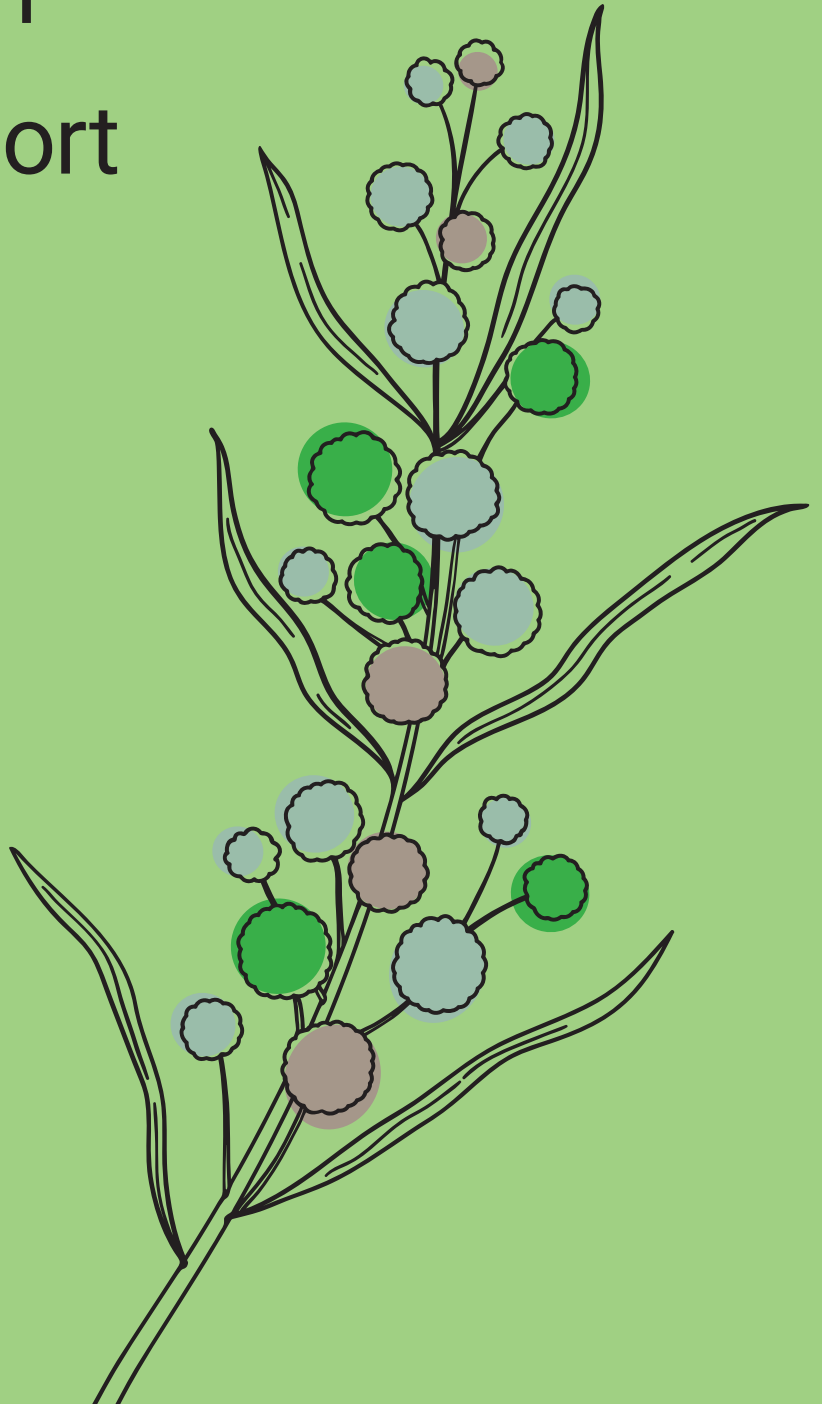


# Fire to Flourish

Lessons learned  
in its activation

Summary Report



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



**We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the lands on which we work and live across Australia. This report was created by people living on Boonwurrung/ Bunurong and Wurundjeri Countries.**

**It draws on the experience of our Fire to Flourish program, that operates on Bidwell, Brinja-Yuin, Bundjalung, Djiringanj, Gumbaynggirr, Gunaikurnai, Kamilaroi, Monero, Walbunja and Yaegl Country.**

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

The use of the term 'Aboriginal' is used throughout this report to describe and acknowledge the Aboriginal people, community members and nation groups of the program.

