



Fire To Flourish  
**Five Years of Impact**  
2021–2025



## 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 Bidawel Maap, Boon Wurrung/Bunerong, Brinja-Yuin, Bundjalung, Cammeraygal, Djiringanj, Euahlayi, Gadigal, Gumbaynggirr, Gunaikurnai, Jubullum, Jukemba, Kamilaroi, Kurna, Ngarabal, Ngarigo Monero, Ngoorabul, Peramangk, Tabulam, Walbunja, Wathaurong, Wurundjeri, Yaegl, Yuin and Yukumbal Countries.

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 Torres Strait Islander peoples is made, the term 'Indigenous' is 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.



## Independent Impact Assessment

The impact assessment underpinning this report was conducted by Elevate Impact, an independent strategy and impact organisation based in Melbourne (Naarm). Elevate Impact works with governments, nonprofits, social enterprises and purpose-driven organisations to help them define their strategy, measure their outcomes and tell their story in ways that drive meaningful change.

Fire to Flourish engaged Elevate Impact to independently evaluate the program across its four-year life, ensuring that the findings presented in this report reflect an honest, rigorous and arm's length assessment of what community-led disaster resilience has achieved.

We are grateful to the Elevate Impact team for their commitment to this work and for bringing both analytical rigour and genuine care to the task of capturing what these communities have built.

[www.elevateimpact.com.au](http://www.elevateimpact.com.au)



## Sensitivity Statement

This document contains artwork of a deceased Aboriginal artist. In alignment with cultural protocols, policy and Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property, Fire to Flourish has sought permissions and guidance on the continued use of the artwork, and an acknowledgement of the artist is given in written communication only. No audio or visual sharing or verbalisation of the artist will be promoted or endorsed out of cultural respect.

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## From Recovery to Resilience

### FOREWORD BY THE CHAIR

**In the wake of the 2019–20 bushfires, Australians witnessed not only the devastating impacts of disaster, but also the extraordinary strength, care and leadership that emerged within affected communities. Fire to Flourish was born from a recognition that while emergency response systems play a vital role, long-term recovery and resilience cannot be delivered to communities. They must be built with them, and led by them.**

Over the past five years, Fire to Flourish has tested a different way of working. Rather than starting with predefined solutions, it has begun with listening. Rather than privileging institutions, it has centred community knowledge, relationships and lived experience. And rather than focusing solely on recovery, it has asked a bigger and more important question: what does it take for communities to flourish in a climate-changed world?

As Chair of the Strategic Advisory Committee, I have had the privilege of observing this work from close quarters. What has struck me most is the program's commitment to learning by doing, and its willingness to sit with complexity. Fire to Flourish has not shied away from the hard work of building trust, navigating power, or acknowledging the time it takes to do community-led work well. Instead, it has invested deeply in foundations, relationships and capability, recognising that these are the true drivers of lasting impact.

This report captures the cumulative impact of Fire to Flourish from 2021 to 2025. It tells a story of tangible outcomes across communities, from strengthened social capital and local leadership, to improved wellbeing, cultural connection and preparedness

for future disasters. But it also documents something less visible and equally important: a shift in how disaster resilience can be understood and practiced in Australia. Through its partnerships with communities, First Nations leaders, researchers, funders and system actors, Fire to Flourish has helped to demonstrate that resilience is not simply about infrastructure or response capacity. It is about relationships, agency, equity and place.

The lessons emerging from this program are both timely and urgent. As disasters become more frequent and severe, the limits of short-term, reactive approaches are increasingly clear. Fire to Flourish offers a compelling alternative: one that treats communities not as passive recipients of support, but as essential leaders in shaping their own futures.

It shows what is possible when communities are trusted, resourced and connected, and when systems are willing to adapt to support this leadership.

I would like to acknowledge the communities who have partnered in this work, sharing their time, insight and courage. I also commend the Fire to Flourish team, Monash University, philanthropic partners and collaborators who have sustained this ambitious program over five years, often in challenging and uncertain conditions.

This report is both a reflection on what has been achieved and an invitation to look forward. The evidence and insights contained here provide a strong foundation for the next phase of work, and for broader system change. My hope is that Fire to Flourish will continue to influence how Australia thinks about disaster resilience, and that its legacy will be seen in stronger, more connected and more empowered communities across the country.

**Professor Christine Nixon AO APM**  
**Chair, Fire to Flourish Strategic Advisory Committee**





# Communities at the Centre: A Call to Rebalance Disaster Resilience

## CEO SUMMARY

Fire to Flourish began with a simple truth that emerged after the 2019–20 bushfires: when disaster strikes, communities are never just ‘impacted’. They respond. They organise. They care for each other. They innovate. They lead. Yet too often, our disaster systems treat communities as recipients of help, rather than the central capability we must invest in if we want Australia to be ready for what is coming.



The coming decades will be defined by compounding climate disasters. Since 2019, more than 250 disasters have trapped countless Australians in an exhausting cycle of recovery. Despite billions spent after events, the share directed to resilience and risk reduction remains far too small. Analysis of the national landscape notes that only 8% of disaster funding is dedicated to prevention and resilience. National reviews have long warned of the same structural imbalance, highlighting that disaster expenditure overwhelmingly flows after disasters, rather than before them.



This is not just inefficient. It is unjust. The communities most severely affected by disaster are often those already facing entrenched disadvantage. Fire to Flourish deliberately partnered in places that were heavily impacted by the 2019–20 fires, with significant inequities and higher-than-average Aboriginal populations, because the consequences of a ‘recovery-only’ system land hardest where resources and power are already uneven.

Across five years, Fire to Flourish has tested a different proposition: that the most powerful way to strengthen disaster resilience is to fund and support communities to be the leaders in their own preparation, mitigation, response and long-term recovery, grounded in place,

relationships, culture and local priorities. That means shifting from command-and-control models towards approaches anchored in community development, equity, and long-term capability building.

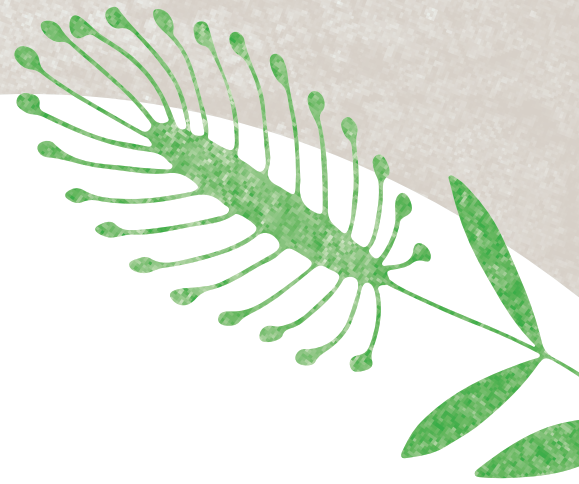
The results are clear. In our partner communities, Fire to Flourish’s impact has been experienced across six domains of resilience: social capital, economic wellbeing, culture, health and wellbeing, built environment, and natural environment. We supported community-led planning, governance, capability building and local leadership, because social cohesion and trusted networks are not ‘nice-to-haves’. They are what determine whether a community can adapt and recover when disaster returns.





EXCELLENCE AWARDS  
**FIRE to FLOURISH**  
EXCELLENCE IN  
SPONSORING  
DISASTER RESILIENCE  
2025





By the end of the program, Fire to Flourish had disbursed \$11.6 million directly to communities, and funded 258 community-led projects, spanning everything from cultural initiatives and creative healing, to practical preparedness measures and local infrastructure that strengthens resilience. Importantly, we did not treat funding as transactional grants. We tested participatory approaches and integrated implementation support, because communities told us that flexibility, accessibility and self-determination are essential if resilience funding is to reach the people and ideas that matter most.

**Fire to Flourish has also contributed nationally. We helped catalyse new social infrastructure for community leaders to connect, learn and influence change, including the DisasterWISE Communities Network, and we advanced a stronger national agenda for Indigenous disaster resilience through dedicated initiatives and partnerships. This matters because resilience is not built one program at a time. It requires systems change: funding rules, governance, capability, data, and decision-making must all shift so that community leadership is structurally enabled, not treated as an exception.**

One of the most important lessons from Fire to Flourish is that community-led resilience does not happen quickly, and it cannot be rushed without sacrificing integrity. Our experiences emphasise the need to invest in foundations to build partnerships, governance, shared vision, local relationships and capability before expecting scalable impact. That is not inefficiency. It is what effectiveness looks like when the work is real.



**Australia is starting to move. The Commonwealth's Disaster Ready Fund represents an important national investment in resilience and risk reduction. But the scale of the challenge demands more. It demands a sharper commitment to outcomes that put communities in the driver's seat: predictable, long-term investment; locally governed decision-making; funding and support that strengthens capability, leadership and action; and a national architecture that treats community resilience as core business.**

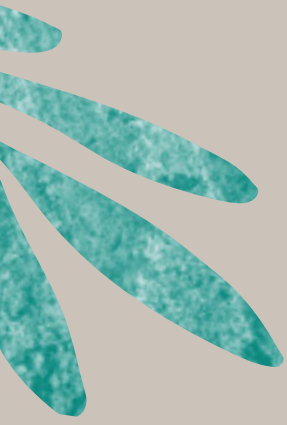
This five-year report is both evidence and invitation. It shows what becomes possible when communities are trusted and resourced to lead: stronger connections, stronger local institutions, better preparedness, deeper cultural grounding, and a renewed sense of agency in places that have carried profound loss.

The question now is not whether community-led disaster resilience works. The evidence tells us it does. The question is whether we, as a nation, are willing to match that evidence with a serious commitment: to shift the balance from recovery to prevention and preparedness, and to fund communities as the leaders of their own futures.

Fire to Flourish has demonstrated what works. The next step is making it the norm.

**Professor Briony Rogers**  
Chief Executive Officer, Fire to Flourish





I came with boots and hopeful spark,  
To work where fire had left its mark.  
With maps and meetings, grants and plans,  
And many cups of tea, and cake in hand.

We gathered close where ash once lay,  
And let community lead the way.  
Shared stories slow, with lots of laughs,  
In conversation, making crafts.

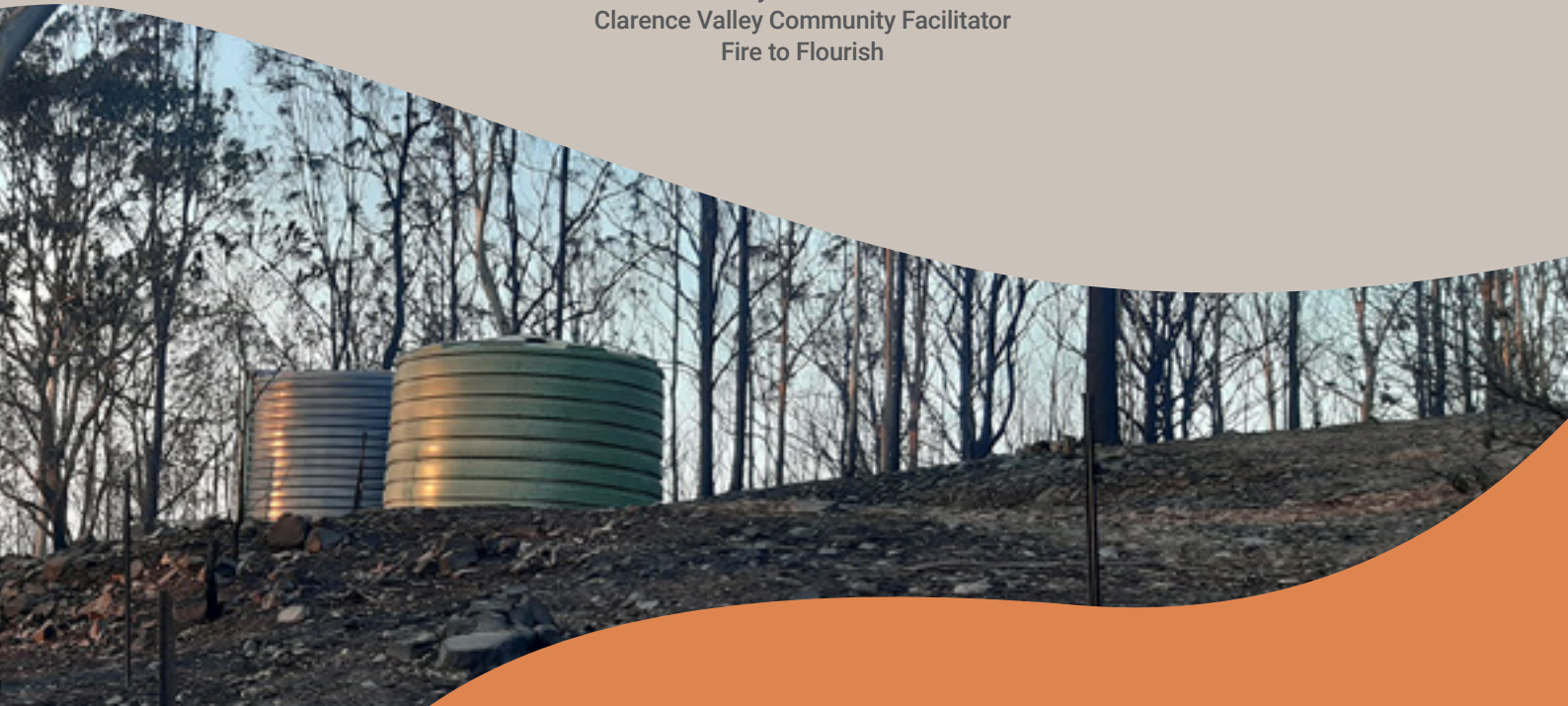
We spoke of Country, care and trust,  
Of healing land and surviving dust.  
Of sparks that travel hand to hand,  
And how good fire can heal the land.

