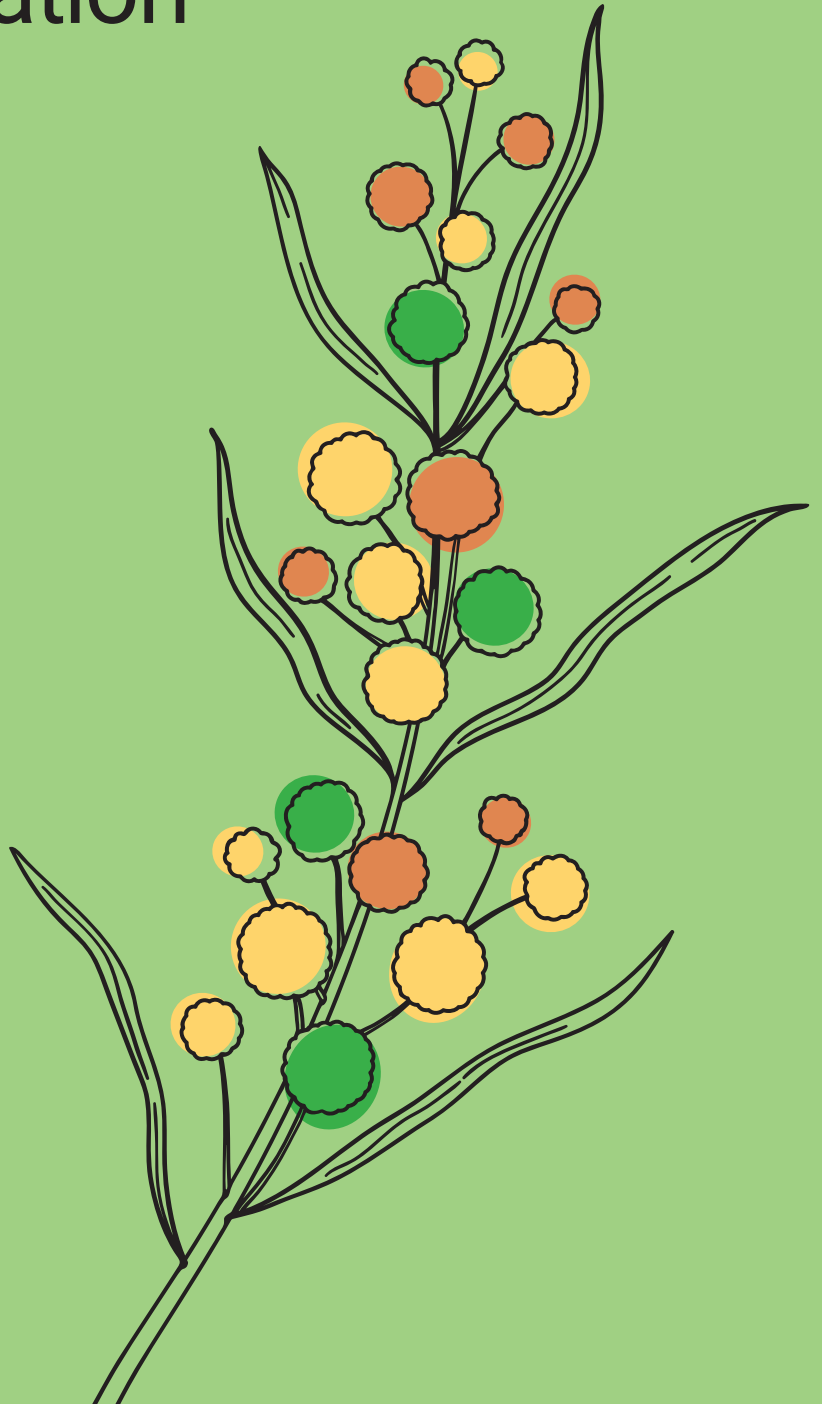


# Fire to Flourish

## Lessons Learned in its Implementation

Facilitating Transformative Change





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the lands on which we work and live across Australia.**

**This lessons learned report was created by people living and working on Wurundjeri, Bunurong, Yurabol, Yugara, Turabol, Bindal and Wulgurukaba Countries. It draws on the experience of our Fire to Flourish program, that operates on Bidwell, Brinja-Yuin, Bundjalung, Djiringanj, Gumbaynggirr, Gunaikurnai, Kamilaroi, Monero, Walbunja and Yaegl Country. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and creates a better future for all.**

The authors wish to gratefully acknowledge the openness and generosity with which everyone within the Fire to Flourish program shared their knowledge, experience and differing perspectives about their learnings. These key lessons draw from many interviews and reflection sessions held with people involved in Fire to Flourish during 2024 and 2025, including community, executive, backbone and research staff, as well as members of the program’s Strategic Advisory Council. The key questions draw from a Fire to Flourish ‘On Country Week’ gathering held in 2025, attended by most staff from across the program.

The richness of people’s responses provided real insight into the complexities of designing and implementing a community impact program grounded in research, where the outcomes can genuinely be led by the partner communities themselves. A program that is not merely a moment in time, but can leave a lasting legacy. Many thanks.

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## FOREWARD



### **It has been an immense privilege to lead a program as complex and ambitious as Fire to Flourish.**

Over five years, from 2021 to 2025, I have been able to work, learn and grow alongside committed delivery teams, and alongside communities that wanted to reconnect and rebuild after the devastating 2019-2020 bushfires. Communities who wanted, and thrived on, the opportunity to work out for themselves the best ways to do that.