Where reference to both Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people is made, the term 'Indigenous' will be used. The term 'Indigenous' evolved through international law to acknowledge a particular relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the territory from which they originate.

Indigenous peoples are actively seeking recognition of their identities, culture and ways of life. As such, in some parts of the Country, it may be more appropriate in publications to use solely the term Aboriginal, or First Nations people.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Fire to Flourish is a five-year initiative (2021-2025) developed and led by Monash University and funded by philanthropic partners. The initiative was created in response to the devastating 2019-2020 Australian bushfires, which revealed an urgent need to transform how communities are supported to prepare, respond and recover from disaster, and enhance overarching resilience.**

Since 2019, more than 250 disasters have trapped countless Australians in a perpetual cycle of recovery. Fire to Flourish's approach is deeply rooted in strengthening community capabilities and leadership in disaster resilience through innovative community-led strategies.

Despite billions spent on recovery, only 7% of disaster funding is dedicated to resilience and risk reduction. Our current system remains short-sighted, focusing on immediate relief rather than building the long-term resilience that is actually required as disasters increase in frequency and severity.

**The primary aim of Fire to Flourish is to pilot a new model of holistic support for inclusive, community-led approaches to building disaster resilience.**

This involves working in deep partnership with communities to support creation of tailored solutions for their unique contexts and priorities. Action and evaluative research is integrated to systematically learn and evidence what works, and to codify the emerging model, methods and tools. Fire to Flourish is also working at the systems scale, catalysing new initiatives that address critical gaps in the national disaster resilience landscape, and engaging with diverse stakeholders to share our lessons and influence policy and systemic change.

Fire to Flourish's partner communities are in the Local Government Areas of Clarence Valley, Tenterfield and Eurobodalla in NSW; and East Gippsland in Victoria. They were selected based on their severe impact from the bushfires, sizable populations in the lowest decile on the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, and an Aboriginal population higher than the national average.

Fire to Flourish's development and ongoing evaluation rely on a comprehensive data collection strategy. This Lessons Learned report showcases insights from data collected through interviews with community leaders and program designers, analysis of feedback from participating community members, and observations from community workshops. These qualitative insights are one part of the program's approach to ensure adaptive strategies that align with community needs and contexts.

This Summary Report presents an overview of the key lessons and insights gained in the first three years of Fire to Flourish's program implementation. For deeper insights into the program rollout, evaluation and community-led disaster resilience, read the full report Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Activation (see page 15).

## Key Lessons Learned

The program's learning is synthesised into five key lessons by reviewing experiences across program establishment, community relationship development, co-design of local implementation, and preparation for scaling and systems change.

**These lessons, represented in Figure 1, are mutually reinforcing. Some speak to outcomes sought, and others to the levers that help get us there. Together, this combination of elements is a powerful guide to working in deep partnership in community. Each requires dedicated focus and time to develop.**

### 1. Invest in a Year Zero

Effective program delivery relies on considerable upfront investments in time and resources to build strong foundations so that impact can be long-lasting. This has two parts. The first is around foundation building with program delivery partners. This includes co-designing a clear program vision, establishing governance structures, aligning partner roles and fostering cross-organisational relationships. This groundwork ensures that all partners share a common understanding and are fully aligned with the program's goals, facilitating smoother implementation and greater impact in subsequent years.

Investing in a 'Year Zero' is also essential to build a strong foundation for work in and with community<sup>1</sup>. This includes identifying community partners, developing local relationships and contextual insights, and providing training in the program foundations, as well as any upskilling needed to do the work. Both components of a Year Zero are essential to allow alignment and operational readiness before delivering program outcomes.

Allocating a minimum of 10% of the total program budget is suggested as necessary for setting Year Zero foundations. Year Zero milestones should focus on enabling conditions, rather than prescriptive community-based deliverables. Year Zero may also need longer than 12 months if the program is highly complex or communities need more time for the program to establish local foundations.

### 2. Lasting change needs long-term funding

Short-term funding is problematic for community-based initiatives, reducing the likelihood of creating lasting impact and risking the re-traumatisation of communities with unreliable, sporadic and often disempowering support. Sustained financial investment is critical for enabling transformative community changes. By resourcing communities' social fabric and networks and building collective capacity, programs can fundamentally transform how communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster.