There were spreadsheets, plans and EOIs,  
Big ideas and dreams that touched the skies.  
Deadlines, budgets, lists to do,  
And emails. So many emails – but we made it through!

Through flickers, embers, smoke and glow,  
Connections grew, ideas would flow.  
And like a phoenix, fierce and wise,  
From ash we watched new visions rise.

From Fire to Flourish, strong and true,  
I leave this spark in all of you.  
May you ignite what's yet to be,  
And don't forget... bring a cup of tea!

Poem by Kath Kermode  
Clarence Valley Community Facilitator  
Fire to Flourish



## FIRE TO FLOURISH: ORIGINS, PURPOSE AND APPROACH

Fire to Flourish emerged from the profound disruption and loss experienced by communities during the 2019–20 bushfires. While the fires were unprecedented in scale and impact, they also exposed a deeper truth: Australia’s disaster systems are largely designed to respond after catastrophe strikes, rather than to enable communities to prepare for, mitigate and adapt to disaster over the long term.

In the aftermath of these fires, it became increasingly clear that many affected communities were caught in a recurring cycle of shock, response and recovery, with little opportunity to invest in the conditions that would help them withstand future disasters. Despite significant public and philanthropic expenditure on disaster recovery, comparatively little funding was directed towards prevention, preparedness and community-led resilience. Communities themselves, particularly those experiencing long-standing disadvantage, were often under-resourced, overlooked in decision-making, and expected to recover without the sustained support needed to do so well.

Fire to Flourish was established in response to this gap. Led by Monash University and supported by philanthropic partners, the program was designed as a five-year initiative (2021–2025) to test, learn and demonstrate a new model for community-led disaster resilience. Its central premise was simple but powerful: communities are not passive recipients of disaster response. They are essential leaders in shaping their own recovery and resilience, and must be trusted, resourced and supported accordingly.

From the outset, Fire to Flourish set out to do more than deliver projects or distribute grants. Its purpose was to work in deep partnership with communities affected by disaster to strengthen local leadership, capability, relationships and systems, while simultaneously building a robust evidence base to inform broader system change. This meant holding two ambitions at once: supporting tangible, locally meaningful action in communities, and influencing how disaster resilience is understood, funded and practiced nationally.





“It rebuilt trust, strengthened relationships and gave people a reason to believe again.”

Community Participant, Fire to Flourish

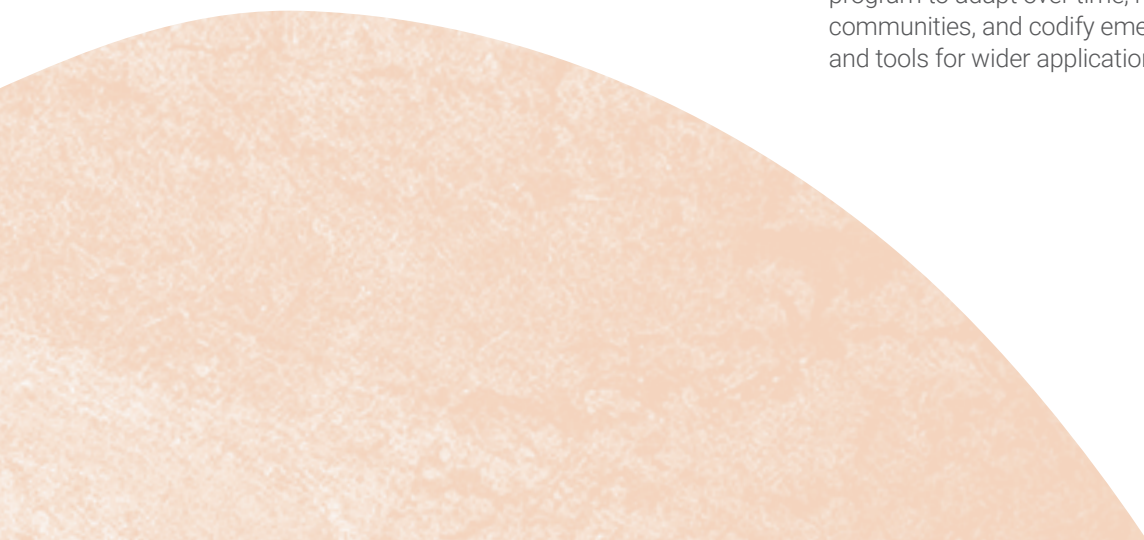
Fire to Flourish partnered with communities in four Local Government Areas severely impacted by the 2019–20 bushfires: Clarence Valley, Tenterfield and Eurobodalla in New South Wales, and East Gippsland in Victoria. These communities were selected not only because of the scale of fire impact, but also because many faced entrenched socio-economic disadvantage and had Aboriginal populations higher than the national average. Working in these contexts required approaches that were trauma-informed, culturally grounded and responsive to place.

A defining feature of Fire to Flourish has been its commitment to moving at the pace of trust. Rather than rushing into delivery, the program invested heavily in foundations: building relationships with community leaders and organisations, developing shared understanding and governance, and supporting local capability before expecting visible outcomes. This early investment, often described as a deliberate ‘Year Zero’, proved critical in enabling deeper engagement, more inclusive leadership and more durable impact over time.

Fire to Flourish adopted a community-led approach grounded in principles of equity, self-determination and systems thinking. Communities were supported to articulate their own visions for resilience and flourishing, identify local priorities, and co-design pathways forward. Importantly, this work recognised resilience as multi-dimensional. It extended beyond physical infrastructure to encompass social capital, wellbeing, culture, economic security, environmental stewardship and local governance.

Funding played a central role, but it was treated as a tool rather than an end in itself. Fire to Flourish trialled participatory and flexible grantmaking approaches that enabled community members to shape funding priorities and decisions. This was complemented by implementation support, recognising that volunteer-led groups and community organisations often need time, skills and practical assistance to translate ideas into action. Over the life of the program, millions of dollars were invested in community-led projects that reflected local needs and aspirations, from cultural initiatives and creative healing to preparedness infrastructure, environmental restoration and governance strengthening.

Alongside place-based work, Fire to Flourish invested in learning and evidence generation. Action and evaluative research were embedded throughout the program to understand what works, for whom and under what conditions. This learning-by-doing approach allowed the program to adapt over time, respond to feedback from communities, and codify emerging models, methods and tools for wider application.



Fire to Flourish also worked beyond individual communities to influence systems. It contributed to national conversations on disaster resilience, helped establish new social infrastructure to connect community leaders, and advanced a stronger focus on Indigenous disaster resilience. By bridging community experience with research, policy and practice, the program sought to challenge prevailing assumptions and demonstrate that community-led approaches are not only possible, but essential in a climate-changed world.

This five-year program overview sets the context for the impact, learning and future directions that follow. Fire to Flourish has shown that when communities are trusted, resourced and supported to lead, resilience is strengthened in ways that are locally meaningful and nationally significant. The task ahead is to build on this foundation and embed these lessons into how Australia prepares for the disasters of the future.

### Why 'Year Zero' Matters

Community-led disaster resilience cannot be rushed.

Fire to Flourish learned that lasting impact depends on strong foundations. 'Year Zero' refers to the deliberate upfront investment made to build trust, relationships, shared understanding and local capability before expecting visible outcomes.

This early work enables communities to lead inclusive decision-making, manage funding effectively, and respond more cohesively when disaster strikes again. While often unseen, it proved essential to achieving meaningful, sustained impact.

'Year Zero' is not a delay to impact. It is what makes long-term impact possible.

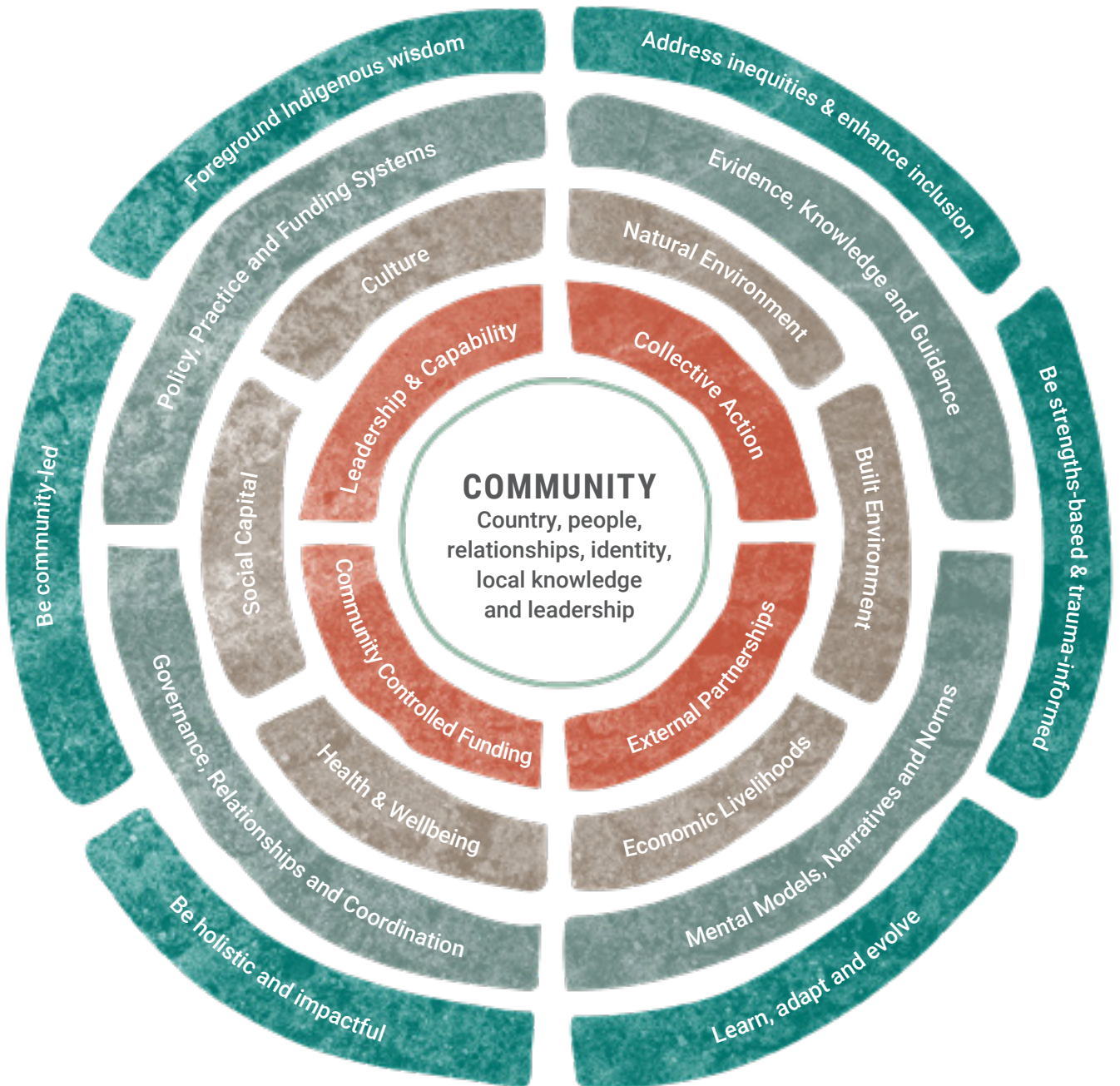




## FIRE TO FLOURISH: MODEL

Through five years of co-design and piloting, Fire to Flourish has refined its approach into the following model

- Foundations of Support
- Impact Domains
- Enabling Environment
- Principles of Practice





## Foundations of Support

### LEADERSHIP AND CAPABILITIES:

*Mobilise, resource and strengthen community leaders and networks*

- Employing local community resilience facilitators
- Convening activities that bring people together
- Providing tailored training and development opportunities
- Facilitating community peer learning networks

### COLLECTIVE ACTION:

*Facilitate inclusive planning and participatory community governance*

- Facilitating processes for shared understanding, envisioning, prioritisation and decision making
- Formalising community voice in disaster governance
- Supporting communities to collaborate with emergency services
- Enabling community-based data and knowledge management