My proudest moments from the program come from hearing stories of the positive impacts of Fire to Flourish in our partner communities. Each individual story I hear comes from one person, or one project, and over the life of Fire to Flourish there have been hundreds of projects, and thousands of people, that our innovative community-led approach has had an impact on.

We started Fire to Flourish with an agenda for transformative change around how communities could strengthen their long-term disaster resilience in

a way that could also help break cycles of structural disadvantage. We were equipped with a vision, design ideas, hopes and guiding principles. Part of the program's design was to underpin the program with research and learning. It has been continuous learning that has enabled us all in the program to put those initial ideas and principles into iterative practice. It has been continuous learning that has enabled us to navigate various challenges and to support communities really take the lead in strengthening their own disaster resilience.

This report passes on the most important of our hard-won lessons about what transformative, community-led change requires in practice.

### **Professor Briony Rogers**

*CEO, Fire to Flourish*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The communities that participated in Fire to Flourish did not just recover from disaster. They grew stronger, more connected, and more capable of shaping their own futures.

**As bushfires, floods and other disasters strike Australia with increasing frequency and intensity, there is a growing need for new and better ways to protect people and property, support recovery, and build long-term resilience. Yet the systems designed to support communities through disaster recovery and resilience building too often overlook the people who know their communities best. Fire to Flourish was established to test a different way of working – and over five years, it generated hard-won knowledge about what that different way of working actually requires.**

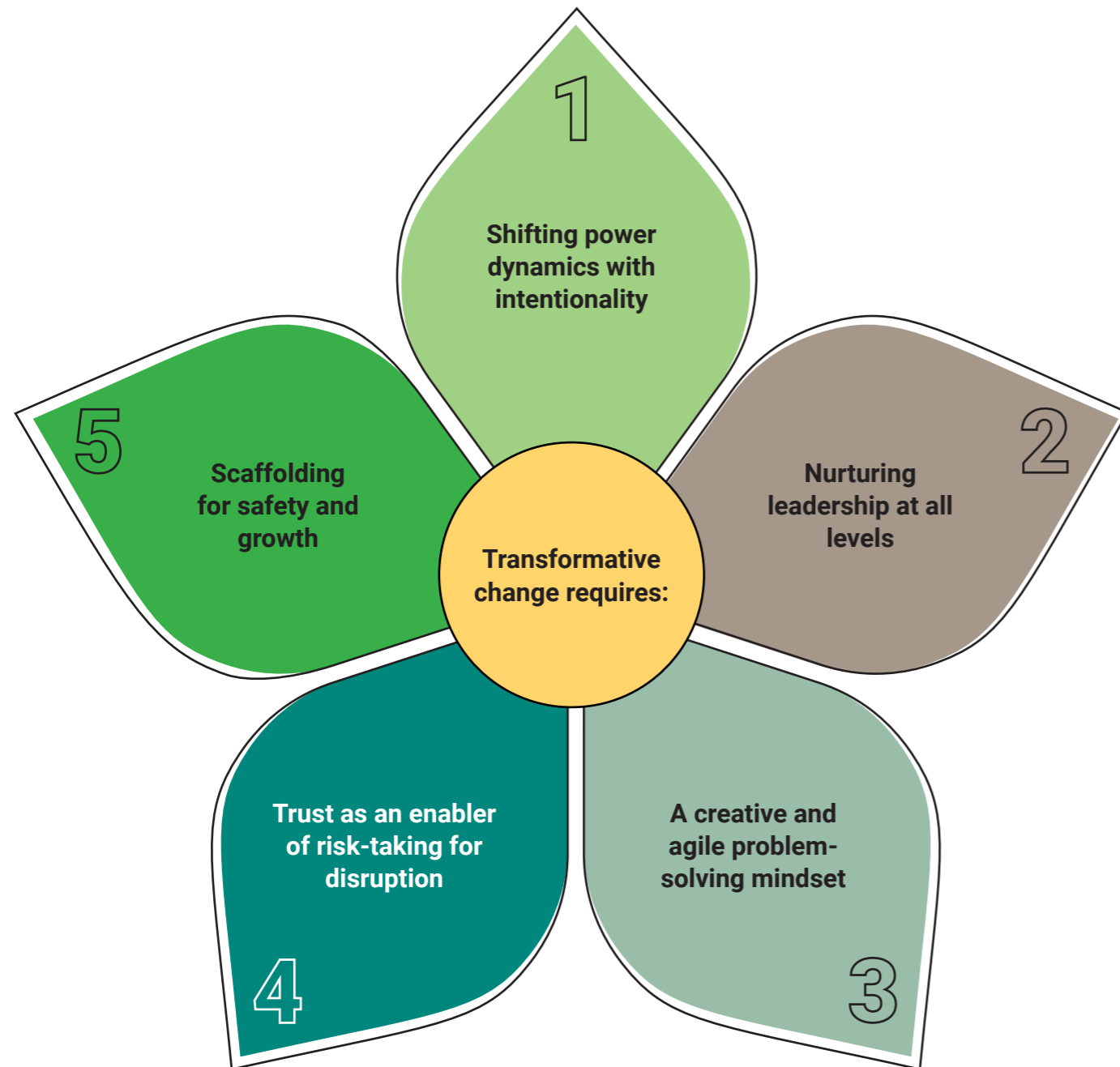
Led by Monash University and funded by philanthropic partners, Fire to Flourish was a five-year initiative (2021–2025) working with more than 70 communities in four Local Government Areas affected by the devastating 2019–2020 bushfires: Clarence Valley, Eurobodalla and Tenterfield in NSW, and East Gippsland in Victoria. The program's core proposition was that recovery funding and support could be more than a lifeline – it could be a lever for lasting community transformation. By placing decision-making power in the hands of community members

themselves, and investing in local leadership, relationships and capability, Fire to Flourish set out to explore whether community-led approaches could not only build disaster resilience, but begin to break the cycles of structural disadvantage that make communities vulnerable to disruptive events such as bushfires in the first place.