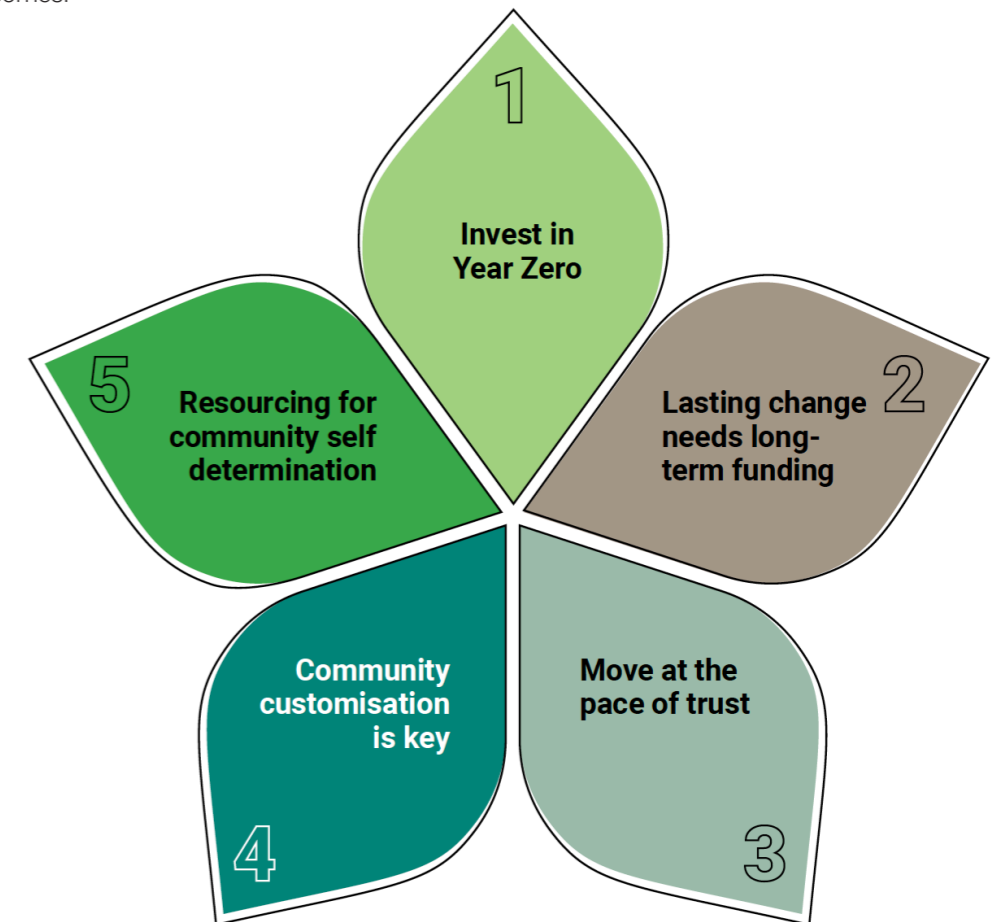


Figure 1: Five key lessons learned through Fire to Flourish activation

<sup>1</sup>We acknowledge that the concept of a 'year zero' arose out of work undertaken by Clear Horizon for Fire to Flourish

Long-term funding models are vital as they allow communities to progress at their own pace and build deep trust, fostering more significant development and confidence over time and embedding a foundation of change.



### 3. Move at the pace of trust

Program success hinges on establishing trust-based relationships with communities, partners and key external stakeholders. These relationships facilitate the program's embedding at local, state, and national levels and are crucial for initiating significant collaborations.

Moving at the pace of trust requires a significant upfront investment of time, deep listening to the community experiences and priorities, and, in turn, ensuring community feels ownership and commitment to the program.

This is supported by long-term funding. What one community can achieve in six months might take another two years. Program longevity ensures delivery can be responsive to community needs, enabling timelines that allow trust building as the foundation, followed by delivery of process and outputs. Trust and reciprocity are especially critical in bringing research expertise together with the lived expertise of community members to generate new knowledge.



### 4. Community customisation is key

Responding effectively to community needs requires adaptable program strategies. It relies on tailoring recruitment processes, communications and the design and implementation of program activities. Fire to Flourish is not one-size-fits-all, with core components implemented flexibly in each community, tailored according to the local context and priorities of each place.

This process of community customisation can be supported by collaboratively developing program principles early on, which helps align and guide the program delivery while accommodating local dynamics and preferences. Trauma-informed practice and intentionally facilitating the participation of people whose voices are less often heard also strengthens localised program delivery.

Importantly, effective community customisation requires a balance between flexibility and tailoring to community needs on one hand, and strong program principles, governance and responsive support on the other. It is the combination of these elements that creates clarity and safety for people to act with confidence in tailoring activities to the local context and therefore maximise the effectiveness of community-led action.