### COMMUNITY CONTROLLED FUNDING:

*Resource local priorities and projects with community controlled funding*

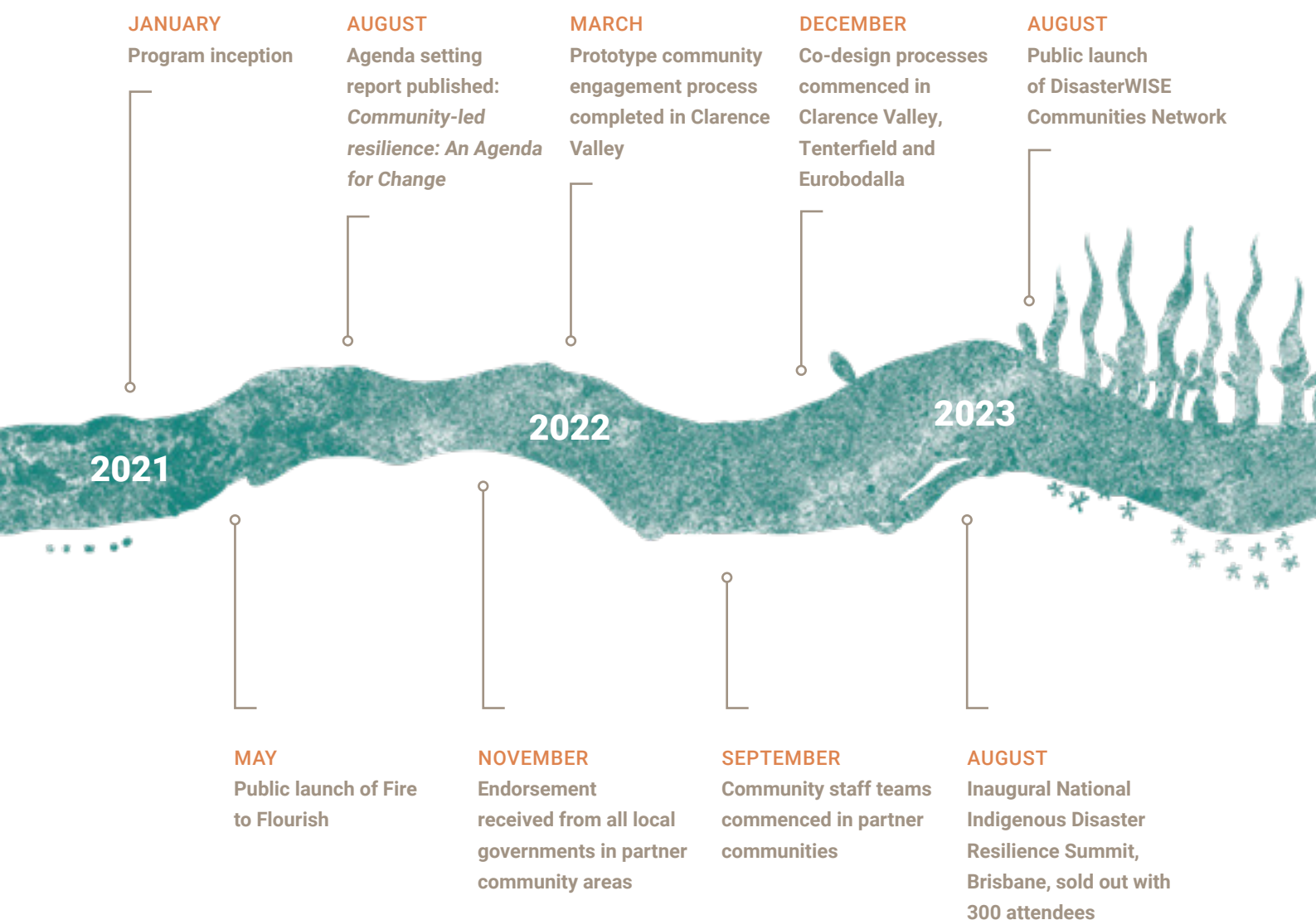
- Establishing legal entities that can receive and distribute financial capital within communities
- Making non-competitive grant funding available for community-led allocation
- Streamlining grantmaking processes and embedding flexibility in grant conditions
- Providing rapid access to low-strings-attached disaster relief funding

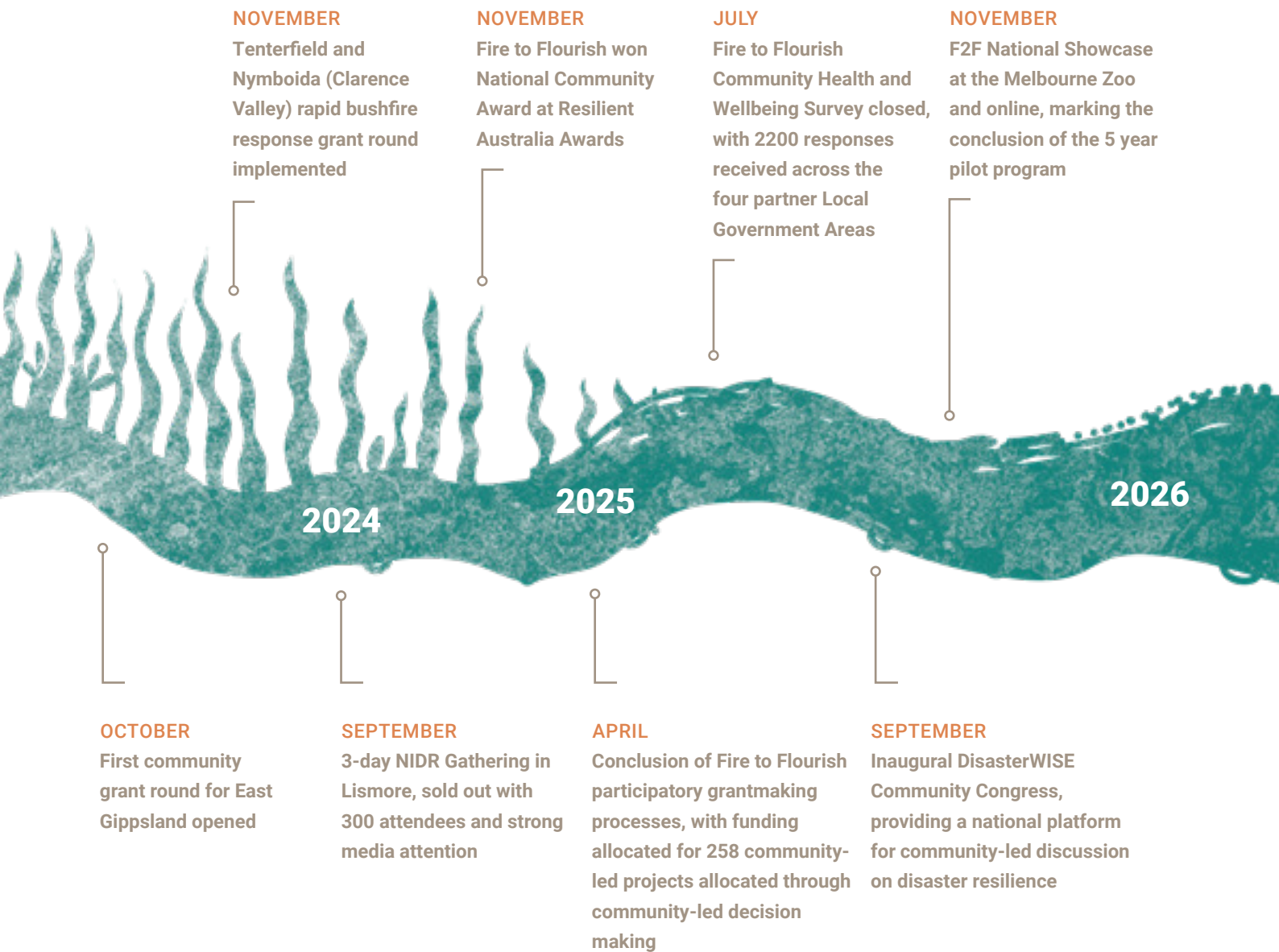
### EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS:

*Link with systems and partners that provide ready access to diverse forms of support*

- Curating evidence-backed guidance, methods and tools
- Offering independent facilitation, technical advice and brokering support
- Making research, monitoring, evaluation and learning services accessible
- Connecting local experiences with systems change efforts

## Program Timeline





## Measuring what Matters

Fire to Flourish was established with a clear commitment not only to act, but to learn. From the outset, the program recognised that if community-led disaster resilience was to be taken seriously as a viable alternative to business-as-usual, it needed to be evidenced in ways that were credible, meaningful and useful to communities, funders, policymakers and the broader sector.

At the same time, Fire to Flourish confronted a fundamental challenge: many of the outcomes that matter most in community-led and systems-oriented work are not easily captured through traditional metrics alone. Changes in trust, confidence, leadership, relationships, cultural safety and agency are critical to long-term resilience, yet they often unfold gradually, unevenly and in ways that resist simple quantification.

For this reason, Fire to Flourish adopted a mixed-methods approach to impact measurement, combining quantitative data with rich qualitative insight. This approach recognises that numbers and data points are essential for understanding scale, reach and patterns of change, but that it is through conversation, story and lived experience that the deeper meaning of impact is revealed.





## Recognising Direct and Indirect Impact

Fire to Flourish was designed to create meaningful change in communities recovering from disaster. This change occurs not only through the initiatives supported by the program, but through the lasting conditions communities build for their future.

Understanding this change requires recognising two interconnected dimensions of impact. Direct impact and indirect impact.

Direct impact refers to the changes that can be clearly linked to the program's investment and activities. Over five years, Fire to Flourish has helped make a wide range of tangible changes possible across participating communities.

Community initiatives have been funded and delivered. New partnerships and local networks have been established. Community members and organisations have strengthened their confidence and capability to lead their own priorities. Research insights, practical tools and accessible resources have been developed to support locally driven resilience.

These impacts matter. They demonstrate what has been achieved through shared investment and collective effort. They show how communities have mobilised ideas into action. They provide a clear picture of progress and a strong foundation for accountability and learning.

Yet the ambition of Fire to Flourish has always extended beyond these visible changes.

At its core, the initiative has focused on strengthening the deeper conditions that allow communities to flourish over time. Many of the most significant shifts supported through the program unfold gradually and are shaped by relationships, collaboration and sustained local leadership.

This is the realm of indirect impact.

Indirect impact reflects the broader transformation that occurs as communities build stronger connections, develop new ways of working together and grow their confidence to respond to future challenges. It can be seen in the strengthening of trust between community members, organisations and institutions. It is reflected in the emergence of new collaborations, shared learning and locally driven innovation. It is present in the revitalisation of cultural knowledge sharing and the increasing visibility of community leadership.



“The relationships formed have become an essential foundation for navigating future challenges.”

Community Participant, Fire to Flourish

These changes also take shape across the six domains of resilience that guide Fire to Flourish’s work. Social capital, economic wellbeing, culture, health and wellbeing, built environment and natural environment. Progress within these domains rarely happens quickly. It is cumulative, relational and often influenced by many actors working toward common goals.

Fire to Flourish does not claim sole ownership of this progress. Community resilience is inherently collective. The initiative’s role has been to invest in the conditions that support communities to act. This includes funding participation, building capability, supporting inclusive governance and resourcing connector facilitators who help communities convene, coordinate and move forward together.

The impact that has emerged reflects the commitment and contributions of community members, First Nations leaders, local organisations, researchers, governments, philanthropic partners and other initiatives working alongside Fire to Flourish.

Recognising indirect impact therefore requires a broader lens. Rather than asking only what can be directly attributed to the program, Fire to Flourish asks how its investment has helped strengthen the foundations for lasting change.

Across the life of the initiative, these foundations have been built in many ways. Through the growth of trust. Through stronger networks. Through new ideas taking shape. Through local leaders stepping forward. Through communities developing the confidence and capability to navigate uncertainty and shape their own futures.

Many of these effects will continue to unfold long after the formal program period concludes. Community relationships formed through Fire to Flourish may support coordinated responses to future disasters. Research insights generated through the initiative may influence policy and practice for years to come. Local leadership strengthened through participation may continue to drive community action in new and unexpected ways.

Understanding the full impact of Fire to Flourish therefore means recognising both what has changed today and what has been made possible for tomorrow.