### **What was achieved**

Over its life, the program provided \$11.6 million in grant funding across 258 community-led projects through 20 tailored grant processes. But the numbers tell only part of the story. The program's most significant achievements were relational and structural: the social capital built within and across communities; the growth in confidence of community members as decision-makers and advocates; meaningful shifts in attitudes toward Indigenous people, knowledge and cultural practice; and the development of local leaders who continue to advocate for their communities long after the program has ended. At a systems level, Fire to Flourish has produced scalable frameworks, methods and tools for participatory grantmaking – a tangible demonstration that participatory, community-led approaches can work – and a suite of practical resources for others working to create the conditions for them to do so.

## FIVE LESSONS FOR THOSE AIMING TO FACILITATE TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE



This report presents what Fire to Flourish learned about what transformative, community-led change requires in practice. These five key lessons are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. They build on the foundations established in *Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Activation*.<sup>1</sup>

**Shifting power dynamics with intentionality.** Genuine community-led action requires more than good intentions. It demands explicit governance structures, trust-based approaches, and sustained effort to include those most often excluded. It also means taking local and Indigenous knowledge seriously – not as an add-on, but as central to the work. When communities are given real decision-making power, backed by real resources, they demonstrate what becomes possible.

**Nurturing leadership at every level.** Transformative work requires leadership to be distributed and developed across a community, program or organisation – not concentrated in formal roles or familiar faces. Fire to Flourish modelled a style of leadership built on empathy, authenticity and stewardship: creating the conditions for others to lead, grow, and ultimately advocate for their own futures.

**A creative and agile problem-solving mindset.** There were no existing systems for this kind of work – and Fire to Flourish was designed from its outset to iteratively and continuously learn, adapt and innovate. From redesigning grant accountability mechanisms to celebrating projects that far exceeded their original scope, the program demonstrated that agility, problem-solving and reflective practice are not optional extras in transformative work. They are essential.

**Trust as an enabler of risk-taking.** Transformative change is inherently risky. What made risk-taking possible in Fire to Flourish was trust – built carefully and consistently at every level of the program, from individual relationships through to institutional partnerships. Where trust was present, it freed up energy and possibility for innovation. Where it was absent, it created significant friction. Trust, in this sense, was the program’s most fundamental resource.

**Scaffolding for safety and growth.** Creativity and agility only flourish where there is sufficient structure holding things steady and inspiring confidence to stretch beyond comfort zones. Fire to Flourish provided intentional scaffolding – through its guiding principles, governance frameworks, investment in community-based staff, payment of community participants, and practical hands-on support – that gave people the safety to take risks and the support to grow. Getting this balance right was one of the program’s most demanding and important ongoing challenges.

### What this means for others

Taken together, these lessons amount to more than a set of program reflections. They represent hard-won, practical knowledge about what transformative, community-led change actually requires – and that knowledge is relevant far beyond disaster resilience. For funders designing grant programs, government agencies developing community policy, and organisations working alongside communities or seeking transformative change in any context, the lessons from Fire to Flourish speak directly to the conditions that make this kind of work succeed or fail.

The frameworks, tools and approaches developed through the program offer a practical starting point. But the deeper invitation is to take seriously what Fire to Flourish demonstrated: that when communities are genuinely resourced, trusted, and supported to lead – with power shared deliberately, leadership nurtured at every level, and the right scaffolding in place – the results can exceed what any top-down program could design in advance.

The communities that participated in Fire to Flourish did not just recover from disaster. They grew stronger, more connected, and more capable of shaping their own futures. That outcome is the program’s most enduring legacy – and a powerful argument for rethinking how transformative community work is designed, funded and supported.

<sup>1</sup> Walden, I., Bos, A., Rogers, B. & Werbeloff, L. (2024) *Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Activation*, Fire to Flourish, Melbourne, Australia