A dedicated Year Zero further supports clearly articulating the balance between program requirements, governance, and flexibility at the community level, allowing time and space for these significant conversations.



### 5. Resourcing for community self-determination

Local knowledge and lived experience means communities are best positioned to make decisions about their local place. This expertise is a critical and often missing piece of disaster response and recovery. Communities bring a deep understanding of local context, needs and priorities and can play a larger role in allocating funding and leading change to support their collective future.

Direct investment in community leadership, networks, and capability building is needed to build community agency and self-determination. By directly resourcing communities, including via the employment and training of local leaders, communities can be better equipped to work together towards shared priorities and advance social cohesion. Elevating community voice and action, and systemically embedding community power into government-led action, can have a transformative effect, and it needs dedicated funding.

Community lived experience is also the basis for effective innovation at the local level. Communities bring a deep understanding of their local place, its history, challenges, and opportunities, and powerful ideas to support collective life. This hyper-local perspective is a powerful source of innovation and needs to be harnessed and funded to support long-term community resilience.

## PART 1: OVERVIEW OF FIRE TO FLOURISH

**Fire to Flourish is pioneering a new way to support communities as the best first and long-term responders to disasters. Since 2019, over 250 disasters have trapped countless Australians in a perpetual cycle of recovery. However, Australian communities are frequently left with inadequate support to navigate the long-term impacts on their physical and mental health, economic well-being, natural and built environments, and social structures.**

To address this gap, Fire to Flourish is focused on trialling innovations in community-led resilience and influencing system changes to support their scaling. In doing so, Fire to Flourish seeks to support communities in leading their own journey to reduce disaster risk and build a long-term foundation of disaster resilience that supports future thriving.

Key areas of Fire to Flourish's innovation include processes that give community decision-making power over flexible grant funding, community governance to grow capabilities and strengthen networks, and Aboriginal leadership that catalyses transformative connections between people, place and culture. Grants allocated through these processes are resourcing diverse community-led projects that strengthen community disaster resilience.

### Research and System Change Initiatives

Research plays a pivotal enabling role in Fire to Flourish, supporting community-led innovations with evidence-based strategies to enhance the program's effectiveness and scalability. The research program is building an evidence base to provide practical knowledge and tools that enhance community agency and long-term resilience. Fire to Flourish connects community experiences with academic research, leveraging insights from fields such as emergency management, social studies, governance and systems change.

System change initiatives seeded by Fire to Flourish, including the DisasterWISE Communities Network and the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience program, extend the program's impact beyond immediate partner community boundaries. These initiatives foster broader networks of knowledge exchange, support, and policy influence that enhance disaster resilience at national and systemic levels.

### Community Initiatives

The program works in partnership with four communities affected by the 2019-2020 bushfire - Clarence Valley, Tenterfield and Eurobodalla in New South Wales, and East Gippsland in Victoria.

Below is a brief overview of the participatory granting processes in each of Fire to Flourish's partner communities to the end of 2023. In addition to these central activities, each community team, working alongside the program's research and operational teams, has engaged in a range of other activities to strengthen local resilience building efforts.

#### Clarence Valley

The program implemented a resilience planning and participatory granting process in Clarence Valley that distributed \$105,000 to fund ten community-led resilience projects. A subsequent process allocated \$150,000 to various projects identified by community members. The approach in Clarence Valley was deeply grassroots, involving community members who had not typically accessed mainstream disaster recovery or resilience funding.

#### Eurobodalla

In Eurobodalla, Fire to Flourish implemented an initial trial of resilience planning to participatory granting from December 2022 to May 2023. This involved co-designers from across the shire who helped to develop and then decide on resilience projects to be funded, resulting in \$300,000 allocated to nine projects. The Eurobodalla community team also led a second participatory grant round, which sought wider community participation, resulting in \$180,000 being allocated across 13 resilience projects.

### Tenterfield

In Tenterfield, the community team focused its efforts on two geographic areas. In 2023, it completed its first resilience planning to participatory granting process, which allocated \$250,000 to community-led initiatives. This process was strategically designed to empower community leaders, enhancing their role in long-term community resilience. A subsequent bushfire in October 2023 disrupted the program. This led to the development of Fire to Flourish's rapid response funding practices and further community-led funding processes.