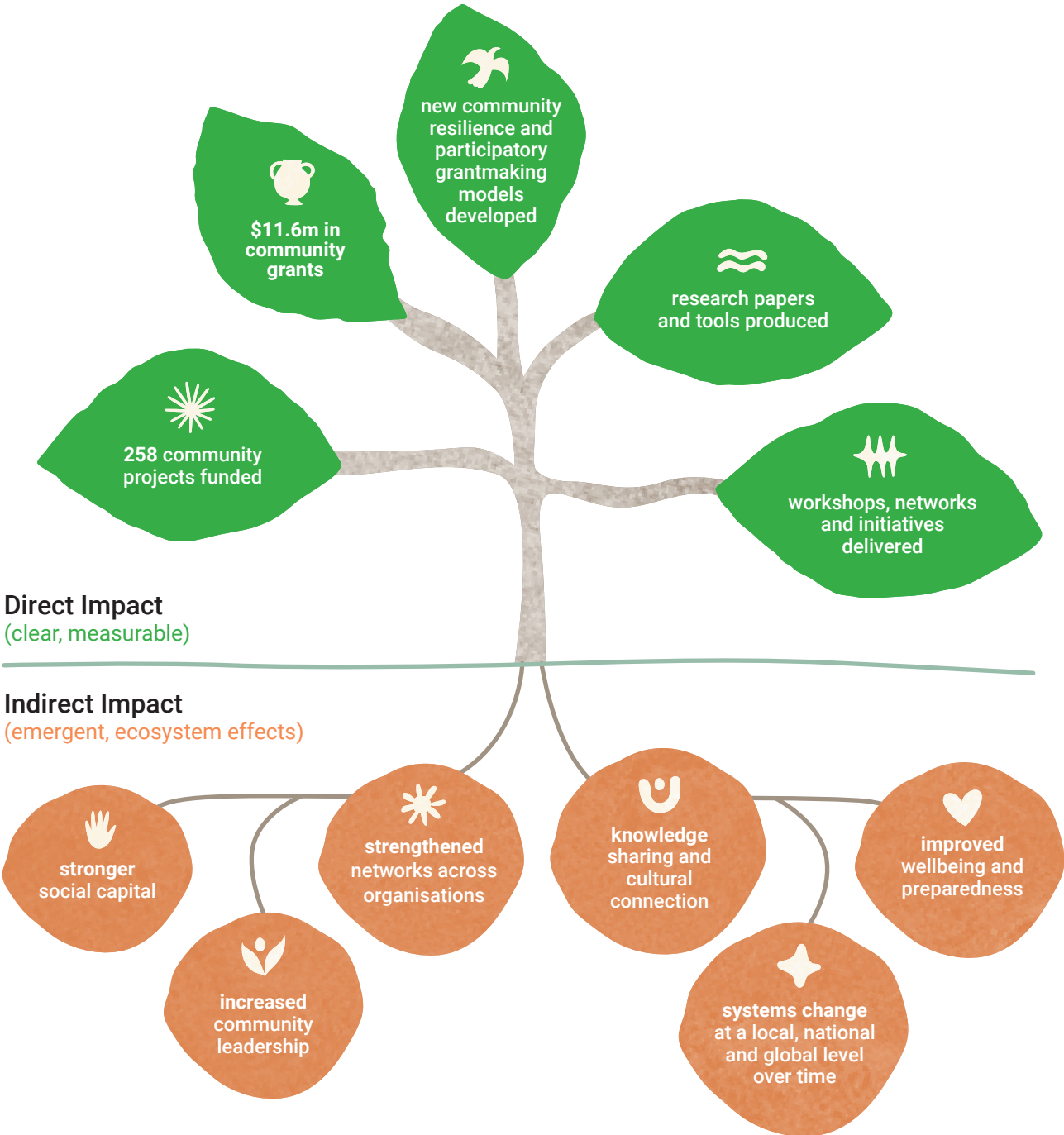
Direct impact shows the tangible difference the initiative has helped create.

Indirect impact reveals how it has strengthened the foundations for enduring community resilience.

Together, they tell the deeper story of what it means to invest in communities not just to recover, but to flourish.

## Two Pathways of Impact

Fire to Flourish has generated both direct and indirect impact. While direct impacts demonstrate what the program delivered, indirect impacts reflect the broader changes enabled through relationships, capability and collaboration across communities and systems.



## Measuring Community-Level Change

At the community level, Fire to Flourish measured impact across six domains of resilience: social capital, economic wellbeing, culture, health and wellbeing, built environment, and natural environment. These domains reflect an understanding of resilience as multi-dimensional, extending beyond physical preparedness to include the social, cultural and relational conditions that enable communities to adapt and flourish over time.

Quantitative data was collected through surveys and structured tools adapted to local contexts, allowing changes to be tracked over time and compared across places. These measures provided important insights into where positive change was occurring and how impact was distributed across different domains.

However, Fire to Flourish did not treat these scores as an end in themselves. Quantitative findings were interpreted alongside qualitative data gathered through interviews, workshops, reflective sessions and ongoing engagement with community members. These conversations helped explain why change was happening, how it was experienced by different groups, and what it meant in practice for people's sense of preparedness, connection and agency.

In many cases, community members spoke less about abstract indicators and more about concrete shifts: feeling more confident to lead, knowing who to call in a crisis, trusting local decision-making processes, or seeing their culture and knowledge valued in resilience planning. These insights ensured that measurement remained grounded in lived experience, rather than detached from it.



## Measuring Impact in Complex Systems

Fire to Flourish was never intended to be a standalone program operating in isolation. It was designed to contribute to broader shifts in how disaster resilience is understood, funded and practiced. Measuring this type of systems change presents a different set of challenges.

Systems change rarely follows a linear path. Progress may involve influencing narratives, building networks, shifting relationships, testing new models, or creating conditions for future change rather than delivering immediate outcomes. These effects are often diffuse, indirect and realised over longer time horizons.

Recognising this, Fire to Flourish approached systems-level measurement as a process of contribution rather than attribution. Rather than asking whether the program alone caused a specific outcome, the focus was on understanding how Fire to Flourish contributed to changes within a wider ecosystem of actors, policies and practices.

This perspective has shaped the structure of this report. Ecosystem Impact and Research Impact are presented as distinct but interconnected areas, reflecting the different pathways through which influence occurs beyond individual communities.

## Ecosystem and Research Impact

Ecosystem Impact captures the ways Fire to Flourish has strengthened connections, capability and alignment across the disaster resilience landscape. This includes supporting networks of community leaders, influencing funding and practice conversations, and contributing to emerging national agendas around community-led and Indigenous disaster resilience. These outcomes are best understood through evidence of collaboration, uptake of ideas, and changes in how organisations and systems engage with communities.

Research Impact focuses on the generation and mobilisation of knowledge. Fire to Flourish embedded action and evaluative research throughout the program, ensuring that learning was not an afterthought but a core component of delivery. This research has produced new tools, models and insights that are being used to inform policy, practice and future investment.

In both cases, impact is evidenced through a combination of outputs (such as publications, tools and forums), evidence of use and influence, and qualitative feedback from stakeholders across community, government, philanthropy and research sectors.



### Listening as a Measure of Impact

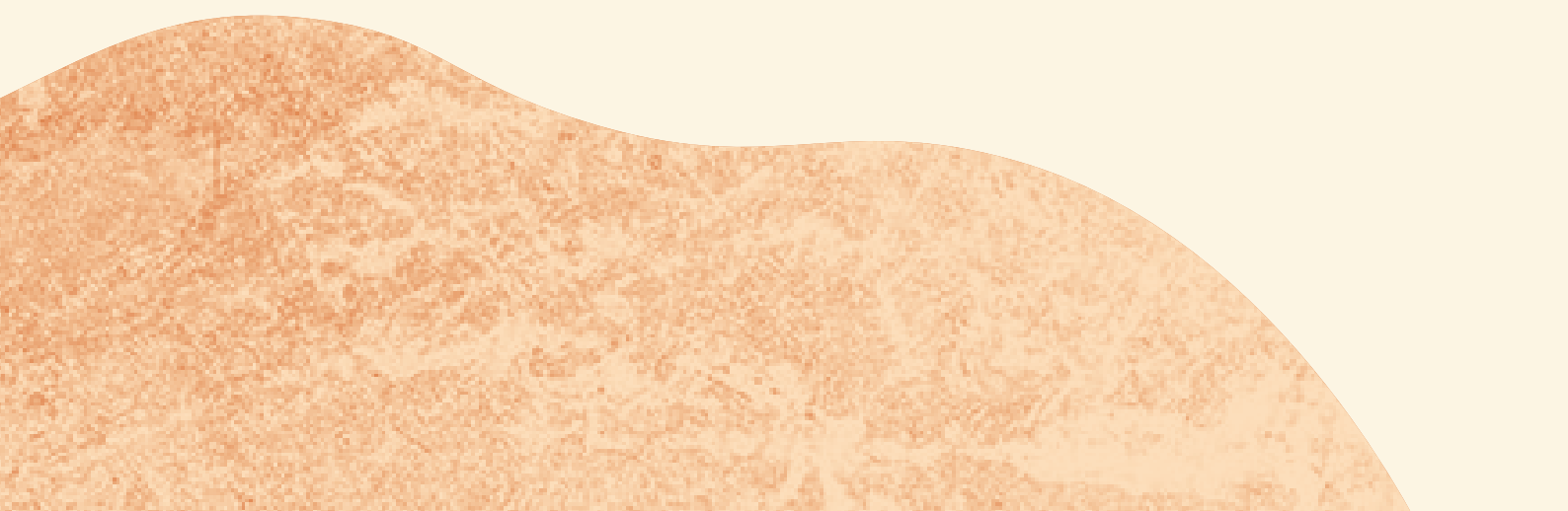
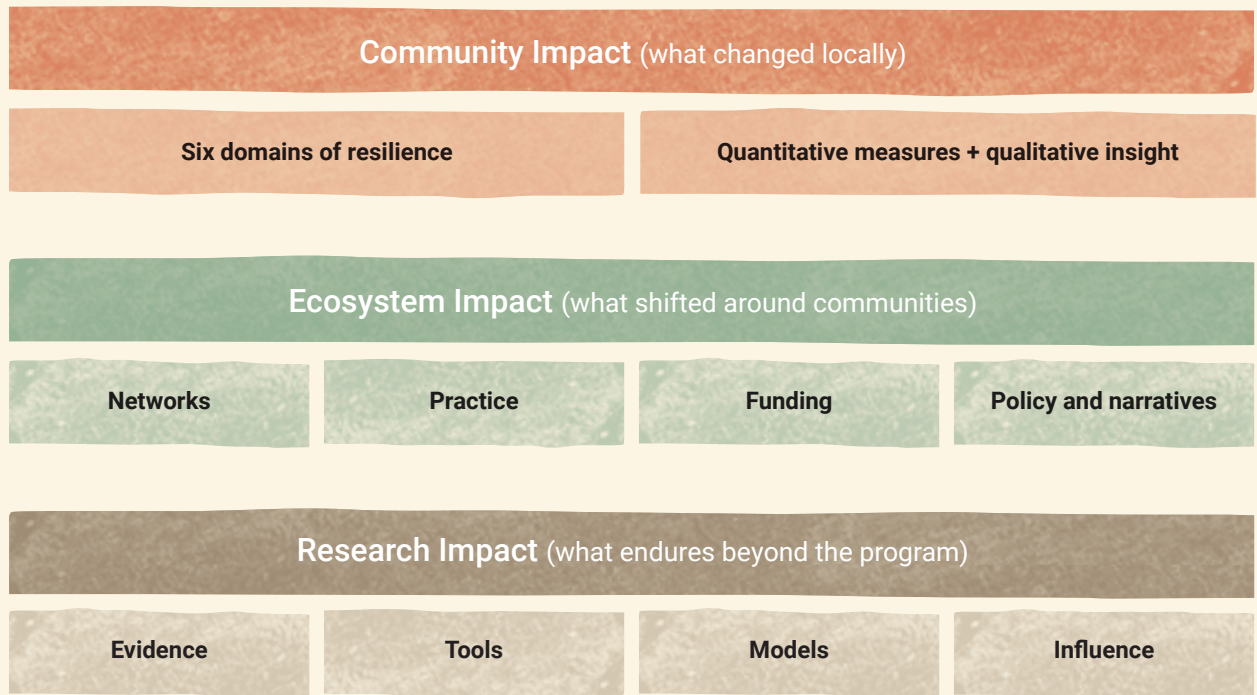
Perhaps the most important measure used by Fire to Flourish has been listening. Ongoing dialogue with community members provided a constant check on whether the program was achieving what mattered most on the ground. These conversations often revealed impacts that would not otherwise be visible: shifts in confidence, reduced isolation, renewed hope, or a sense that communities were better equipped to face whatever came next.

By valuing both data and dialogue, Fire to Flourish has sought to measure what truly matters. This approach acknowledges complexity without avoiding accountability, and it ensures that evidence remains connected to the people and places at the heart of the work.

The sections that follow reflect this philosophy. They present quantitative findings alongside stories, insights and learning, recognising that together they offer a more complete and honest account of what five years of community-led disaster resilience has achieved.



## Measuring what Matters Framework



Fire to Flourish: Five Years of Impact  
2021-2025

# Fire to Flourish





# IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

Over four years, Fire to Flourish partnered with Elevate Impact, an independent evaluation organisation, to rigorously assess the program’s impact across its partner communities. This was not a one-off snapshot but a sustained commitment to evidence: each year, Elevate Impact conducted surveys and interviews with community members, grant recipients and project participants to track how the program was landing and what was changing on the ground.

Alongside this primary research, Elevate Impact independently reviewed program and research data provided by Fire to Flourish, drawing on multiple evidence streams to build a credible and comprehensive picture of impact over time. The result is an evaluation grounded in the voices of the people the program served, verified by an organisation working at arm’s length from Fire to Flourish.