Lakes Entrance in the Gippsland Lakes, VIC

# Overview of Fire to Flourish

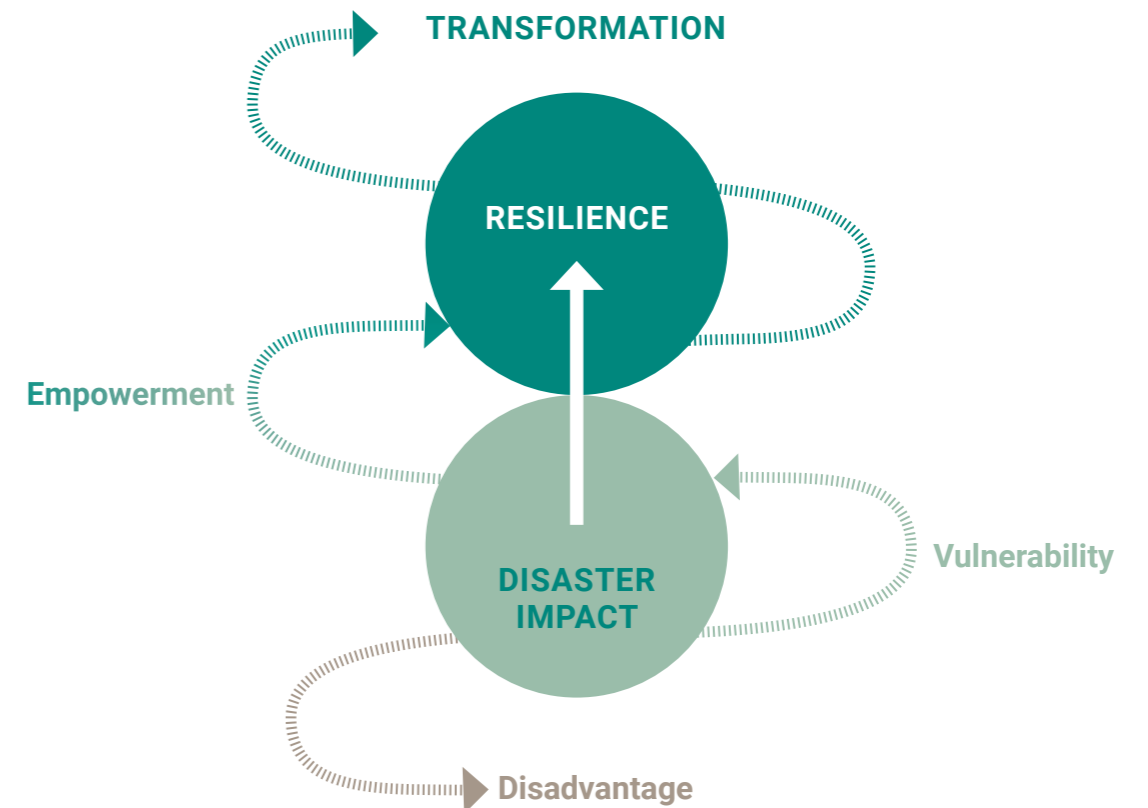
**Fire to Flourish, a five-year initiative (2021–2025) led by Monash University and funded by philanthropic partners, was established to enable communities to strengthen their resilience to disaster by trialling innovative, community-led solutions that addressed systemic disadvantage.**

Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all model, the program worked directly with more than 70 communities in four LGAs affected by the devastating 2019-2020 bushfires – Clarence Valley, Eurobodalla and Tenterfield in NSW, and East Gippsland in Victoria. Fire to Flourish

supported people and groups within those communities to connect and co-create tailored solutions that reflected their own lived experience and local realities. Through resilience planning, participatory grantmaking, capability building, and long-term support, Fire to Flourish has helped bridge the gap between hyper-local needs and broader government responses, helping communities not just to recover, but to flourish.

“If you give people the opportunity, they do have the ability to be able to do these things and run these programs and be successful at it.” – Community Lead

## AN AGENDA OF TRANSFORMATION



*Transformative Agenda: Fire to Flourish aimed to disrupt entrenched disadvantage and disaster impact through a model of empowerment and transformation that supports communities to build resilience<sup>2</sup>*

From its outset, Fire to Flourish had an agenda of community transformation and empowerment.<sup>3</sup> The program set out to explore whether recovery from the 2019–20 Australian bushfires could also be a transformative opportunity – one that brought in voices not typically heard in disaster recovery, and empowered communities to understand, mitigate and manage their own disaster risks.

Central to this was a question about trajectory: could recovery funding become a lever for lasting community development? Could community-led, strengths-based approaches improve people's wellbeing and disaster resilience over the long term – and, more ambitiously, break the cycles of structural disadvantage that make communities more vulnerable to natural hazards in the first place?

<sup>2</sup> Keating et al. (2022) *Transformative actions for community-led disaster resilience, Fire to Flourish, Melbourne, Australia*  
<sup>3</sup> Rogers et al. (2021) *An agenda for change: Community-led disaster resilience, Fire to Flourish, Melbourne, Australia*

“I’ve never worked... in the disaster resilience space before... To go from that to how does [disaster] affect different communities when they have different geographic socioeconomic advantage, disadvantage... [to] seeing the leaders in the community [develop]. I think that’s probably a proud thing ... seeing the leaders in the community.” – Community Lead

## A MODEL OF COMMUNITY INVESTMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

“Community decision making is the way to go, and it should be adopted not only at a local level, but all across Australia because it works, because people know what’s best for their communities and how best to achieve it with the support of the people on the ground where decision making should be happening.”

– Community Lead

Over the life of the Fire to Flourish program, \$11.6 million in grant funding was allocated by community member decision makers to 258 community-led projects through 20 different grant processes - each one of these tailored specifically by communities for communities. Funding supported a diverse range of initiatives to strengthen local community disaster resilience, including training and capability development; infrastructure planning and investment; the purchase of equipment and supplies; community planning, programs and events; land management and fire risk reduction measures; and communications, storytelling and creative practice. In addition, Fire to Flourish extended rapid emergency response grants to households in Tenterfield and Nymboida, affected by bushfires in 2023. But the program’s ambitions extended well beyond grantmaking.

Fire to Flourish sought to remain relevant and responsive to each community’s evolving needs while sustaining and deepening participation over time. The program invested directly into its partner communities, developing capabilities, networks, and local community leaders. Community members were employed as team members to run resilience planning and grant processes, and community decision-makers were paid in recognition of both their time and their considerable expertise about their own local communities.

Central to this model were commitments to wellbeing, care and cultural safety – for community participants and staff alike – and to navigating the risks and roadblocks that inevitably arise in complex, long-term,

transformative work. Underpinning everything was a determination to build the foundations for lasting systemic change: a proof of concept for community-led resilience and participatory grantmaking models, with scalable frameworks, methods and tools for wider adoption, as well as increased community confidence and improved social capital within partner communities.

