parts.¹⁰ Instead, community resilience is built on systems and programs that respond to vulnerable circumstances in times of disaster.

In addition, levels of resilience vary within communities between individuals and groups (e.g. families).¹¹ Therefore, a community resilience approach does not assume that resilience is universally shared throughout the community, or that processes of community resilience can always support individual resilience.¹²

In summary, a place-based systems understanding of community invites engagement with opportunities that have the potential to be transformative. This is critical for individuals and groups who are particularly vulnerable to natural hazards due to the systemic factors underlying their experiences of long-term disadvantage. It highlights a range of opportunities for place-based, mission-driven and research supported policy and practice to take next steps in Australia's ongoing collaborative efforts to improve community resilience and steer positive community development trajectories in the aftermath of bushfire and other disasters.

OPPORTUNITY

Work with communities as place-based systems

Place-based approaches do not exist in a vacuum of regional, state or federal systems. It is therefore imperative to highlight aspects of extra-local systems that may lead to greater vulnerability and entrenched disadvantage into the future, as well as aspects that can be important levers for strengthening community-led resilience.

- a. Understand how the diverse local attributes, including assets and relationships, that make up a community's system may mitigate or exacerbate disaster risk, or influence its recovery trajectory.
- b. Consider what system factors may influence people's opportunity to participate in disaster resilience initiatives, including the flow of and access to recovery resources.
- c. Invest in initiatives that build protective factors that are likely to buffer individuals and the community system from disaster impacts.

5.3. Connect to Country

Building on the previous section, the traditional wisdom held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities offers invaluable ways of thinking and knowing about place-based community systems. Research has found that Indigenous knowledge can enable a greater understanding of place-based hazards and disasters,¹⁷ and that drawing on local cultural practices can increase the capacity of local people to take ownership of their own process of recovery and restoration.¹⁸



Professor Brian Martin, Associate Dean Indigenous at Monash University’s Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, and an author of this Report, offers the following reflections:

When we think about Country, we should be thinking about the non-human as having the same status and importance as the human. Country as an entity is vital to understanding Indigenous ways of knowing and also sustainable living practices. Respect for Country means we are part of Country, we have relationality with it, and it is this relationality that builds mutual survivance.

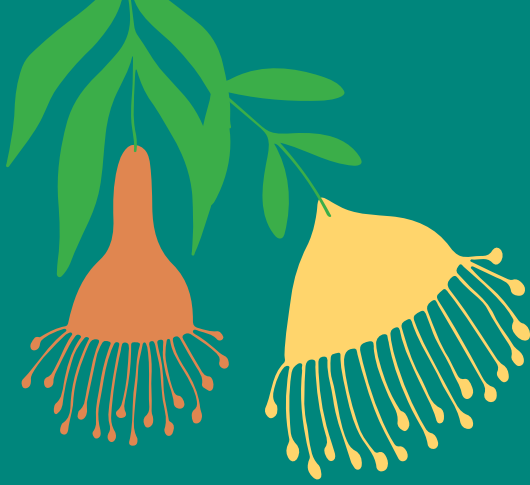
Place is important to Indigenous peoples, but it is vital to everyone.

*Indigenous scholar and leader Mary Graham discusses the relationship between different research methodologies of both Indigenous and western thinking. She distinguishes that for most western models of thinking, inquiry precedes Place – knowledge acquisition both defines and supersedes Place.¹⁹ Yet for Indigenous knowledges, Place precedes, defines and supersedes inquiry. Place is a living thing, whether it is geographically located or located as an event in time. Place does not hamper, confuse or attenuate inquiry, rather Place both enhances and clarifies inquiry. Place underpins inquiry but not merely in an ideological sense. Rather, Place underpins inquiry in the deepest ontological sense, inasmuch as, from an Indigenous point of view, it is the fundamental existential quantifier – **it informs us of who we are.***

Mary Graham states that because an Aboriginal understanding of Place is predicated on relationality of all things, there is an inextricable need for an ethical and moral approach to knowing.²⁰ Reality in this instance is predetermined, regardless of what people think about it. That reality is also ordered and regardless of its context and time – the natural world remains the same.