The data and statistics on these pages are drawn from that independent assessment, organised across four domains that together capture what community led disaster resilience looks like in practice:

**Program Legacy and Overall Impact** measures the broad, lasting difference Fire to Flourish made to communities including whether projects delivered meaningful change, whether relationships and skills will endure, and whether the program shifted how communities and leaders think about resilience.

**Social Capital and Community Resilience** examines the strength of relationships, trust and collective capability that the program helped build, reflecting the understanding that social connection is itself a form of disaster preparedness.

**Indigenous Culture and Knowledge Sharing** captures the program’s contribution to strengthening Indigenous leadership, cultural practices and two-way learning between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members.

**Natural Environment and Local Priorities** reflects the program’s impact on environmental awareness, caring for Country practices and communities’ understanding of how healthy landscapes contribute to long term resilience.



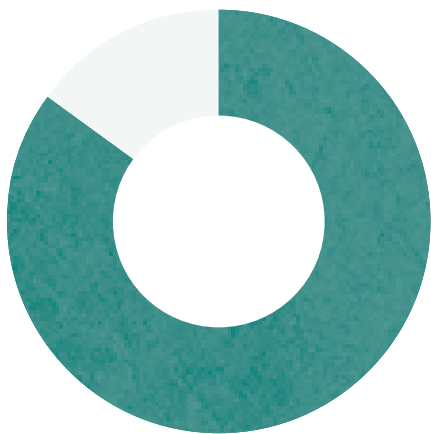
**5** years of community-led  
disaster resilience innovation

**4** partner  
regions

**70+** communities  
supported

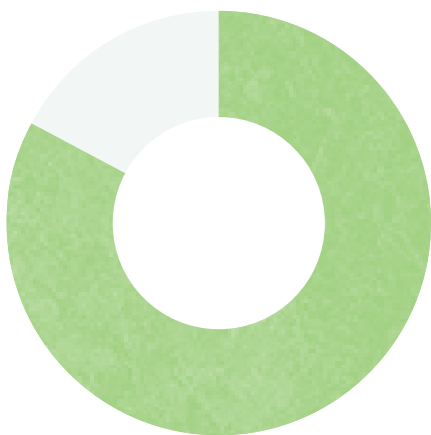
**\$11.6** million in grants to enable  
community-led action

**258** community projects funded  
designed and delivered by  
local people



**85%**

of people strongly agree they formed new relationships through Fire to Flourish activities



**83%**

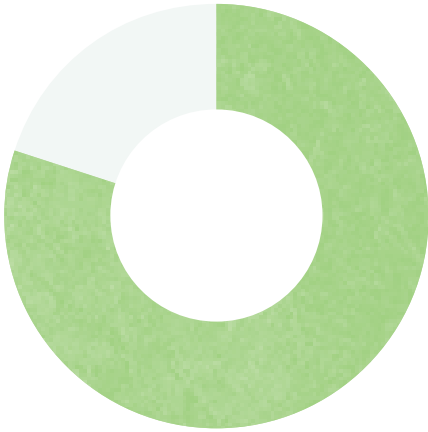
of people strongly agree the skills, relationships, and networks developed through Fire to Flourish will continue beyond the program





**82%**

of people strongly agree the projects funded by Fire to Flourish have positively impacted their community



**80%**

of people strongly agree Fire to Flourish has made a lasting positive difference in their community



**PROGRAM LEGACY  
AND OVERALL IMPACT  
RATING**



**SOCIAL CAPITAL AND  
COMMUNITY RESILIENCE  
RATING**



INDIGENOUS CULTURE  
AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING  
RATING



NATURAL ENVIRONMENT  
AND LOCAL PRIORITIES  
RATING





## COMMUNITY IMPACT

### People and Places

Fire to Flourish's community impact is best understood through the experiences of the people and places at the heart of the program. Between 2021 and 2025, Fire to Flourish worked in deep partnership with communities in Clarence Valley, Eurobodalla and Tenterfield in New South Wales, and East Gippsland in Victoria — all of which experienced severe impacts from the 2019–20 bushfires and face ongoing exposure to climate-driven disasters.

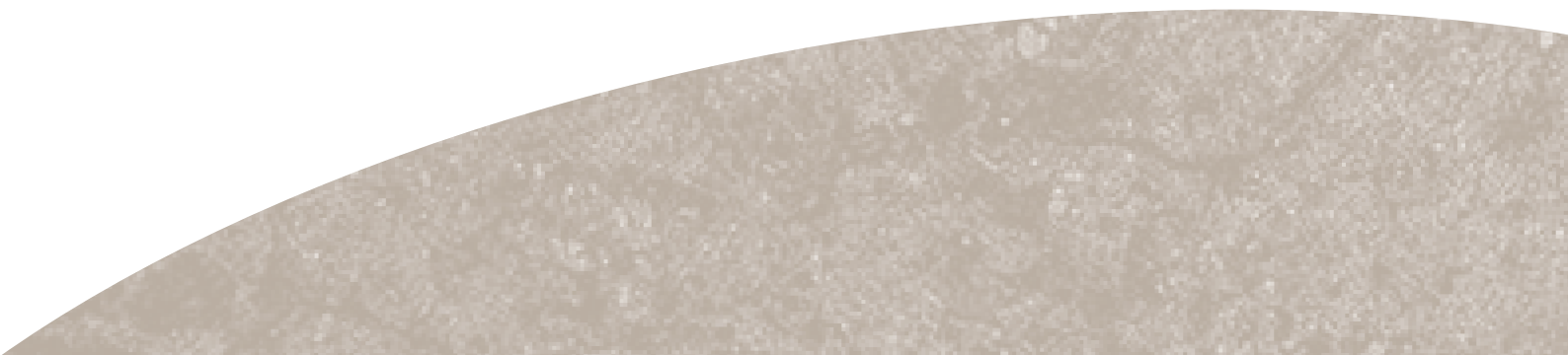
Community impact was independently assessed by Elevate Impact using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative surveys with qualitative insights gathered through interviews, workshops and ongoing engagement. More than 6,000 data points were collected across communities in the four Local Government Areas over the life of the program, providing a robust and credible evidence base for understanding what changed, how it changed, and why it mattered.

### Strengthening Social Capital and Connection

Across all four communities, the strongest and most consistent impacts were observed in social capital. Community members reported significant improvements in trust, connection, collaboration and local leadership. By 2025, social capital had increased by 43% compared to baseline, with community members rating this domain as having a very positive impact.

Participants described forming new relationships, strengthening existing networks, and working more effectively across community groups that had not previously collaborated. Importantly, these connections were not limited to formal organisations; they extended to informal leaders, volunteers and residents who had often felt disconnected or overlooked prior to Fire to Flourish's engagement.

Community members consistently reported feeling more confident to participate in decision-making, more able to influence local priorities, and better connected to others working on preparedness, recovery and resilience. These shifts in social capital were widely recognised as foundational to communities' ability to respond more cohesively when disaster struck again.



“The projects mattered, but the relationships and hope they created mattered even more.”

Community Participant, Fire to Flourish

### Building Confidence, Capability and Agency

Fire to Flourish also had a significant impact on individual and collective capability. Survey respondents reported increased skills and knowledge across areas such as project development, collaboration, communication and governance. More than half of participants indicated that Fire to Flourish had strengthened their confidence to actively participate in community life and to take on leadership roles.

Crucially, these gains translated into a stronger sense of agency. Community members reported feeling better equipped to shape decisions affecting their

community, rather than responding to externally imposed solutions. This was particularly evident in communities where participatory grantmaking and co-designed governance models were introduced, enabling local people to set priorities and allocate resources in ways that reflected local needs and values.

By 2025, community readiness to respond to future disasters was rated at 8.03 out of 10, reflecting a strong belief that communities were more prepared, more connected and more capable of acting collectively under pressure.





### Cultural Connection and Indigenous Leadership

Positive impacts were also recorded in relation to Indigenous culture and knowledge sharing, with a 39% increase in impact over the life of the program. Community members reported improved understanding of, and connection to, local Traditional Owners, and greater opportunities for Indigenous people to share stories, knowledge and leadership in disaster resilience efforts.

68 funded projects were led by, or developed in partnership with, Aboriginal people or organisations. These initiatives strengthened cultural connection, supported self-determination, and contributed to broader community understanding of the role of Indigenous knowledge in caring for Country and reducing disaster risk.

68 funded projects were led by, or developed in partnership with, Aboriginal people or organisations.

### Wellbeing and Sense of Support

While Fire to Flourish was not a health program, participants reported meaningful improvements in wellbeing, particularly in feeling supported, connected and less isolated. Community members described the importance of having trusted relationships, safe spaces to gather, and opportunities to come together after prolonged periods of stress, trauma and uncertainty.

These relational impacts were widely recognised as essential to recovery and resilience. Participants consistently emphasised that feeling supported and connected was as important as physical preparedness in enabling communities to face future challenges.





### Durability of Impact

A defining feature of Fire to Flourish's community impact is its perceived durability. More than 83% of respondents believed that the skills, relationships and networks developed through the program would continue beyond its formal conclusion. This confidence reflects the program's emphasis on building local capability and leadership, rather than delivering time-limited interventions.

Overall, Fire to Flourish received an overall community impact rating of 8.58 out of 10, representing a very positive impact across the four partner communities. These results demonstrate that when communities are trusted, resourced and supported to lead, meaningful and lasting change is possible.

The following case studies provide a closer look at how this impact played out in each community, highlighting the unique contexts, priorities and pathways through which Fire to Flourish supported people and places to flourish.



## CASE STUDIES

### COLLECTIVE STRENGTH – Growing Confidence and Momentum through Shared Vision (East Gippsland)

In far East Gippsland, Fire to Flourish brought together local leaders from small, widely dispersed communities stretching from Orbost to Gipsy Point to form a group of community planners. In a region shaped by the 2019/20 bushfires, the isolation of COVID-19, and the looming economic transition away from native forest logging, this was significant in itself. The process created a rare space for people facing similar pressures to connect across distance, listen deeply to one another, and develop a shared sense of purpose and optimism for the future.

The impact was both relational and practical. Community-led planning helped people recognise the strengths already present in the region – local knowledge, trusted relationships, creativity, adaptability, and deep care for Country and

community. It built confidence in their ability to work together, make decisions and shape locally relevant responses, while also generating tangible projects to support resilience, connection and regional transition.

Just as importantly, the relationships and collective momentum developed through this work are enduring. They provide a critical anchor for continued collaboration and shared effort beyond the Fire to Flourish program, helping communities see themselves not only as affected by change, but capable of leading it.

“We’d never really sat down and thought about what we needed in the long-term...The community is now working in a new way, having learned different inclusive methods in Fire to Flourish community planning sessions that inspired us to change the way we work together.” – East Gippsland Community Planner



## REIMAGINING PLACE – Community-Led Design for Connection and Resilience (Clarence Valley)

In the Clarence Valley, placemaking was a powerful way for communities to turn local knowledge, care for place and shared aspirations into practical action. Across Blicks, Orara Valley, Woombah and Nymboida, community members came together to reimagine important public spaces, assets and infrastructure through workshops, site walks, exhibitions and design processes. Rather than being passive consultees, people were supported to shape a collective vision for places that could support community connections, increase public value and strengthen disaster resilience.

The impact extended well beyond the infrastructure designs and projects themselves. Placemaking created new opportunities for diverse people across the community to meet, build relationships and develop shared priorities. It helped surface local ideas that may not otherwise have entered formal planning processes, while building confidence, leadership and practical capability in areas such as design thinking, project development, funding proposals and navigating council processes.

By working through real projects together, communities also strengthened their relationships with local government and built a stronger platform for ongoing collaboration. The result was not only a pipeline of locally grounded infrastructure ideas, but a more connected, capable and future-focused community – better equipped to shape and advocate for the places it needs to thrive before, during and after disruption.

“It was amazing to see the amount of people that not only turned up, but turned up and participated. And people actually felt like contributing and talking about their town or their region.” – Community Facilitator



## REBUILDING CONNECTION – Community-Led Recovery through Creativity and Culture (Eurobodalla)

In Eurobodalla, the impacts of the bushfires were compounded by prolonged isolation, fatigue and emotional strain. While physical recovery was progressing, many people still felt disconnected and unsure how to re-engage with community life.

Fire to Flourish supported a range of community-led recovery and connection initiatives grounded in Aboriginal culture and creative arts practices. These were not peripheral activities, but central vehicles for healing, social connection, cultural revitalisation and disaster resilience. Designed to bring people together in safe, inclusive and purposeful ways, the projects prioritised participation, wellbeing and shared experience, recognising that social repair is a critical part of recovery.