### East Gippsland

The activation in East Gippsland was initially slower, needing time to establish a local presence and develop trust with the community. The program began with broad outreach to establish community connections, including a travelling exhibition and community events. A grant round that invited applications from existing community groups was conducted, which laid the foundation for more focused resilience planning and granting processes that are being rolled out this year. This adaptive approach allowed the community to begin defining their own resilience strategies and projects.

The program's phased implementation reflects a deep commitment to developing relationships, understanding community dynamics, and building trust. These elements are essential for the long-term success of community-led resilience efforts. As it progresses, Fire to Flourish continues to adapt and evolve, informed by ongoing learning and reflection activities to ensure the program remains responsive to the needs of the communities it serves.



## PART 2: PROGRAM FOUNDATIONS

**Fire to Flourish is an ambitious program designed to foster community resilience in the wake of disasters, operating across diverse geographies and integrating a variety of organisational partners and knowledge systems. The foundational phase, crucial for the program's success, focused on establishing solid partnerships and clear operational guidelines before community implementation began.**

### Program Framework and Principles

The Fire to Flourish approach is represented in Figure 2. At the centre is a commitment to advancing community-led disaster resilience. To do this, the program walks alongside communities to explore, analyse, co-design and create new community-led solutions that strengthen disaster resilience on their own terms, while continually learning and adapting.

This program approach is strengthened by six foundational principles, each crafted to ensure the program's integrity and effectiveness across its diverse settings.

#### 1. Be Community-Led

The program is driven by the communities it serves, ensuring their active participation in decision-making and leadership. This empowers communities to shape the program's direction, activities and outcomes, ensuring that initiatives are relevant and impactful.

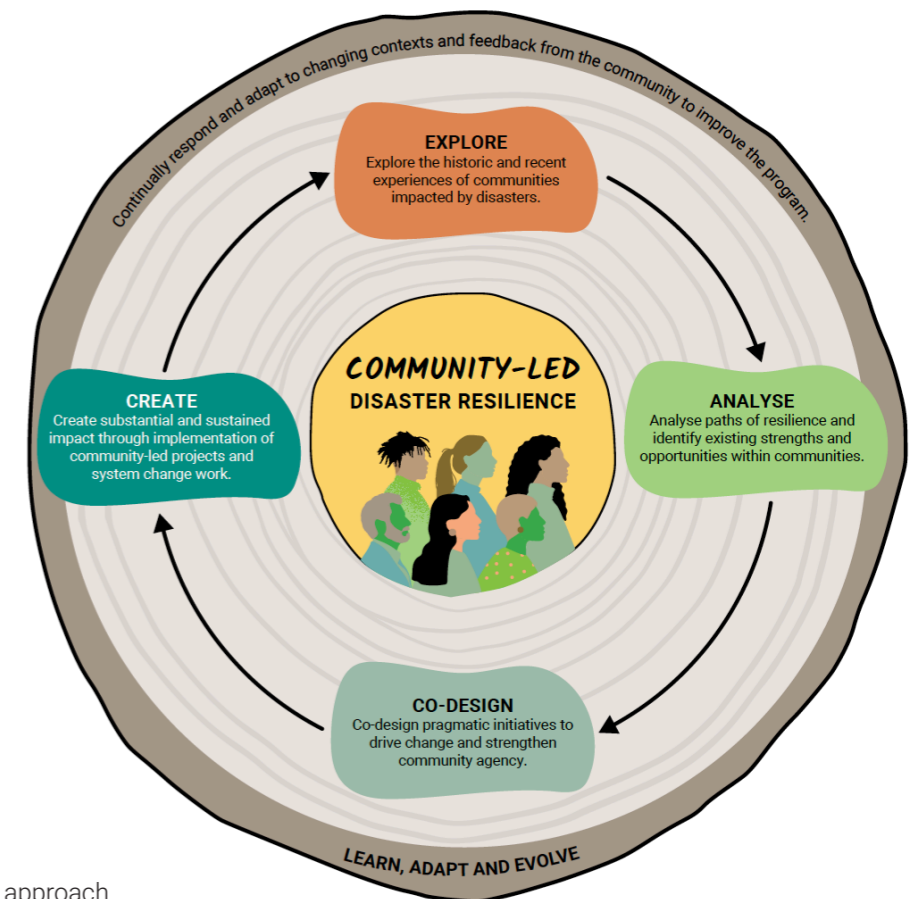


Figure 2: The Fire to Flourish program approach



## PART 3: COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

### 2. Foreground Aboriginal Wisdom

The program respects the sovereignty of Indigenous, learning from Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and fostering strong partnerships. Fire to Flourish recognises that Indigenous knowledge is critical in a disaster recovery and resilience context to inform understanding of the interdependence of community and the lands on which they live.