## KEY PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACTS

The Fire to Flourish program concluded in March 2026, having made significant achievements and leaving lasting impacts.

Local community impacts are seen in the legacy of relationships and social capital built through the program, and in the growth in confidence of community members as decision-makers, and advocates for their communities’ priorities and needs.

“I think definitely number one [achievement] would be social capital. I think what we’ve created here and the connections that have been made throughout the program are amazing. And I think that people have made lifelong friends. It’s not what, it’s who.”

– Community Lead

Community teams also reported that, over the life of the program, they had built relationships with community members resulting in significant attitudinal shifts.

“Those feelings towards the cultural burning and looking after Country have changed dramatically. And one of those guys that chipped me in the first place about ‘why do we have to use Aboriginal wisdom’ now... is a really good friend of mine, asks about the [cultural] burning and stuff like that and is appreciative of the fact that we’ve brought all that to the program.” – Community Lead

The significance of community agency and the shifting norms around indigenous inclusion have also been identified as standout contributions by the program.

“I know from the great work of Fire to Flourish that the views that we spread across different communities will ensure that community leadership and community agency doesn’t leave Indigenous voices behind in the future. That’s something that I think is really special.” – Strategic Advisory Council member

National impacts centred on the Fire to Flourish program as a proof of concept - what had been learned about transformative change, community-led resilience approaches and grantmaking models. Program staff were proud of the scalable frameworks, methods and tools that had been developed over the life of the program and of the thought leadership provided around the potential for systemic change.

“It’s proven 10 times over that this model of granting is possible and that those principles are the right principles to apply and that we know what we need - the enablers – to make it happen.”

– Executive Member

The lessons in this report have been distilled from reflections from the people who implemented and guided Fire to Flourish – the community teams who facilitated the program on the ground, backbone and executive staff, research teams, and the Strategic Advisory Council. To make the richness of their insights as useful as possible, the lessons are presented in two ways. Firstly, in Part 2 as five key lessons about implementing a program aimed at facilitating transformative change, and as secondly, in Part 3 as key questions to ask when designing, implementing, maintaining, and planning for the legacy of a community-led development program.





Forest regeneration after bushfires, Clarence Valley, NSW

# Key Lessons Learned

Through its implementation, Fire to Flourish generated five key lessons about what transformative, community-led change requires in practice. These lessons are deeply interconnected — each enables and reinforces the others — and together they offer a framework for others working in community development, disaster resilience, system transformation and related fields.

## KEY LESSON 1: SHIFTING POWER DYNAMICS WITH INTENTIONALITY

“The effort to truly embed Indigenous ways of knowing and doing has been one of the best efforts I’ve ever seen in a thing that’s not specifically only for mob.”

– Strategic Advisory Council Member

Transformative change requires a deliberate commitment to shifting the power dynamics that typically characterise relationships between communities and the institutions that serve them. Fire to Flourish was designed with this in mind. The program brought significant funding into partner communities and explicitly sought to include less-heard voices in the decisions about how that funding was spent. As one community lead put it: “People in Canberra don’t know what [our] people need on the ground. People here in town know better than anybody what’s needed. And that’s why we’re doing the community decision making”.

This required more than good intentions — it demanded explicit governance structures, trust-based approaches, and sustained effort to include those who are most often excluded. It also meant taking seriously the value of local and Indigenous knowledge, not as an add-on, but as genuinely central to the work. As one Strategic Advisory Council member observed, Fire to Flourish’s effort to embed Indigenous ways of knowing and doing “is not a bolt on... it is truly actually embedded and respected and thought about and it’s deliberate”.

Shifting power also meant being transparent about the role that money plays. The presence of real funding changed the stakes for communities — as one researcher noted, “the community knew that there was money behind it... things can actually change”. Wielding that power with care required Fire to Flourish to hold itself accountable not just to its own processes, but to the communities it worked with. This accountability was understood as a kind of ‘social contract’: an ongoing obligation to work in service of communities, rather than extracting from them. Over time, this approach created genuine shifts in how community members understood their own agency. As one participant reflected: “We’ve got more confidence [now] that we have agency... I think to a degree the government doesn’t actually want us to have this sense of purpose and agency and power in our own journey because it scares them a little bit”.

By creating what one Strategic Advisory Council member described as “pockets of different practice”, Fire to Flourish has demonstrated what becomes possible when power is shared rather than concentrated. Bringing together diverse voices and perspectives — and actively countering the dominant top down narratives that so often shape disaster recovery and disaster resilience — proved to be one of the program’s most significant contributions. The result led a Strategic Advisory Council member to say of Fire to Flourish: “community agency and the way that local leadership and decision making does really shift power... it is one of the best examples I think I’ve seen”.

## KEY LESSON 2: NURTURING AND DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP AT ALL LEVELS

**“To see transformative outcomes and hear those sorts of stories... we did have so many people go out of their way... to say what a difference it’s made. They never saw themselves as leaders before and they’ve been really supported to step up.”**

– Community Lead

Transformative community work requires leadership to be distributed, nurtured, and practiced at every level – not concentrated in formal positions or the same familiar faces. Fire to Flourish demonstrated this in practice.