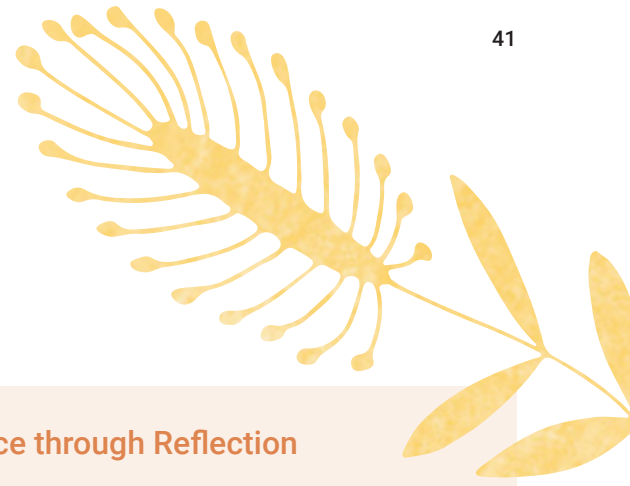
Grant investments ranged from small community programs of under \$5,000 to major anchor events of more than \$150,000, showing that arts-based approaches can deliver value at every scale.

Many projects were grounded in First Nations cultural practices, with storytelling, yarning, language and on-Country connection playing a central role. Others supported trauma recovery and emotional wellbeing, positioning arts as a therapeutic and connective community practice.

Through gatherings, creative activities and collaborative projects, community members rebuilt relationships, strengthened trust and regained confidence in acting collectively. Participants felt more supported, less isolated and more hopeful about the future – showing that recovery is not only about rebuilding assets, but also restoring relationships and belonging.

“The connection between our Elders and youth has been incredible. It’s about preserving our culture and ensuring it continues to shape our community’s future.”  
– Community participant





## LEARNING TOGETHER – Strengthening Future Resilience through Reflection (Tenterfield)

In Tenterfield, Fire to Flourish supported the community to turn reflection into resilience. Through a Community-Centred Disaster Learning Review, residents, leaders and organisations came together to reflect on past disaster experiences and identify what had worked, what hadn't, and what needed to change.

Rather than being led by external experts, the learning review placed community voice at the centre. Participants shared lived experience, local knowledge and insights that had often been overlooked in formal reviews. This process built trust, validated local expertise and strengthened confidence to influence future planning.

The review informed practical changes to local preparedness and response, while also strengthening relationships across the community. It also informed a round of participatory grantmaking, with funds allocated to projects that directly addressed priorities that were identified through the reflections. Participants reported feeling heard, respected and more capable of shaping decisions affecting their future.

By treating learning as a collective, community-owned process, the project demonstrated how reflection can be a powerful tool for resilience. It also contributed to broader systems learning, informing Fire to Flourish practice guides and national conversations about community-led disaster learning.

"I like the structure of it, I like the involvement of Monash University to give us that structure. And I like the fact that the process is stepped through in a way that best meets the needs of the groups in the community that are submitting the grant submissions."

– Community participant

"I'm just really really grateful that we've now been able to disperse \$200,000 into the Tenterfield community for projects that are going to make our community better and bring our community more together." – Community participant





## Grants Impact

**Across its five-year lifespan, Fire to Flourish provided grant funding to support a diverse portfolio of community-led projects designed to strengthen disaster resilience in ways that were locally relevant, practical and enduring. Rather than delivering a single program model, Fire to Flourish deliberately backed a wide range of initiatives that reflected the priorities, capabilities and aspirations of each community.**

Projects spanned communities in all four partner areas and addressed multiple dimensions of resilience, including social connection, preparedness, wellbeing, culture, governance, economic participation and environmental stewardship. While the form and focus of projects varied, they shared a common intent: to enable communities to take the lead in shaping their own preparedness, recovery and future resilience.

A defining feature of Fire to Flourish's project approach was participatory grantmaking. Communities were actively involved in identifying priorities, shaping funding decisions and governing how resources were allocated. This approach shifted power closer to the ground and ensured projects were grounded in lived experience rather than externally defined priorities and solutions.

Importantly, funding was paired with implementation support. Fire to Flourish recognised that many community groups were volunteer-led, stretched, or navigating trauma and recovery alongside project delivery. Support included facilitation, capability building, connections to expertise, opportunities for peer learning and flexibility through implementation. This combination of resources and relational support was critical in enabling projects to move from ideas to action.

The projects themselves ranged from highly practical initiatives, such as emergency preparedness infrastructure, communications and local coordination mechanisms, through to relational and cultural initiatives focused on healing, connection and leadership. Others centred on learning and governance, helping communities reflect on past disaster experiences, strengthen decision-making and prepare for future events.

Grants were also provided to support rapid disaster relief in Nymboida and Tenterfield when bushfires struck again. In Nymboida, funds delivered drinking water to residents who had no other way of accessing fresh water for their homes and families. In Tenterfield, funds provided temporary fencing so residents could safely contain cattle on their properties and avoid further income loss. Funding was also distributed quickly to individuals with immediate bushfire recovery needs, with minimal bureaucracy.

Across the portfolio, several consistent impacts emerged. Projects helped surface and support new and diverse local leaders, many of whom had not previously held formal leadership roles. They strengthened collaboration between community organisations, Traditional Owners, volunteers and local institutions. They also created tangible assets, processes and relationships that communities reported would continue to be used beyond the life of the program.

Crucially, Fire to Flourish did not treat projects as isolated outputs. Each project contributed to broader community outcomes captured through the program's impact measurement framework, including increased social capital, improved preparedness and stronger confidence to act collectively. In this way, individual projects became building blocks in a wider, connected resilience ecosystem within each community.

Fire to Flourish has also invested impact capital with community foundations in each partner community to support ongoing impact. This impact capital will help ensure impact continues beyond the life of the program. It creates an enduring local resource for communities to keep building resilience on their own terms – supporting initiatives that strengthen connection, preparedness, recovery capacity and long-term wellbeing, as well as a resource for rapid disaster response should it be needed. In this way, Fire to Flourish is leaving behind more than funding alone: it is helping seed local ownership, community-led decision-making and a lasting foundation for future action.

Taken together, the Fire to Flourish grant and project portfolio demonstrates that when communities are trusted to lead, and supported with flexible funding and practical assistance, they generate solutions that are both contextually appropriate and deeply impactful. The projects outlined in the table below represent not just a list of activities, but a body of work that has strengthened community capability, confidence and readiness for the long term.



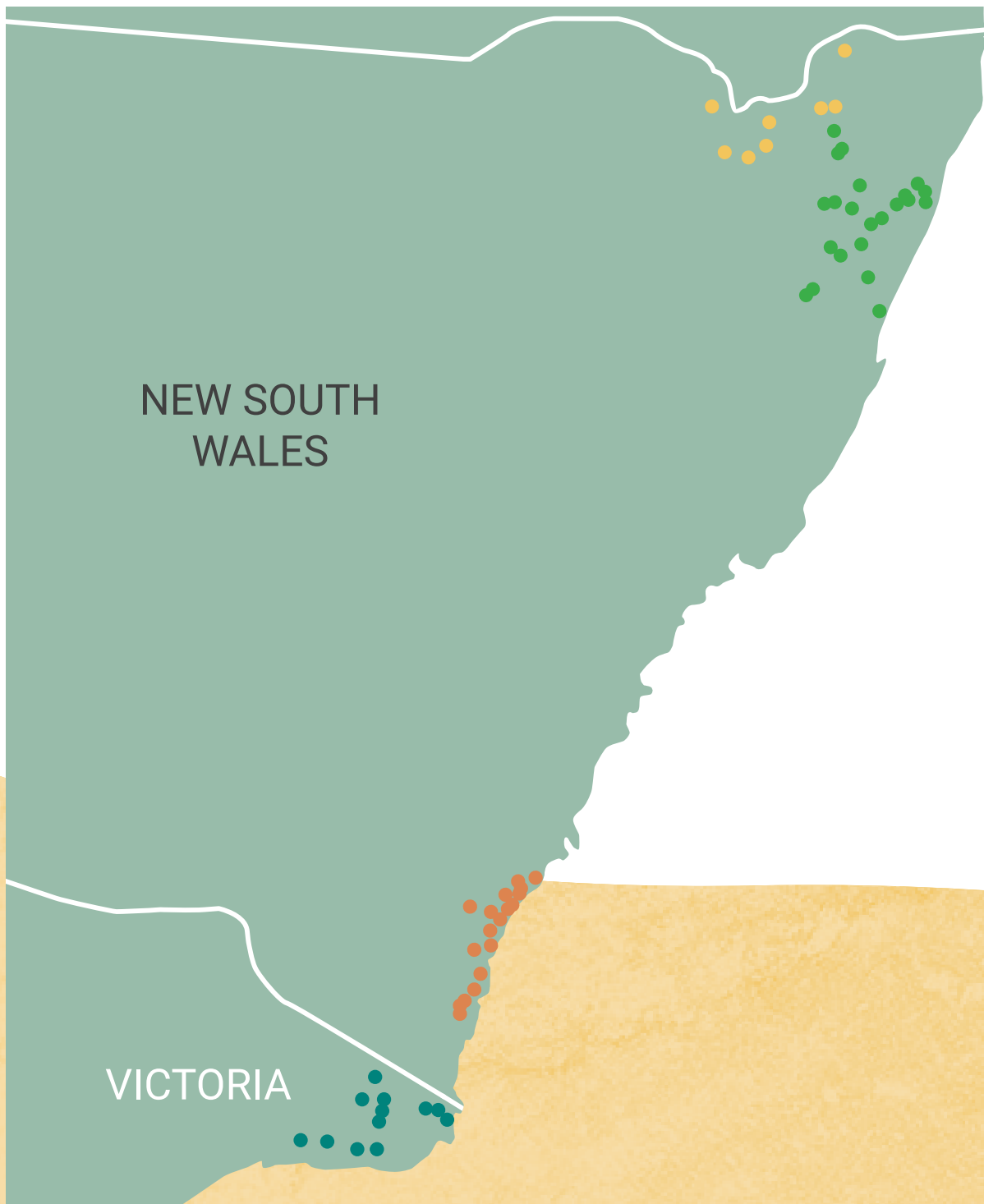
## Fire to Flourish Community Grants 2021–2025

Grant category	Overview	# Projects	Total funding
<b>Projects</b>		<b>258</b>	<b>\$8,771,767</b>
Capabilities & skills development	Local workshops, training and other initiatives that build community and organisational capabilities, including leadership, governance, disaster preparedness and wellbeing.	37	\$1,390,571
Communications & documentation	Community storytelling, media projects and documentation initiatives that capture local experiences and share knowledge.	9	\$141,038
Community planning processes	Community-led planning processes, resilience strategy development and preparedness planning initiatives.	15	\$538,099
Community programs & events	Community programs and events that bring people together, share knowledge and strengthen networks related to resilience, recovery and community connection.	36	\$974,556
Creative arts practices	Creative projects and activities that support healing, storytelling and cultural connection following disaster.	21	\$690,415
Equipment & supplies purchase	Emergency equipment, power generators, materials and other assets to enable community services and disaster preparedness.	38	\$618,499
Infrastructure investment	New and upgraded community halls, resilience hubs, sheds, and other public facilities to strengthen local disaster readiness.	78	\$3,152,758
Infrastructure planning	Feasibility studies, masterplanning and concept designs to support infrastructure development.	9	\$733,228
Land management & fire risk reduction	Clean up, environmental restoration, land management and reducing fire risk through local stewardship and preparedness activities.	15	\$532,603
<b>Other Grants</b>			<b>\$2,818,338</b>
Rapid disaster response	Immediate relief and recovery support for Nymboida and Tenterfield following bushfires during the program.	N/A	\$293,255
Rapid disaster contingency	Funding held in trust ready for rapid disaster response when communities need it.	N/A	\$1,215,083
Impact capital	Funding held in trust as an enduring local resource for communities to keep building resilience through initiatives that strengthen connection, preparedness, recovery capacity and long-term wellbeing.	N/A	\$1,310,000
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>\$11,590,105</b>



## 5 Year Project Map

- Tenterfield
- Clarence Valley
- Eurobodalla
- East Gippsland





## ENABLING SYSTEM-LEVEL CHANGE

**Fire to Flourish was designed not only as a community-based program, but as a platform for systems change. From the outset, it recognised that strengthening disaster resilience at scale requires collaboration across sectors that do not often work together in sustained, coordinated ways.**

Over five years, Fire to Flourish convened and connected communities, governments, academia, philanthropy, business and civil society, creating space for shared learning, experimentation and alignment. Rather than positioning any one actor as the solution, the program acted as a trusted intermediary, helping different parts of the system to listen to, learn from and work alongside communities.

This ecosystem approach enabled new relationships and ways of working to emerge. Community leaders engaged directly with policymakers, funders and researchers. Government agencies and philanthropic partners were exposed to community-led models that challenged traditional assumptions about risk, control and accountability.

### Examples of Systems Influence

Fire to Flourish has helped seed enduring initiatives, shape new funding models, inform policy and practice, and contribute to influential national and international platforms on community-led disaster resilience.

#### Seeded enduring initiatives by:

- catalysing and funding the DisasterWISE Communities Network, a peer learning network advancing disaster resilience through self-determination and community-led action.
- supporting and funding the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience research program (NIDR) within Monash University's Faculty of Arts.
- enabling the biannual National Indigenous Disaster Resilience Gathering, recognised for its transformative impact.



Researchers worked alongside practitioners and residents, ensuring that evidence was grounded in lived experience and practical application.