### 3. Address Inequities and Enhance Inclusion

The program actively includes voices often marginalised or underrepresented, ensuring inclusive participation and that diverse community cohorts can contribute to and benefit from resilience-building efforts.

### 4. Be Strengths-based and Trauma-informed

Acknowledging the community's existing strengths and the pervasive impact of trauma, the program adopts approaches that promote healing and resilience, recognising the varied experiences of individuals and groups within the community.

### 5. Be Holistic and Impactful

Fire to Flourish aims for systemic impact, contributing evidence to help advance community-led resilience. The program takes a holistic view of resilience, including social capital, health, economic stability, and environmental conditions.

### 6. Learn, Adapt, Evolve

The program is designed as a learning system, continually adapting its strategies based on community feedback and changing circumstances. By deliberately taking a reflective approach, the program remains effective over time and responds dynamically to new challenges and opportunities.

Both Fire to Flourish strategy and operations are informed by this principle-based approach, creating a robust framework for community-led disaster resilience, ensuring that the program meets immediate recovery needs and contributes to sustainable, long-term community strengthening.

**Fire to Flourish, focused on strengthening community resilience through community-led action, is predicated on the foundational concept of 'moving at the pace of trust'. This approach is vital in ensuring that the program is valued by the community it serves, and that implementation aligns with the unique priorities and timelines of each partner community.**

### Investing in in-Person Opportunities to Build Trust

The success of Fire to Flourish hinges significantly on the ability to establish and nurture relationships within partner communities. This has been particularly challenging due to COVID-19 lockdowns, which delayed program roll-out within partner communities. Despite these challenges, the program learned that communities need substantial time to understand new initiatives and trust their potential benefits. In-person meetings and engagements on Country have proven essential in building this trust, providing a deep understanding of local conditions, and demonstrating respect for community time and commitment.

### Respecting Formal and Informal Community Governance

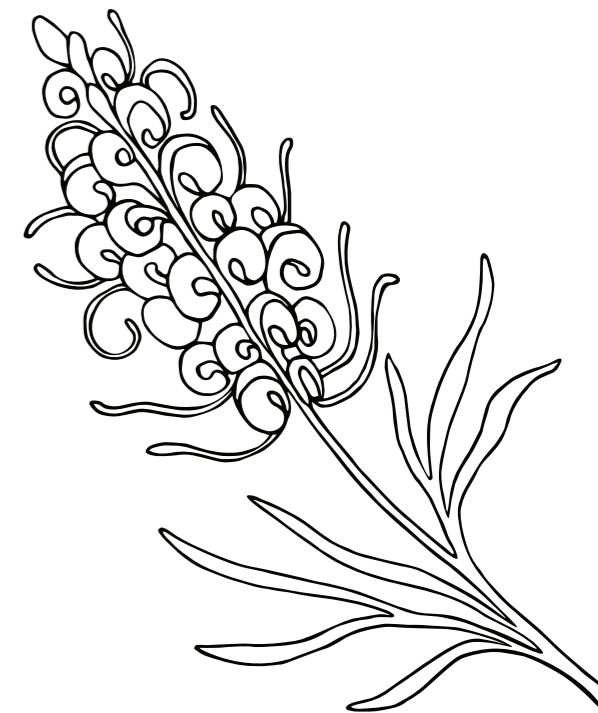
Recognising and respecting both the formal and informal governance structures within communities has been crucial. This includes understanding diverse local leadership dynamics and community organisation methods. Fire to Flourish has made concerted efforts to engage with a variety of local leaders, including those outside traditional organisational roles, ensuring comprehensive community involvement that respects all voices and governance structures.

### Practising Deep Listening

The program incorporates the Indigenous methodology of deep listening, emphasising the importance of understanding community stories and perspectives without judgment. This practice not only fosters mutual respect and opens dialogue but also ensures that community members can lead conversations, setting the agenda based on their priorities and concerns.

### Following Through on Commitments

A significant challenge in building trust with communities has been overcoming scepticism due to past unfulfilled promises by other organisations. Fire to Flourish has learned the importance of making realistic commitments and fulfilling them consistently. Transparent and proactive communication about the program's capabilities and limitations has been key to maintaining trust.