One community lead reflected on a deliberate effort to broaden who had a seat at the table: *“We wanted to have leaders in the community up and down the coast who are leaders in their own circles, but they’re not the same people who are at the table every single time... you find that you go to a meeting and there’s four or five people there, and then you go to another meeting and those four or five people are the same people”.*

Breaking that pattern required active effort – creating the conditions for new voices to emerge, and for people who had never seen themselves as leaders to step into that role. One researcher who took students out to work directly with communities noted with pleasure how community members took on a mentoring role with the students. Another community staff member observed: *“They never saw themselves as leaders before and they’ve been really supported to step up”.*

This kind of leadership development only flourishes where power has genuinely shifted – so it is closely linked to the first lesson in this report. But it also requires a particular quality of leadership from within the program itself. Fire to Flourish modelled a distributed, principles-aligned approach that prioritised empathy, authenticity, and what one executive described as *“steadfastness around vision without minimalising or catastrophising”*, holding optimism and purpose through uncertainty while remaining sensitive to people and emotion. This wasn’t leadership as command-and-control, but leadership as stewardship: creating the conditions for others to lead.

Leadership in this context also encompassed advocacy – naming what wasn’t working, challenging entrenched power structures, and in some cases building entirely new structures to sustain community agency into the future, such as the Community First Foundation established by residents of Tenterfield with support from the Fire to Flourish program. As one Strategic Advisory Council member noted, Fire to Flourish *“wasn’t just helping people to bounce back from disasters... they actually helped community to get involved and gave them the leadership”*. The result was a program that didn’t just deliver outcomes, but grew the capacity of communities to advocate for their own futures long after the program itself had ended.



## KEY LESSON 3: A CREATIVE AND AGILE PROBLEM-SOLVING MINDSET

**“We did a round of funding, [and] there were things that didn’t work. What can we do next? How can we make that better next time?”** – Community Lead

Transformative change requires a creative and agile problem-solving mindset. Fire to Flourish succeeded in part because there were no existing systems for community-led disaster resilience work – and struggled, at times, for exactly the same reason.

Agile problem solving was always built into the program as iterative learning – as a practice rather than an afterthought. As one community staff member described: *“We started with all those co-design tools... social impact stuff that they gave us ... and then we used them and adapted them and made them our own.”* However, there were many additional instances where the program required constant creative problem-solving, workarounds, and adaptation.

For instance, traditional grant accountability mechanisms – receipts, formal reports, audits – didn’t align with the community-led and accessibility objectives of the participatory grantmaking framework trialled, or the trust-based approaches the program was built on. In response, Fire to Flourish developed a model of proportional accountability: lighter-touch requirements for smaller grants, relational check-ins instead of forms, and stories and photos alongside financial documentation. When gaps in community capabilities were discovered, the program created resources to fill them – such as a granting toolkit<sup>4</sup> written by the Eurobodalla community team. As one team member noted, *“so many people have said how helpful that is to be able to have that on hand when they apply for*

*funding again”*. And when communities found creative ways to stretch a project beyond its original scope – like the Tenterfield Farm Gate project, which went from buying printed signs to purchasing printing equipment and eventually offering signs at cost price to the whole region – the program celebrated and supported that resourcefulness rather than constraining it.

This creativity should be recognised for what it is: both a genuine strength and a symptom of systemic gaps and misalignments. The innovation required of Fire to Flourish was not incidental – it reflected the absence of frameworks, funding models, and governance structures that are fit-for-purpose when it comes to community-led resilience work. One of the most important factors in this agility was having ‘translators’ embedded in the team: people who could bridge the gap between formal systems and processes on one side, and local knowledge, values, and ways of working on the other. As one community team member put it: *“One of the roles in this kind of program is you’re a translator. You’re translating between community needs and aspirations and community values and ways of working and then government and bureaucracy”*. This translation extended to language itself – recognising that communities don’t necessarily talk about ‘resilience building’, but they do talk about barbecues, tennis clubs, and what their community actually needs.

This willingness to reflect, adapt, and improve at both the program and community level was what allowed Fire to Flourish to navigate complexity, manage risks and roadblocks, and keep improving its practice over time. Crucially, as the links to Lessons 4 and 5 make clear, this kind of agility is only possible where there is sufficient trust and institutional scaffolding holding things steady underneath it.

<sup>4</sup> Grant Writing Toolkit: Guide to Applying for Grants for Community Groups & Not-for-Profit Organisations in New South Wales & Victoria

## KEY LESSON 4: TRUST AS AN ENABLER OF RISK-TAKING FOR DISRUPTION

“The higher the trust you have, the higher the risk you could take, probably because you feel you can share the risk.”

– Community Team Member

Transformative change is inherently risky — and Fire to Flourish operated with a deliberately high risk appetite in order to innovate, adapt, and work in ways that challenged existing systems. What made that possible was trust. As one community lead reflected: *“The counter to risk is all the conversations we’ve had around trust and being able to hold that risk at the different levels”*. Trust, in this sense, functioned as the fundamental currency of the program. It was the ingredient that made flexibility, creativity, and genuine disruption possible without everything falling apart.

Crucially, trust had to be actively built and maintained at multiple levels simultaneously: within teams, with communities, with the home institution, with delivery partners, and with funding partners. It couldn’t be assumed or mandated — it had to be earned through consistent, open, and honest communication over time, as well as accountability and follow through on commitments. As one community team member put it: *“As long as you’ve got an open communication relationship of trust, then it’s all rosy... if you don’t have that relationship of trust or that connection, it doesn’t work because you don’t know what’s going on”*. Where trust was present, it freed up energy for the work itself.

Where it was absent, it created significant barriers — slowing progress, increasing friction, and making risk-sharing impossible.

That foundation of trust unlocked genuine innovation throughout the program. It enabled teams to take creative risks to solve unexpected issues and find workarounds when institutional norms created barriers.