The inclusion of Place in a story provides an authentic explanation of how and why something comes into the world that in turn provides a balance between agency (human and spiritual) and point of origin or Place.

Not only history, but meaning, arises out of Place. The saying “the past is another Country” is from Aboriginal logic. When we consider the devastation that bushfires cause, we need to consider alternate ways of caring for Country. Indigenous ways of knowing can provide a way for On Country Learning.



It is also instructive to delve deeper into the ontology of Place and the colonial project and the contemporary direction of decolonisation. One of the key components we explore is a way for structure and ways of thinking to reconfigure themselves through a process of decolonisation. Indigenous cultural practices and ways of knowing offer deep value in this plight and can act as a platform for the decolonial project to possibly succeed. The colonial project was designed upon the premise of 'disregard and self-regard'. For Uncle Charles Moran, Uncle Greg Harrington and Norm Sheehan:

"regardless of its power, colonialism is just one of many possible genres of social design. From an Indigenous Knowledge perspective, decolonizing social design commences with the interactions that result from building relationships with knowledge outside the human mind because Knowledge lives in Country and has partnered with human designers since the beginning."²¹

They present a way of rethinking design and posit 'On Country Design', which is articulated through On Country Learning on Bundjalung Country. They recognise colonisation as a 'denaturing project' characterised by its pattern of disregard and self-regard. By recognising this, we open up the way towards a (de)colonial trajectory. For the Uncles and Norm Sheehan 'an interrogation of ontologies is essential to any decolonizing movement'.²²

To understand decolonisation, we must first accept that colonisation exists and has currency in contemporary societies.

"Colonial successes and the wealth gathered over centuries has benefited many, but it has also situated disregard, denial, and exploitation as primary to the epistemology of development. Thus, colonization is not a past doctrine; its violations and intrusions are embedded systematically in the assumptive framework of modern societies."²³

Colonisation designed on the patterns of disregard and self-regard have significantly impacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia. It has also had and continues to have a significant impact on Country and Place.

So, we need to ensure that we relook at systems of thinking about each other and particularly to Place. So how do we engage with Indigenous ways of knowing? We can look at the Australian and International Indigenous Design Charters²⁴ as a way of working with Indigenous cultural knowledge in a respectful and integral way, delivering benefit to the whole community.

Box 4: The 10 principles outlined in the Australian Indigenous Design Charter²⁵ are:

1. Indigenous Led

Ensure Indigenous stakeholders oversee creative development and the design process.

2. Self-Determined

Respect the rights of Indigenous peoples to determine the application of traditional knowledge and representation of their culture in design practice.

3. Community Specific

Ensure respect for the diversity of Indigenous culture by acknowledging and following regional cultural understandings.

4. Deep Listening

Ensure respectful, culturally specific, personal engagement behaviours for effective communication and courteous interaction. Make sure to be inclusive and ensure that recognised custodians are actively involved and consulted.

5. Indigenous Knowledge

Acknowledge and respond to the rich cultural history of Indigenous knowledge including designs, stories, sustainability and land management, with the understanding that ownership of knowledge must remain with the Indigenous custodians.

6. Shared Knowledge

Cultivate respectful, culturally specific, personal engagement behaviours for effective communication. This involves courteous interactions to encourage the transmission of shared knowledge by developing a cultural competency framework to remain aware of Indigenous cultural realities.

7. Shared Benefits

Ensure Indigenous people share in the benefits from the use of their cultural knowledge, especially where it is being commercially applied.

8. Impact of Design

Consider the reception and implication of all designs so that they protect the environment, are sustainable, and remain respectful of Indigenous cultures over deep time: past, present, and future.