## PART 4: CO-DESIGNING LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

### Recruiting Local Community Staff

The recruitment of local staff, including Community Leads and Facilitators, has been guided by the program's principles, focusing on creating accessible and inclusive hiring processes. This strategy has been particularly effective in reaching potential staff members who are deeply embedded in their communities but might not typically see themselves as candidates for such roles. This approach has successfully attracted a diverse range of applicants, including a significant number of Indigenous staff members, thereby enriching the program's community connections and relevance.

### Being Trauma-Informed

Recognising the high levels of trauma experienced by community members, Fire to Flourish is committed to implementing trauma-informed practices. This involves understanding the profound impact of trauma on individuals and communities and ensuring that all program activities are conducted in ways that promote safety, trust, and healing. The program also provides professional support and training to its staff to handle trauma sensitively and effectively.

Through these strategies, Fire to Flourish aims to embed itself within communities genuinely and respectfully, ensuring that its efforts to build resilience are informed by deep local engagement and an overarching respect for community pace and autonomy. This approach facilitates meaningful community involvement and sets the stage for sustainable, community-led resilience.



### Community-led implementation is foundational to Fire to Flourish, focusing on empowering communities to take charge of decisions impacting their recovery and resilience. This approach recognises the community's key role in taking recovery actions immediately following disasters

By supporting community-led action, Fire to Flourish facilitates community empowerment and control for those affected by trauma and disaster. Importantly, community-led does not mean community-alone. Appropriate program scaffolding has been needed to ensure safety and clarity for community staff and stakeholders, which has required regular discussion to determine the extent to which community activities should be informed, shaped, driven or owned by community.

### Co-designing Flexible Local Approaches

Fire to Flourish acknowledges that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective across diverse community contexts. Instead, it uses co-design methods to tailor local implementation, allowing communities to lead the planning and execution of resilience-building and recovery initiatives. This method ensures that program interventions are well-suited to local needs, preferences, and governance structures, making them more effective and sustainable.

### Supporting Community Teams for Success

Setting up community teams for success is crucial. Distributed local teams need a clear understanding and alignment with the program's principles and sufficient support to feel secure and effective in their roles. This includes comprehensive onboarding, continuous professional development, and ongoing discussion to clarify the balance between community-led and program-led elements to ensure that teams can operate safely and effectively without compromising the program's community-led ethos.

### Ensuring Meaningful and Accessible Communication

Communicating in an inclusive, clear, and resonant way with all community members is vital. Fire to Flourish strives to transcend language barriers and disciplinary jargon to make communication as accessible and meaningful as possible. This involves careful selection of language that reflects the community's culture and experiences, avoiding terms that may feel alienating or patronising.

### Inclusivity in Engagement

The program places a high priority on inclusion, making concerted efforts to hear from those within the community who are often overlooked. This includes ensuring cultural safety and appropriate engagement strategies in workshops and meetings, particularly for Aboriginal participants. Ensuring that all community members can participate without barriers, whether they stem from cultural, literacy, or technological challenges, is key to building comprehensive community resilience.

Through these strategies, Fire to Flourish not only supports communities in leading their own recovery efforts but also ensures that these efforts are grounded in respect for local customs and governance, effective communication, and inclusive engagement practices. This approach helps to broaden and deepen the program's reach into community. It also supports communities to better direct their recovery and build resilience for future challenges.

## PART 5: THINKING AND ACTING SYSTEMICALLY

**Fire to Flourish has seen communities readily adopt systems thinking to understand and address the complex interconnections affecting their resilience. This approach helps communities recognise their vulnerabilities and challenges and the levers available for building resilience. By harnessing a systemic understanding, communities can identify transformative solutions rather than temporary fixes, understanding stakeholder roles, resource opportunities, and potential collaboration or support avenues.**

However, systems mapping can sometimes reveal overwhelming challenges, especially in communities already burdened by trauma and disaster recovery fatigue. Fire to Flourish pairs systems analysis with envisioning exercises to counteract feelings of disempowerment, helping communities imagine a hopeful future and understand their potential influence on decision-making processes at various levels.

### Elevating Community Voice

A key Fire to Flourish approach is to elevate community voice in local and national forums, integrating community lived experiences and insights into disaster resilience planning and policy-making. This has proven effective both locally—where communities feel more supported and heard—and nationally—where diverse gatherings of professionals and community members have fostered deeper understanding and collaboration. Success in these areas has underscored the importance of creating intentional platforms that amplify community voices and facilitate networking across different sectors and cohorts.

### Enabling Research, Evidence, and Knowledge Generation

Pairing research expertise with community lived experience has been a key strategy of Fire to Flourish, though building these relationships has taken longer than expected. The program emphasises ethical research

practices and reciprocity, ensuring that research activities benefit and respect community members, particularly Indigenous peoples who may bring historical mistrust towards research institutions.