Trust also freed communities to engage authentically in co-design and decision-making, shifting power in ways that more transactional relationships never could. This produced some of the program’s most profound outcomes: communities that didn’t just participate in the program, but took ownership of it — in one case establishing their own foundation to continue the work after Fire to Flourish ended, unwilling to let the momentum disappear. These weren’t outcomes that could be planned or mandated. They emerged because trust had been built carefully, over time, at every level of the program.

The trust that Fire to Flourish built with communities was perhaps its most hard-won and most significant achievement. It was the foundation on which everything else depended — and its presence was felt by communities themselves. As one community lead noted: *“Their trust in us and their acceptance of the program... we’ve proven that it can work”*. That proof of concept, grounded in genuine relational trust, is one of the most important things Fire to Flourish leaves behind.



## KEY LESSON 5: SCAFFOLDING FOR SAFETY AND GROWTH

“Those [Fire to Flourish program] principles I think still [are] really important anchors... they are all fairly intuitive and people can connect to them and bring their own meaning to them. And they’ve facilitated really important discussions around design and implementation and decision making along the way” – Executive Member

Transformative change requires more than vision and goodwill – it requires intentional scaffolding: structures flexible enough to allow creativity, but strong enough to provide safety, direction, and support at every level of the program – individual, team, community, and institutional. This wasn’t about control. As one executive reflected, “people actually really revelled in the structure and having some boundaries, even if it was to push the boundaries. There was a sense of safety and sharing some responsibility that enabled someone who is local to dive in without as much risk”.

Fire to Flourish’s six program principles served as a foundational part of this scaffolding – functioning as anchors that bridged different knowledge systems, facilitated discussions around design and implementation, and gave people a shared foundation from which to make decisions.



Fire to Flourish’s six program principles – foundational to the program’s scaffolding

Communities need to be properly resourced to do this kind of work, and Fire to Flourish recognised that from the outset. Therefore, scaffolding included investment in community-based staff, in payment of community participants for their time in the program, and in training and skills development. This investment was not incidental; it was foundational.

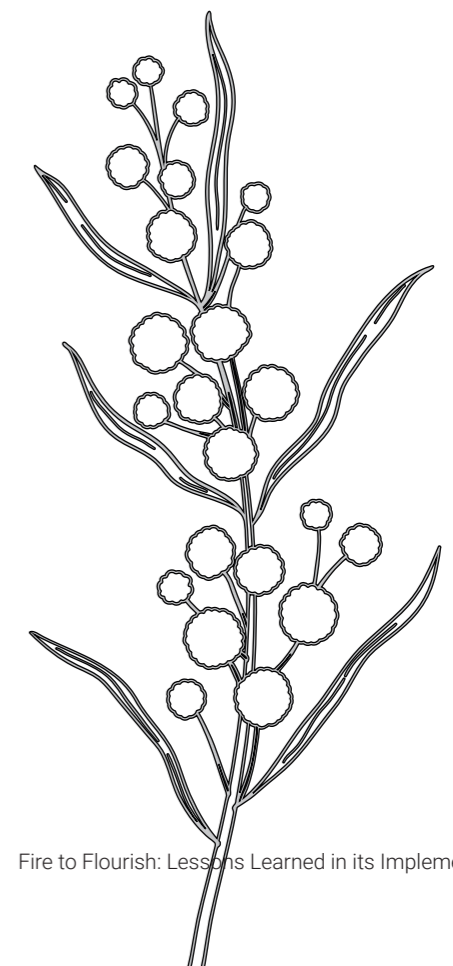
That resourcing extended to practical, hands-on support for the people leading community projects funded through Fire to Flourish – helping them scope budgets, navigate bureaucratic processes, and even manage the emotional weight of work that often touched deeply into people’s lives. As one community lead noted: “What I hadn’t really expected with that role was how emotional it would be. How when you touch base with the project leads you are touching into their life”. The program’s response was practical and human: offering support with the “really s\*\*\*y stuff like liaising with council and getting permits” so that community project leads could focus on what mattered most.

The scaffolding Fire to Flourish provided was also explicitly developmental – designed not just to hold people steady, but to help them grow. This was done in conversation with communities, and was led by their priorities and insights into what would be helpful. Community project mentors<sup>5</sup> in Eurobodalla, for instance, were trained to deeply understand the program’s purpose and principles so they could communicate them authentically when working with grant applicants.

Staff and community members alike were supported to build new skills and capacities. And many program staff found the work to be transformative at a personal level too, with one reflecting: “If you’re not yourself being changed by the experiences and the things you’re discovering and the training and the learnings that you’re going through, you’re not properly engaging”. The result, when the conditions were right, was both program staff and communities that could bring everything

they knew to the table – and surprise everyone, including themselves, with their achievements and as a result, building trust in the program and growing their confidence. As one community lead put it: “Providing that support, the funding or the expert people who are willing to work in a collaborative way, those conditions just show what the community is capable of”.

Getting the scaffolding wrong, however, had the potential to cause real harm – not just inefficiency. The tension between community-led informality and the need for structure ran through the program’s life, and navigating it required constant attention and care. The commitment to ‘do no harm’ was explicit: as one staff member noted, “when we go in and employ people, it’s really important that we’re going in and we’re not actually doing harm”. This vigilance, and the recognition that poorly designed structures and processes can hurt people, not just slow things down, is perhaps one of the most important lessons Fire to Flourish leaves for others working in this space.