9. Legal and Moral

Demonstrate respect and honour cultural ownerships and intellectual property rights, including moral rights, by obtaining appropriate permissions where required.

10. Charter Implementation

Ask the question if there is an aspect to the project, in relation to any design brief, that may be improved with Indigenous knowledge. Use the Charter to safeguard Indigenous design integrity and to help build the cultural awareness of your clients and associated stakeholders.



OPPORTUNITY

Incorporate Indigenous wisdom for the benefit of all

Indigenous ways of knowing and relating provide a powerful and under-utilised approach to living in greater harmony with the natural world, including in the context of bushfire. With a strong focus on relationality, Indigenous ways of knowing encourage us to live in connection with the land, and for communities to see themselves as part of that land and place, rather than separate. As emergency management increasingly shifts towards community-led and place-specific responses, there is significant opportunity for Indigenous wisdom to play a key role.

- a. Foreground Indigenous voices in all place-based community initiatives
- b. Actively incorporate Indigenous perspectives in design and delivery of bushfire preparedness and recovery initiatives, ensuring that Indigenous people engage directly and frequently with decision-makers.
- c. Create opportunities for Indigenous knowledge and practice to be shared with the broader community, fostering increased understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, and a greater appreciation for the contribution of Indigenous knowledge.
- d. Increase commitment to pursuing regionally-specific bushfire preparedness and recovery initiatives in concert with local Indigenous custodians, including dedicated funding mechanisms.

5.4. Increase people's transformative capacities

“Whether persons are able to cope with threats, learn from them, and adjust to future crises is not only decided by the persons themselves, or by their endowments and willingness to invest into mitigating and adaptive measures; most of all, it is a question involving all those societal factors that both facilitate and constrain people's abilities to access assets, to gain capabilities for learning, and to become part of the decision-making process.”²⁶

Increasing people's capacities is central to community resilience building efforts. It is well accepted in disaster literature that a community's capacity to cope with and adapt to natural hazards is critical, helping to mitigate disaster impact and supporting communities to recover swiftly.

Coping capacities typically refers to immediate response and recovery following a disaster event to restore present wellbeing (see Figure 5).

Adaptive capacities help a community to regroup and respond to a situation in which their pre-existing coping strategies and capacities are not effective in mitigating the losses or damage caused by disasters. They enable creativity, experimentation and 'learning by doing', which

helps a community to diversify their adaptation and promote social cohesion for not just recovery but future planning.²⁷

While critical for community resilience, coping and adaptive capacities alone do not adequately address the needs of communities experiencing ongoing hardship, adversity or marginalisation. In this context, a focus only on coping and adapting can risk being ineffective, maintaining an undesirable status quo, or worse, sliding communities further into disadvantage with each disaster event.²⁸ Communities need to learn from their experiences and enhance their networks, both within their community and between similar communities.

As such, we call for focus on also increasing a community's **transformative capacities** – that is, capacities for driving proactive, creative and systemic change over a longer time period.²⁹ The nurturing of transformative capacities in a community presents opportunity for reducing the root causes of vulnerability, as opposed to incremental adaptation which aims to address proximate causes of vulnerability by marginal improvements in existing systems.³⁰ A key element of transformative capacities is communities being able to participate in self-determining their disaster recovery journeys, with the knowledge, skills and confidence that help them exert agency and leadership in planning and decision-making processes.




 Coping capacities	 Adaptive capacities	 Transformative capacities
Response to risk After an event, based on actual results	Response to risk Before an event, based on forecast or prediction	Response to risk Before, during and after an event
Time horizon Short-term	Time horizon Long-term	Time horizon Long-term
Degree of change Low, status quo	Degree of change Medium, incremental change	Degree of change High, radical change
Outcome Restoration of present level of wellbeing	Outcome Security of future wellbeing	Outcome Enhancement of present and future wellbeing

Figure 5. Three capacities of resilience³¹

OPPORTUNITY

Strengthen community capacities

Individuals and communities have a powerful role in increasing disaster resilience at the local scale. A critical strategy for mobilising this power is to take a strengths-based approach and give focus to the full suite of coping, adaptive and transformative capacities. The creation and distribution of resources (e.g. financial, informational and relational) needs to be configured in ways that support community-led decision-making and action.