Fire to Flourish supported this ecosystem through a combination of convenings, networks, collaborative projects and ongoing relationship-building. These activities helped to surface shared challenges, reduce duplication, and build collective momentum around community-led disaster resilience. Importantly, they also created pathways for community insights and evidence to influence policy, funding and practice beyond the program's immediate footprint.

One of the clearest expressions of this ecosystem impact has been Fire to Flourish's role in shaping national conversations about disaster resilience.

By bridging community experience with research and policy, the program has contributed to a growing recognition that resilience cannot be engineered solely through infrastructure or response systems. It must be built through trust, capability, equity and local leadership.

While systems change is gradual and often non-linear, Fire to Flourish's ecosystem impact is evident in strengthened cross-sector relationships, increased uptake of community-led approaches, and a more connected landscape of actors working towards shared goals. These shifts create the conditions for lasting change, extending the program's influence well beyond individual communities or projects.

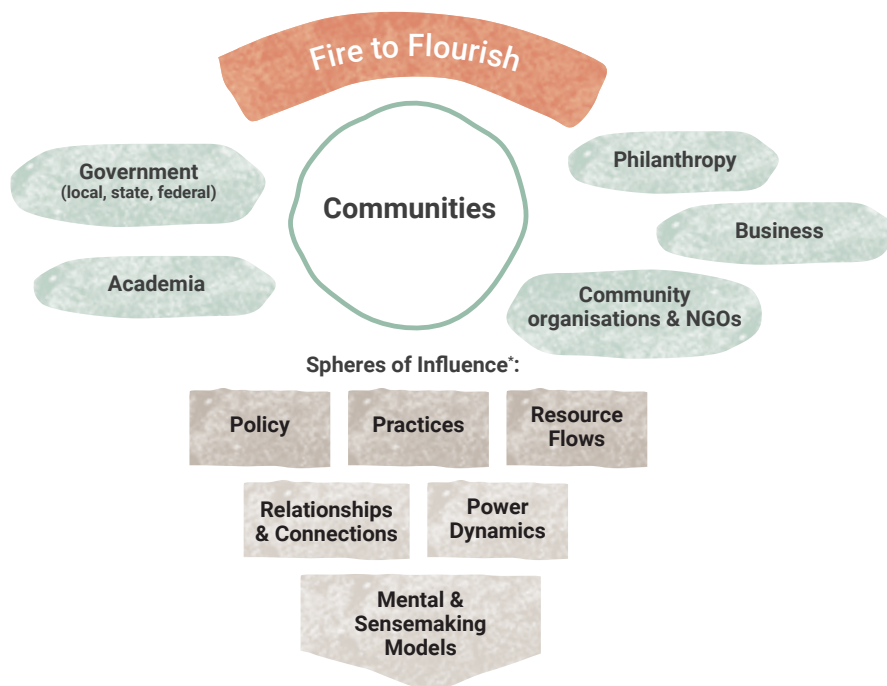
**Inspired new funding models** through participatory and rapid-response approaches now being adopted elsewhere. Examples include:

- The Generous Gippsland Fund by Gippsland Community Foundation, which has designed strong community participation in decision making as a direct outcome of the experiences through its partnership with Fire to Flourish.
- NRMA Insurance commitment of \$800,000 to support community-led resilience in the Northern Rivers, NSW, by adapting the Fire to Flourish participatory grantmaking model.
- The Australian Communities Foundation's new rapid disaster response product informed by Fire to Flourish practice.

**Informed policy and practice** through:

- development of a National Indigenous Disaster Resilience framework at the invitation of the Commonwealth Government, led by NIDR.
- facilitation of Aboriginal Disaster Resilience Policy Roundtables in South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales to date, led by NIDR.
- independent review of the Cobargo Community Bushfire Recovery Fund to inform recommendations and share lessons.
- invited advice to government departments and agencies across New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia.
- invited advice to leaders of communities recently affected by disasters.
- leveraged \$5.74 million additional research funding through government, industry and philanthropic partnerships to advance evidence and knowledge development for policy and practice priorities.

## Ecosystem of Change



\* Marra et al. (2026) How Embodiment Transforms Systems Change. <https://collectivechangelab.medium.com/how-embodiment-transforms-systems-change-9b71a04dd289> [accessed 30 March 2026].

\* Kania et al. (2018) The Water of Systems Change. [https://www.fsg.org/resource/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change/](https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/) [accessed 30 March 2026]

## Examples of Systems Influence

### Contributed to sector guidance and professional capability through:

- convening workshops, webinars, forums, and other events that brought community leaders together with policymakers and practitioners from across Australia to explore future disaster resilience systems and pathways for empowering community leadership and action.
- contributions to the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience's national guidance through publication of Planning Evacuations with Indigenous Communities as a companion document to the Evacuation Planning Handbook, and contributions to updating the Community Recovery Handbook.
- participation in the National Taskforce for Creative Recovery
- invited articles in Australia's leading emergency management practice journal, Australian Journal of Emergency Management (2023, 2025).
- facilitation of a Masterclass on Thinking Systemically for Disaster Resilience at the 2025 Australian Disaster Resilience Conference Professional Development Program.
- hosting stalls at key industry events to support knowledge exchange and sector engagement, for example the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council Conference and Australian Disaster Resilience Conference.



**Shaped public and professional debate** through:

- feature case study in the Commonwealth Government's 2023 National Health and Climate Strategy .
- citation in the Second National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework.
- Australian Resilient Democracy Network discussion paper on disasters and democratic resilience, with ANU and the Department of Home Affairs.
- keynote and invited contributions at national and international conferences, including to AFAC2025, the 2024 National Conference for Community Education Australia, the 2025 Philanthropy Australia Summit, the 2025 Lessons Management Forum in New Zealand, and the International Transformations Conferences in Sydney (2023) and Johannesburg (2025).

- submissions to national Government enquiries, including Treasury's Economic Reform Roundtable, NEMA's Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding, Home Affairs, review of Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response, and NHRA's review of Research priorities for disaster risk reduction and community resilience,

**Extended its public reach** through:

- featuring community and program leaders in a documentary film on community-led disaster resilience, currently in development in partnership with CheekyMac Studios and the Bendigo and Adelaide Bank's Community Enterprise Foundation
- co-funding the From the Embers Season 2 podcast, produced by the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia.

## KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE AND INFLUENCE

Research has been a core pillar of Fire to Flourish from the outset. Rather than treating research as a parallel or retrospective activity, Fire to Flourish embedded action and evaluative research throughout the life of the program to ensure that learning informed delivery in real time and that community experience shaped the evidence base.

The research component of Fire to Flourish was designed with two complementary aims. The first was to generate credible, place-based evidence about what strengthens community-led disaster resilience in practice. The second was to ensure that this evidence was translated into usable knowledge that could inform policy, funding, practice and future investment beyond the program itself.

To achieve this, Fire to Flourish brought together researchers, community members, practitioners and system actors in collaborative learning processes. Communities were not treated as subjects of research, but as partners in inquiry. Lived experience, local knowledge and reflection were valued alongside academic expertise, ensuring that findings remained grounded in place and relevant to those most affected by disaster.

Over five years, Fire to Flourish produced a substantial body of research outputs, including peer-reviewed journal articles, evidence reports, learning reviews, practice guides and agenda-setting publications. These outputs documented not only outcomes, but also the conditions, methods and principles that enabled them. Topics ranged from participatory grantmaking and community governance, to Indigenous engagement, resilience measurement, community-centred learning, and analysis of the social, health and economic dimensions of disaster and recovery.



A defining feature of Fire to Flourish’s research impact has been its focus on practice relevance. Findings were deliberately translated into accessible formats, including summaries, toolkits and guides, to support uptake by communities, governments, funders and practitioners. This approach reflects an understanding that evidence only contributes to change when it is usable, timely and connected to decision-making contexts.

Fire to Flourish’s research has also contributed to broader national and international conversations about disaster resilience. By challenging dominant response- and recovery-focused paradigms, the program’s evidence has helped to elevate the role of community leadership, equity and long-term capability building in resilience thinking. Research outputs have been used to inform policy discussions, funding frameworks and sector learning, and have supported Fire to Flourish’s role as a trusted contributor to systems-level change.

Importantly, research impact extended beyond formal publications. Learning processes such as Community-Centred Disaster Learning Reviews created spaces for collective reflection that strengthened local capability while also generating insights applicable elsewhere. These processes demonstrated that research itself can be a resilience initiative when it builds confidence, validates local knowledge and strengthens relationships.

Together, Fire to Flourish’s research outputs represent a coherent and influential body of work. They provide robust evidence that community-led approaches are effective, scalable and essential in a climate-changed world. Just as importantly, they offer practical guidance on how to do this work well, ethically and sustainably.



## Program Outputs featuring Fire to Flourish Research

Type	Publication	Year	Focus
Insights Reports	An Agenda for Change: Community-Led Disaster Resilience	2021	National policy and practice implications
	National Survey: Disaster Preparedness and Resilience	2021	Findings from a national survey of 3500+ community respondents
	Transformative Actions For Community Led Disaster Resilience	2022	Findings from collaborative workshops on system change with community, local government and industry representatives
	Now–Future–How: Insights from Testing a Holistic Model for Community-Led Resilience	2023	Insights from initial process prototype
	Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Activation	2024	Program design, foundations and delivery insights
	Independent Review of the Cobargo Community Bushfire Recovery Fund	2024	Review of successful community-led disaster recovery fund
	Measuring Climate Disaster Resilience in Fire and Flood-Affected Communities	2025	Methodology on resilience measurement and evidence on resilience, equity and climate impacts
	Resourcing Community Self-Determination for Resilience to Disaster, Disruption and Change	2026*	Synthesis of Fire to Flourish evidence and approach to present the case and derived model for investment in community
	Community Voices, Visions and Priorities: Insights from Fire to Flourish	2026*	Evidence of community resilience, priorities derived through Fire to Flourish processes
	Benefits of Fire to Flourish’s Participatory Processes	2026*	Evidence of the benefits communities experienced through resilience planning to granting processes
	Towards an Evidence-based Framework for Supporting Internally Displaced Peoples	2026*	Synthesis of research conducted on the lived experiences and systemic issues for internal displacement of disaster-affected people
Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Implementation	2026*	Program delivery, implementation and maximising impact insights	
Fire to Flourish: Research Overview and Insights	2026*	Overview of key findings from research conducted as part of Fire to Flourish	
Practice Guides	Fire to Flourish Grant Writing Toolkit	2023	Building community capability and access to funding
	Planning Evacuations with Indigenous Communities	2023	Companion document to the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience’s Handbook on Planning Evacuations
	Community-Based Disaster Learning Reviews: Practice Guide	2024	Methodology for community-led learning after a disaster event
	Working with Indigenous Peoples and Communities	2024	Guide to working with Indigenous communities
	Planning Guide to Enhance Resilience and Preparedness in Aboriginal Communities across South Australia	2025	Guidance on how to create safety for communities, culture and Country through resilience and preparedness work.

Type	Publication	Year	Focus
Practice Guides	Key Capabilities for Community Disaster Resilience: Insights and Practice	2026	A framework for self-assessment of community resilience capabilities
	Participatory Grantmaking for Community Resilience	2026*	Guide to participatory grantmaking governance and implementation
	Participatory Grantmaking Playbook	2026*	An online tool to support implementation of participatory grantmaking
	Community Power in Action: A Guide for Local Planning and Collaboration	2026*	Guide to participatory community-led resilience planning
	Community Power in Action: A Toolbox for Local Planning and Collaboration	2026*	Tools for participatory community-led resilience planning
	Storytelling Methodologies for Community-led Disaster Resilience	2026*	Guidance on the use of narrative methods to support recovery and resilience planning
Submissions	Natural Hazards Research Australia review of Research priorities for disaster risk reduction and community resilience	2021	Presents evidence on research priorities identified through Fire to Flourish scoping and design phase
	NEMA's Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding	2023	Presents evidence on community experiences of disaster funding and participatory grantmaking as a promising alternative
	Department of Home Affairs review of Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response	2023	Presents evidence on community capabilities for crisis response
	Department of Treasury Economic Reform Roundtable	2025	Presents evidence of the economic productivity benefits of community-led disaster resilience
Impact Reports	Fire to Flourish Impact Report 2023	2024	Annual impact measurement
	Fire to Flourish Impact Report 2024 (included in 2024 Annual Report)	2025	Annual impact measurement
	Fire to Flourish Impact Report 2021–2025 (this report)	2026	Whole-of-program impact measurement
Annual Reports	Annual Report 2021	2022	Activities and insights from the program's first year
	Annual Report 2022	2023	Activities and insights from the program's second year
	Annual Report 2023	2024	Activities and insights from the program's third year
	Annual Report 2024	2025	Activities and insights from the program's fourth year
	Annual Report 2025	2026*	Activities and insights from the program's final year

\* Output is forthcoming. Further outputs will be produced throughout 2026.