<sup>5</sup> Community Project Mentor practice guide



Bluff Rock, Tenterfield, NSW

# Design, Delivery and Lasting Impact: Key Questions to Consider



**On the following pages are questions that translate the key lessons learned through Fire to Flourish into a practical reflection and design tool. The tool can be used to support the design, implementation, maintenance and planning for lasting impact of a transformative, community-led development program.**

While most relevant for the organisation facilitating a program, these questions can be asked by any group involved, including community members and organisations, First Nations leaders and bodies, local government, program staff, and funders.

The questions draw from a Fire to Flourish 'On Country Week' gathering held in 2025, attended by community, executive, backbone and research staff, and from the two Fire to Flourish Lessons Learned reports.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Walden, I., Bos, A., Rogers, B. & Werbeloff, L. (2024) *Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Activation*, Fire to Flourish, Melbourne, Australia and this report, *Fire to Flourish: Lessons Learned in its Implementation*



## BEFORE ENGAGEMENT BEGINS (YEAR ZERO)

1. **Purpose, need and alignment:** Is the purpose of the program grounded in evidence and responsive to real community need, and do the community's priorities genuinely align with the program's goals?
2. **Community readiness and self-determination:** Is there a genuine need and desire for this program in the community, and has the community itself been central to identifying and defining that need?
3. **First Nations context and leadership:** Are First Nations peoples, organisations and leadership meaningfully involved from the outset, and is their authority and cultural knowledge shaping the program's direction?
4. **Understanding the community:** Do we have a deep and honest understanding of this community – its strengths, dynamics, history, relationships, priorities and capacity?
5. **Stakeholder mapping and engagement:** Have we identified and engaged the right stakeholders, including those whose voices are less often heard, and are we building trust through consistent and authentic relationships?
6. **Funder and partner clarity:** Are funders and partners clear on their role, genuinely connected to the vision, and flexible enough to allow the community to shape the approach?
7. **Program team readiness:** Do we have the right team in place, with the diversity, relationships, capabilities and cultural understanding needed to do this work well? Are we ready and willing to find creative solutions and figure out problems as they arise?
8. **Practical and logistical foundations:** Are the practical and logistical foundations – resources, timeframes, systems and processes – sufficient and realistic for the work ahead?



## EARLY ACTIVATION IN A COMMUNITY

1. **Shared understanding and purpose:** Is everyone – community, program staff, partners and funders – genuinely on the same page about the purpose, principles and approach of the program?
2. **Co-design and community-led approaches:** Have we co-designed a local approach with the community, and does it reflect their priorities, governance arrangements, and ways of working?
3. **Inclusion and diverse voices:** Are the right people at the table, and are we actively seeking out those whose voices are less often heard?
4. **Trauma-informed and culturally safe practice:** Are we set up to work in a trauma-informed, culturally safe, and inclusive way from the very beginning, including for our own staff?
5. **Relationships, trust and community building:** How are we building and maintaining trust with the community, across the team, and with partners and funders? Are we allowing enough time to do this well?
6. **Logistics, roles and structures:** Do we have the structures, processes, roles, systems and resources in place to support both community and program teams to do this work well?
7. **Resources, funding and burden:** Are resources, funding and workload being distributed fairly, and are we honest about who bears the burden and who receives the benefit?
8. **Feedback, learning and accountability:** Are our feedback and accountability systems transparent, two-way, and genuinely useful for the community as much as for the program?



## ONGOING IMPLEMENTATION

1. **Relevance and responsiveness:** Is the program still relevant, still impactful, and still genuinely responsive to what the community needs right now?
2. **Learning, sharing and continuous improvement:** Are we learning continuously from what's working, what isn't, what's changing, and feeding those lessons back into the program?
3. **Participation, inclusion and leadership:** Are we sustaining and deepening participation, and actively bringing new voices, leaders and partners into the work?
4. **Wellbeing, care and cultural safety:** Are we looking after the wellbeing of community members and staff, and building the resilience needed to navigate setbacks and disruption?
5. **Resources, funding and staffing:** Are our resources, funding and staffing sufficient, flexible and accessible? What happens when they change or run out?
6. **Tracking progress and impact:** Are we tracking progress and impact in ways that are meaningful to the community, as well as to funders and program managers?
7. **Navigating conflict, risks and roadblocks:** Are we navigating conflict, roadblocks and risks in ways that protect the integrity of the program, the safety of people and the trust of the community?
8. **Sustainability, legacy and exit:** Are we already thinking about what comes after, and building the foundations for lasting change and community-led sustainability?



## PLANNING FOR LASTING IMPACT

1. **Planning and managing the transition:** Have we planned for the end of the program with the same care and intention we brought to the beginning, including a trauma-informed, honest and transparent transition process?
2. **Community capability, relationships and self-determination:** Have we left the community with the skills, relationships, networks, structures and resources they need to continue and build on the work?
3. **Knowledge, research and storytelling:** Are the knowledge, stories and research generated by the program being captured, owned appropriately, and shared in ways that are accessible and useful to different audiences?
4. **Ongoing asset maintenance:** Are any assets created during the program being maintained and leveraged beyond its formal conclusion?
5. **Honest reflection and evaluation:** Have we been honest – with ourselves, with the community, and with funders – about what worked, what didn't, and what still needs to be addressed?
6. **Absorbing the program into community life:** Is there a clear plan for how the program's functions could be absorbed into existing community structures, programs and activities?
7. **Systemic change, policy and scale:** Are we thinking systemically about how this program's sustained impact can elevate community voice, influence policy, and contribute to lasting change beyond this community?
8. **Celebration, recognition and closure:** Have we celebrated what was achieved, recognised every contribution, and honoured the relationships that made the work possible?

# FIRE to FLOURISH



Strength through community-led action

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

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

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

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