- a. Invest in building the coping, adaptive and transformative capacities of individuals, communities and institutions to access the resources they need to recover from disasters and build a long-term foundation for community resilience.
- b. Give particular emphasis to building the participative capacities of people to increase their participation in and ownership of recovery and resilience initiatives as part of a shift to self-determination.
- c. Develop tools and processes that help communities share data and knowledge, connect with each other, and understand the vulnerability and risk of different members of their community so that effective and tailored recovery and resilience-building plans are implemented.

5.5. Strengthen local leadership and social capital

Recognising that all disasters have distinctly local impacts, affecting places and communities differently, the [Royal Commission](#) and [CSIRO Report](#) have called for more locally-led approaches that better engage local communities in preparation, response and recovery efforts (see Section 4.1). This is recognised as requiring a shift away from approaches that have largely focused on centralised or ‘top-down’ institutional responses.

Evidence highlights that building authentic partnerships and engaging with community members in disaster recovery efforts is essential to fostering trust, ensuring that activities address local needs and reflect community values, promoting a sense of ownership and collective leadership, and improving the likelihood of

success.³² Ensuring transparency, inclusion and a supportive approach can reduce the risk of any negative impacts that implementation of recovery and resilience initiatives may have on communities.³³ By building on the existing strengths, capacities and skills of people, we can link recovery efforts to ongoing community development work.³⁴ Incorporating this ‘bottom-up’ input enables contextual aspects of collective and individual social, relational and wellbeing values, sense of place, local knowledge, values and experiences to be encompassed in decision making. Importantly, the whole of community should be at the emergency planning table.

Greater attention to locally-led approaches would not only ensure better outcomes from recovery investments; they could create transformative opportunities for communities as they continue on their post-disaster development trajectory.

Realising the transformative potential of community-led disaster responses requires investment in social capital. Evidence confirms the importance of social capital in building community cohesion, increasing people's collective ability to make sense of and cope with difficult situations, and combatting stressors in communities experiencing disadvantage.³⁵

However, investments in physical reconstruction are typically prioritised over building social capital.³⁶ And despite the immediate mobilisation of social support that is common post-disaster, over time there is often a deterioration of perceived social support and sense of community, replaced by a sense of distress, fatigue, competition and solitude.³⁷ We therefore call for significant and sustained investment in building the social capital of communities recovering from bushfire and

other disasters, thereby empowering them to lead their own recovery. This needs to be done in ways that develop respectful, trusting relationships and collaborations, and that consider the significance of land, trauma and healing.³⁸

Daniel Aldrich, an internationally influential academic who promotes social capital in the disaster setting, supports this view. He argues for "concrete policies for disaster managers, government decision makers and nongovernmental organisations to increase resilience to catastrophe through strengthening social infrastructure at the community level".³⁹ Aldrich sees social capital from three equally important perspectives: **bonding capital** between usual contacts, **bridging capital** with the wider community horizontally, and **linking capital** for communicating with government and others vertically.⁴⁰

OPPORTUNITY

Support community knowledge, connections, leadership and action

As experts in their local people and place, communities can make a powerful contribution to disaster risk mitigation, preparation, response and recovery efforts through their leadership and action. Increasing and diversifying community participation is key to creating the social capital that can unlock this potential and strengthen transformative resilience.