Building trust with communities involves face-to-face interactions, clear and tailored language, and a commitment to data governance that respects Indigenous data sovereignty. This includes recognising the ownership of cultural knowledge and ensuring its use benefits the community.

Research within Fire to Flourish is designed to be mutually beneficial, providing communities with direct returns on their involvement and enabling them to contribute to broader knowledge sharing. This co-researcher model empowers community members, involving them deeply in the research process and helping to ensure that outcomes are relevant and valuable both locally and for other communities facing similar challenges.

By integrating systems thinking, elevating community voices, and fostering robust research partnerships, Fire to Flourish aims to transform how communities engage with disaster resilience efforts, ensuring that their insights and priorities shape both immediate responses and long-term strategic planning. This phase of the program is critical in scaling these innovations to have a wider impact and influence systemic changes necessary for sustainable community-led disaster resilience.

## PART 6: CONCLUSION

**Implementing a community-led disaster resilience program is not straightforward. It requires a blend of innovation, local community engagement, and strategic planning. The foundational years have allowed Fire to Flourish to experiment with and refine approaches that empower communities to lead their recovery efforts, thus laying the groundwork for sustained resilience and wellbeing.**

The five key lessons outlined in this report provide a valuable framework for working in partnership with community, to bring about lasting community-led change. Each lesson draws particular attention to an important piece of the puzzle, whether it be dedicated planning and alignment activities in Year Zero, doing the deep listening and connecting to move at the 'pace of trust' or directly resourcing community leadership. However the true power is in the combination. These five lessons are mutually reinforcing, and collectively create a rich ecosystem to support community-led action for a stronger future, together.

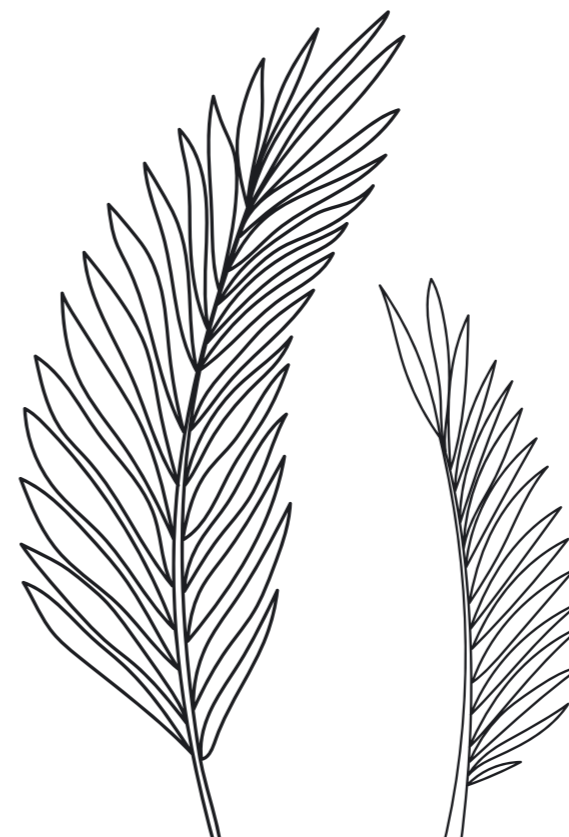
### Moving Forward

As Fire to Flourish moves into its next phase, it focuses on accelerating implementation, disseminating the lessons learned, and influencing the system conditions necessary for adopting community-led resilience innovations at scale. The program remains committed to continuous learning and sharing insights, adapting to varying contexts and needs, and enhancing its impact across partner communities.

This approach underscores the importance of community-centric practices in disaster resilience, aiming to recover from crises and transform the systems that support such recovery.



**Read the full report *Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Activation* for deeper insights into lessons about the program rollout, evaluation, and community-led disaster resilience.**



# FIRE to FLOURISH



Strength through community-led action

Fire to Flourish is a pioneering five year program, working in partnership with communities affected by the 2019/20 Australian bushfire season to trial innovations in community-led disaster resilience

Pathways for scaling the insights, models and tools developed through the program are being created through partnerships with government, philanthropic, not-for-profit and private sector organisations.

Fire to Flourish is led by Monash University and supported by cornerstone philanthropic partners, the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd. Additional philanthropic support is provided by the Lowy Foundation.

For more information, go to:  
[firetoflourish.monash](https://firetoflourish.monash)