## Our Learnings

### WHAT FIVE YEARS OF COMMUNITY-LED RESILIENCE HAS TAUGHT US ABOUT DELIVERING IMPACT

Over five years, Fire to Flourish has worked alongside disaster-affected communities, governments, researchers, funders and practitioners to understand what truly strengthens resilience in a climate-changed world. In doing so, the program has generated not only measurable impact, but a clear set of learnings about how disaster systems must evolve if communities are to be better prepared for what lies ahead.

Fire to Flourish has shown what is possible when communities are trusted and resourced to lead. Across this work, five core learnings consistently emerged as critical for delivering impact in Fire to Flourish's partner communities. The challenge now is to embed these learnings into funding models, policy frameworks and institutional practice, so that community-led resilience becomes a core feature of how Australia prepares for the future.



# Five Core Learnings

# 1

## Communities are the capability, not the problem

A central learning from Fire to Flourish is that communities are not passive recipients of disaster management. They are active agents with deep local knowledge, established networks and existing organising capacity. Fire to Flourish saw repeatedly that when communities were given decision-making power, respect and flexible support, they responded in ways that were locally relevant and effective.

# 2

## Social capital is critical infrastructure

Fire to Flourish learned that while physical infrastructure and warning systems are important, they are not sufficient. Trust, connection and cooperation often determine how well a community navigates crises. Fire to Flourish's impact data strongly supports this insight, showing that communities with stronger relationships were better able to coordinate, communicate and act collectively during times of stress.

# 3

## Resilience is strengthened through the everyday parts of community life

Disaster resilience is not built through standalone programs alone. It is strengthened through the everyday activities communities are already engaged in, including cultural events, local food initiatives, environmental care and economic development.

# 4

## Systems must wrap around communities – not the other way around

Fire to Flourish also learned that achieving community-led resilience requires a shift in how systems operate. Rather than communities being required to fit into predetermined programs, institutions must adapt to support community-defined priorities. Fire to Flourish's experience reinforces that when systems wrap around communities, rather than directing them, resilience outcomes are stronger and more enduring.

## 5

## Trust, time and flexibility are non-negotiable

Finally, Fire to Flourish learned that community-led resilience cannot be rushed. Trust takes time to build, particularly in communities navigating trauma, fatigue and repeated disasters. Flexible funding, reduced bureaucracy and long-term relationships are essential conditions for success. Fire to Flourish's deliberate investment in foundations and long-term partnerships proved critical to achieving lasting impact.



## A GROWING MOVEMENT

Together, these learnings point to a broader movement toward community-led disaster resilience in Australia. There is growing recognition that traditional, top-down approaches to disaster resilience are insufficient on their own. Increasingly, leaders across government, humanitarian organisations, research institutions and community groups are acknowledging that resilience is built through people, relationships and place. This shift is reflected in the voices of those working across the disaster resilience landscape.



“Communities don’t see themselves as passive recipients of disaster management. We are active agents with deep local knowledge, existing networks and organising capacity. We know that the most effective resilience emerges when we stop infantilising communities and recognise the leadership and capability already present. We need flexible funding that respects local decision making, recognition of community leaders as legitimate practitioners, removal of bureaucratic barriers and sustained relationships that persist beyond crises. True community-led resilience isn’t better consultation or more inclusive programs. It’s communities having the means, legitimacy, and space to lead their own futures, with institutions genuinely in service of community vision.”

**Zena Armstrong – President, Cobargo Community Bushfire Recovery Fund**



“Community-led disaster resilience is the invisible infrastructure Australia can’t afford to overlook. Warning systems matter, but they can only do so much. It’s our social capital – how people trust, connect, and cooperate – that ultimately determines how well a community weathers a crisis. We need greater understanding and investment in these human networks, because it’s the people, their connections, and the places that foster them that create real resilience.”

**Renae Hanvin – CEO, Resilient Ready**



“Community-led disaster resilience is proving to be one of the most effective ways to reduce disaster impacts and strengthen post-disaster recovery. When communities co-design approaches to building resilience, solutions are place-based, sustainable, and deeply connected to what matters most. We’re seeing growing support for this approach because it delivers real impacts – building trust, capability, and resilience that lasts well beyond any single event. That’s why the NSW Reconstruction Authority is working hand-in-hand with community to create Disaster Adaptation Plans that fit the unique needs of each region.”

**Amanda Leck – former Head, Adaptation, Mitigation & Reconstruction, NSW Reconstruction Authority**



“We’re seeing a major shift in approaches to disaster resilience. Whilst disaster-impacted communities have for some time been acknowledged as being important, what we’re seeing more and more in the last five years, is community being put right in the centre of resilience efforts, with other services wrapping around them. That’s a shift which leads to more resilient communities across Australia.”

**John Richardson – Executive Director, Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience**



“Across Australia, we’re seeing communities lead the way in building their own resilience. When people are supported to draw on their existing strengths, knowledge and connections, they not only recover from disasters – they emerge stronger, more cohesive and better prepared for the future. This growing movement toward community-led resilience reflects a powerful shift in how we approach emergencies. It’s about moving from doing things for communities to doing things with them – listening, partnering and ensuring every voice is heard.”

**Bridget Tehan – Senior Adviser Humanitarian Diplomacy – Emergencies, Australian Red Cross**



“I have been heavily involved with the fire affected community on Kangaroo Island following the 2019 Black Summer bushfires which devastated the western half of the island. While I initially led the development of a community garden in Parndana, the town within the burnt zone, the community quickly rallied and led the push to create their future food security. From one community garden and one harvest exchange before the fire, there are now four community gardens, five harvest exchanges and community driven workshops on market gardening. It’s been wonderful to observe a community knowing exactly what they need, connecting their knowledge, skills and passion, and activating to lead their own resilience efforts.”

**Sophie Thomson – writer, author and presenter**



“Community resilience is about supporting bottom up initiatives that fill holes and build bridges that only the locals know about, it fosters structure and connection to support the transition from strife to post traumatic growth. By allowing for self determinism, the seeds of action that are planted in a disaster, are fed and watered, allowing for stronger communities to grow from the fertile mud and ash. Shared responsibility is more than a policy, it is trust and respect and alliance. We have a long way to go as a nation to reach this lofty goal, but, as we like to say up here in the Northern Rivers – ‘we are stronger together’. I have no doubt we will get there if we keep this notion at the centre of our minds and work.”

**Melanie Bloor – President, Resilient Uki**

# Our Future

## FIRE TO FLOURISH'S LEGACY

**Fire to Flourish concludes at a moment of growing urgency. Climate-driven disasters are becoming more frequent, more severe and more complex, placing increasing strain on communities, systems and institutions across Australia. While the scale of this challenge can feel overwhelming, the legacy of Fire to Flourish offers a different way forward, one grounded in people, place and collective capability.**

The most enduring legacy of Fire to Flourish is not a single program, project or report. It is the strengthened capacity of communities to lead their own preparedness, recovery and future resilience. Across Clarence Valley, Eurobodalla, Tenterfield and East Gippsland, communities have built deeper relationships, stronger leadership, clearer decision-making and greater confidence to act together in the face of uncertainty. These are the foundations that enable communities not only to recover from disaster, but to adapt and flourish over the long term.

This legacy has been shaped by the extraordinary commitment of people in these four partner communities. Community leaders, volunteers, Elders, local organisations and residents gave their time, energy and insight to co-design, deliver and learn through Fire to Flourish. Many did so while navigating ongoing recovery, repeated disasters and personal loss. Their willingness to show up, to collaborate and to imagine a different future has driven the program's impact and learning at every stage.

Fire to Flourish also leaves a legacy of trust. By investing time in listening, relationship-building and shared governance, the program demonstrated that community-led approaches are not only possible, but effective. This trust enabled new leaders to emerge, diverse voices to be heard and local knowledge to be valued alongside professional expertise. In doing so, Fire to Flourish challenged assumptions about where capability sits and who should lead in times of crisis.

Another critical aspect of Fire to Flourish's legacy is evidence. Over five years, the program built a robust and credible body of data, learning and insight that demonstrates the value of community-led disaster resilience. This evidence shows that social capital, cultural connection, local leadership and agency are not intangible benefits. They are measurable, impactful and essential to preparedness and recovery. In a policy and funding environment that often prioritises short-term outputs, Fire to Flourish has helped make the case for longer-term investment in community capability.

The legacy also extends beyond individual communities. Fire to Flourish has contributed to a growing national movement that recognises communities as central to disaster resilience. By convening and connecting government, academia, philanthropy, business and civil society, the program has helped shift conversations and practice towards models that place communities at the centre, with systems in service of local priorities. These relationships and networks continue to influence how resilience is understood and pursued across Australia.

# “Fire to Flourish helped move our community from reacting to crises to shaping our own long-term future.”

Community Participant, Fire to Flourish

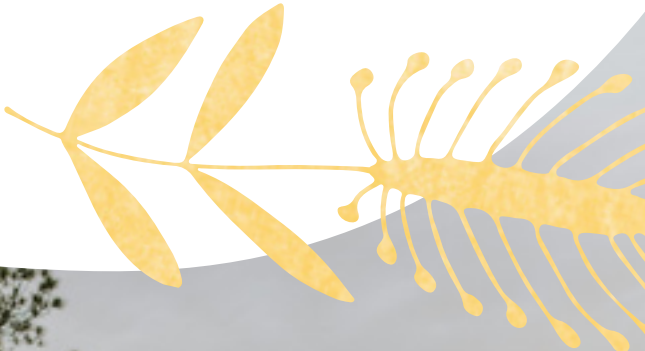
Importantly, Fire to Flourish leaves behind more than lessons. It leaves behind practical tools, models and ways of working that others can adopt and adapt. From resilience planning, participatory grantmaking and community-centred learning reviews to principles for building trust and capability, the program has translated experience into guidance that can inform future investment and action.

As Australia looks ahead, the question is no longer whether communities should play a central role in disaster resilience. Fire to Flourish has shown that they already do. The question is whether systems, funding models and institutions will evolve quickly enough to support them.

The legacy of Fire to Flourish is a reminder that resilience is not built in isolation or in moments of crisis alone. It is built over time, through relationships, shared purpose and the everyday work of caring for people and place. It is built when communities are trusted, resourced and respected as leaders of their own futures.

As climate impacts intensify, this legacy offers both hope and responsibility. Hope, because it shows what is possible when communities are supported to lead. Responsibility, because the work cannot stop here. The foundations laid by Fire to Flourish now call for sustained commitment, deeper investment and system-wide change so that community-led resilience becomes a core feature of Australia’s response to a changing climate.

Above all, Fire to Flourish’s legacy belongs to the people and places who brought it to life. Their leadership, generosity and determination will continue to shape stronger, more connected and more resilient communities long after the program itself concludes.



# What's Next for Australia

## A CALL TO ACT

**Australia is entering a period of profound and accelerating risk. Climate-driven disasters are no longer episodic or exceptional. They are becoming a defining feature of our national landscape, affecting more communities, more often, and with greater intensity. While emergency response and recovery systems remain critical, they are not enough on their own. If Australia is to be ready for what lies ahead, we must fundamentally rebalance how we invest in resilience.**

Fire to Flourish has shown what is possible when communities are trusted and resourced to lead. Across five years, the program demonstrated that community-led approaches strengthen preparedness, recovery and long-term resilience in ways that are locally meaningful and nationally relevant. The evidence is clear: communities are not a risk to be managed. They are a capability to be enabled.

What is needed now is commitment. Australia must move beyond pilots and short-term programs towards sustained, long-term investment in community-led disaster resilience. This means shifting a greater proportion of disaster funding upstream, from recovery to prevention and preparedness, and ensuring that funding mechanisms are flexible enough to support local decision-making, leadership and innovation.

Governments at all levels have a critical role to play. Policy and funding frameworks must be designed to support place-based, community-defined priorities rather than imposing one-size-fits-all solutions. This includes reducing administrative burden, recognising community leaders as legitimate practitioners, and investing in the social and cultural infrastructure that underpins resilience.



Philanthropy and the private sector also have a vital role. Fire to Flourish has shown the value of patient, partnership-based investment that prioritises learning, trust and long-term outcomes over short-term outputs. By aligning funding with community-led approaches, philanthropy and business can help de-risk innovation and catalyse system change.

For research institutions and practitioners, the task is to continue bridging evidence and practice. Knowledge must be co-created with communities and translated into forms that inform real-world decision-making. Research should strengthen community capability, not extract from it.

Most importantly, communities themselves must remain at the centre of Australia's resilience efforts. The future of disaster resilience lies in recognising and supporting the work communities are already doing to care for people and place, whether through cultural practice, local governance, environmental stewardship or economic development. Resilience is built in everyday life, not only in moments of crisis.

Fire to Flourish marks a beginning, not an end. It has laid foundations, generated evidence and demonstrated pathways forward. The challenge now is scale and permanence. The next chapter requires courage to change systems, discipline to invest for the long term, and humility to listen to those closest to the impacts.

Australia has a choice. We can continue to spend ever-increasing amounts responding to disasters after they occur, or we can invest in the conditions that help communities withstand, adapt and recover together. Fire to Flourish has shown that the latter is not only possible, but essential.

**The time to act is now.**