- a. Invest in initiatives that build the social capital of communities recovering from bushfire and other disasters in order to increase their ability to lead their own recovery and create transformative community development opportunities.
- b. Strengthen participatory approaches in local recovery and resilience initiatives through new models that ensure all parts of the community are at the table, and that deeply engage with communities to integrate their knowledge and foreground their priorities in planning, investment and implementation.
- c. Understand the benefits, opportunities, tensions and risks of community-led disaster recovery and resilience building, and use this evidence to inform guidance on how community leadership and action can best be supported and facilitated



6. CONCLUSION

Australia is facing more frequent, intense and compounding extreme weather events. The 2019/20 Summer bushfires brought this 'climate and disasters' reality into clear and immediate focus. Bushfire-affected communities are now on their long recovery journey after facing unprecedented bushfire impact and threat. There is nation-wide agreement that we need to increase community resilience to bushfire, drought, flood, heatwaves and other natural hazards.

The disaster management sector has taken promising and significant steps, with emerging focus on disaster risk reduction, 'building back better' to increase long-term resilience, and calls for community-led responses. These approaches will form important foundations for improving disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

In this report, we have called for these disaster management priorities to also be influenced by an explicit and systematic focus on communities who may be particularly vulnerable to disasters due to their reduced financial and social capital, or experiences of other forms of disadvantage. Extensive evidence of the impacts, opportunities and capacities in such communities is needed to inform and tailor recovery and resilience efforts for different cohorts in ways that strengthen their community development trajectories. This is especially necessary for groups who are typically less able to fully participate in disaster planning and recovery initiatives due to their experiences of disadvantage.

To support this agenda, we have articulated a way of thinking about the intersections between disaster, resilience, community and disadvantage. In particular, we have called for exploration of a 'transformative resilience' approach to disaster management, which aims to coordinate community resources and build capacities for coping and adapting to disaster while facilitating larger-scale shifts that improve community wellbeing more broadly. It is underpinned by principles of community-led, strengths-based, empowerment and participation.

“ We hope this report offers useful reflections as we continue our collective journey of increasing Australia’s disaster resilience.”

To operationalise transformative resilience, we have identified four directions that appear to be important:

1. **Understand communities as place-based systems** that both shape and are shaped by interconnected social, institutional, physical and environmental conditions;
2. **Connect to Country**, guided by the traditional wisdom held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to increase people’s understanding, respect and care for their local Place and People;
3. **Increase the coping, adaptive and transformative capacities** of communities to strengthen efforts immediately post-disaster, in future planning and for driving system change over the long-term; and
4. **Strengthen local leadership and social capital** through authentic community partnerships and tailored support mechanisms.

Place-based, mission-driven and research-supported policy and practice provides the platform to take the next steps in Australia’s ongoing collaborative efforts to improve community resilience and steer positive community development trajectories in the aftermath of bushfire and other disasters.

This report identifies a range of specific opportunities to advance transformative resilience. In particular, we highlight the need for innovation and experimentation with models and processes that enact transformative resilience principles. This is critical in order to develop longitudinal evidence of their outcomes and guidance on their implementation.

Long-term partnerships between communities, governments, research organisations, funders and other enabling collaborators will be important catalysts for advancing this learning agenda, and ultimately influencing its widespread uptake in policy and practice. The partnership between Monash University, the Paul Ramsay Foundation, TACSI and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd is an example of such a collaboration. We look forward to growing our partnership and collaborating with others to explore transformative resilience in practice with communities in the coming years.

We hope this report offers useful reflections as we continue our collective journey of increasing Australia’s disaster resilience.

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Fire to Flourish is led by Monash University, with the Paul Ramsay Foundation, Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd and The Australian Centre for Social Innovation as cornerstone partners.

FIRE to FLOURISH

Strength through community-led action

Fire to Flourish is a five-year transdisciplinary program working at the intersection of disaster resilience and community development. In partnership with communities affected by the 2019/20 Australian bushfire season, Fire to Flourish aims to support communities to lead their own recovery, co-create foundations for long-term resilience and wellbeing, and disrupt cycles of entrenched disadvantage. The program will trial and scale a new model of community-led resilience, amplified through partnerships with government, philanthropic, not-for-profit and private sector organisations.

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