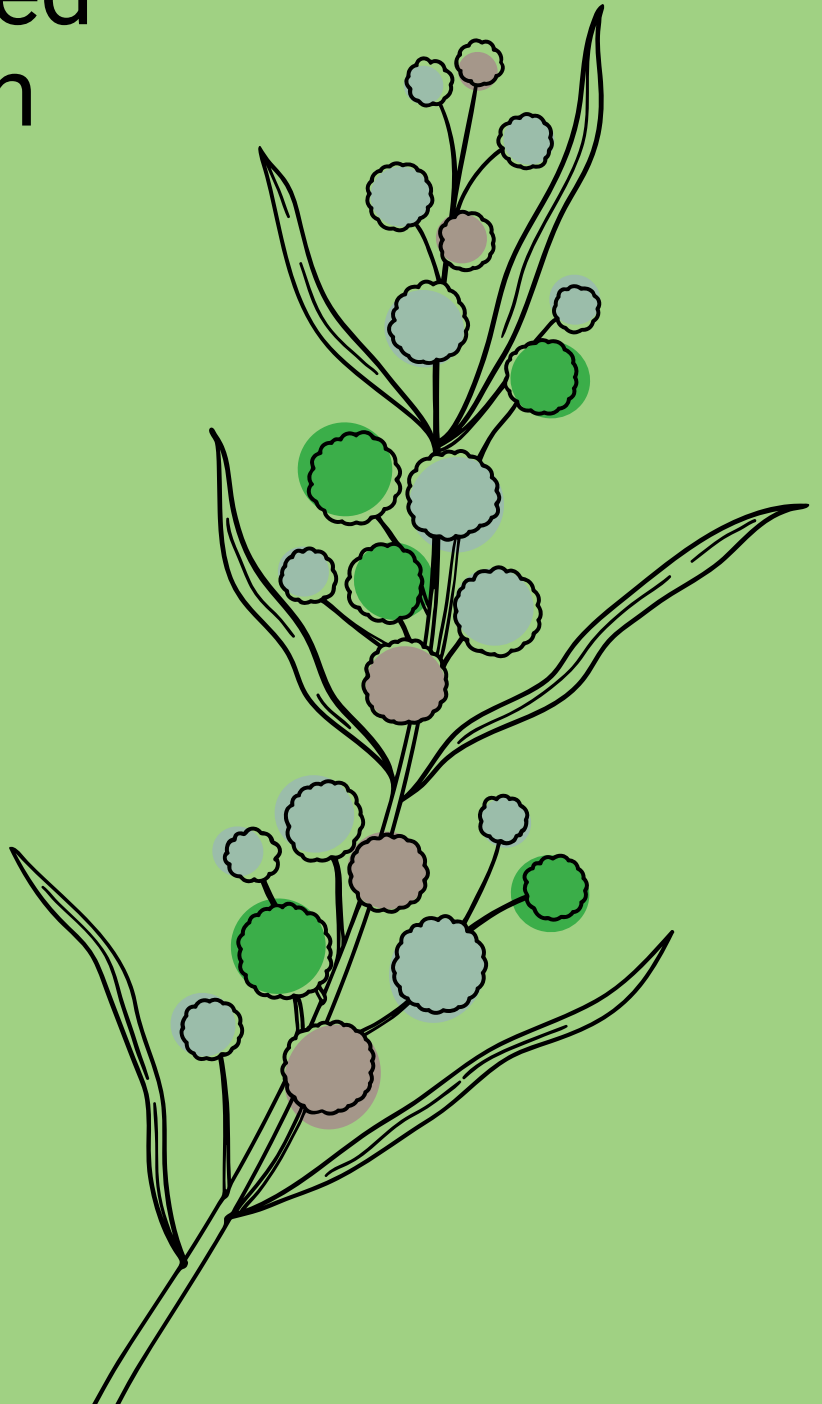


# Fire to Flourish

Lessons learned  
in its activation





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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

**This report was created by people living on Boonwurrung/Bunurong and Wurundjeri Countries. It draws on the experience of our Fire to Flourish program, that operates on Bidwell, Brinja-Yuin, Bundjalung, Djiringanj, Gumbaynggirr, Gunaikurnai, Kamilaroi, Monero, Walbunja and Yaegl Country.**

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

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

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

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

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**As Australian communities face more frequent and intense extreme weather events under a changing climate, there is widespread agreement that there is a need for new and better ways to deal with such disasters – to protect Country, people and property when disasters happen and to support long-term community recovery and resilience building after they occur.**

Fire to Flourish is a five-year program (2021–2025) working with communities in regions of New South Wales and Victoria that were severely affected by the devastating 2019–2020 bushfires. Led by Monash University with philanthropic funding, the program supports experimentation and innovation at a community level, exploring how communities can strengthen their disaster resilience in ways that are inclusive, equitable and community-led. A diverse impact, learning and research agenda also supports the program’s objectives to grow capabilities, strengthen networks and influence systems change.

Through interwoven research and on-ground experimentation, the program addresses questions such as: What are the community-specific factors and activities that build resilience in the face of repeated disasters?

How can disaster planning and preparedness efforts best support communities to respond effectively and in self-determined ways to future disaster events? How can we enable co-design of value-for-money, long-lasting disaster recovery and resilience approaches? What would a fit-for-purpose disaster resilience framework look like if it were co-designed by community?

The foundational years of Fire to Flourish have provided a unique opportunity to contribute to collective learning about how to enable communities to lead their own recovery and set foundations for long-term resilience and wellbeing. We hope our lessons can help other organisations and agencies as they walk alongside communities, partner with them, and support the testing and trialling of new approaches that can challenge existing practice.

This report shares the lessons we have learned so far and outlines what it has taken to establish and activate a program of this kind. The focus is on sharing lessons learned about the enabling conditions for and establishment of our program. It does not include detailed insights about community experiences of disaster, the participatory processes taking place within Fire to Flourish’s partner communities, the community-led actions being taken through the program or the specific innovations being trialled. These elements will be the focus of future publications.

## LESSONS LEARNED

In reviewing our experiences across program establishment, community relationship development, co-design of local implementation, and preparation for scaling and systems change, we have synthesised our learning into five key lessons.

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

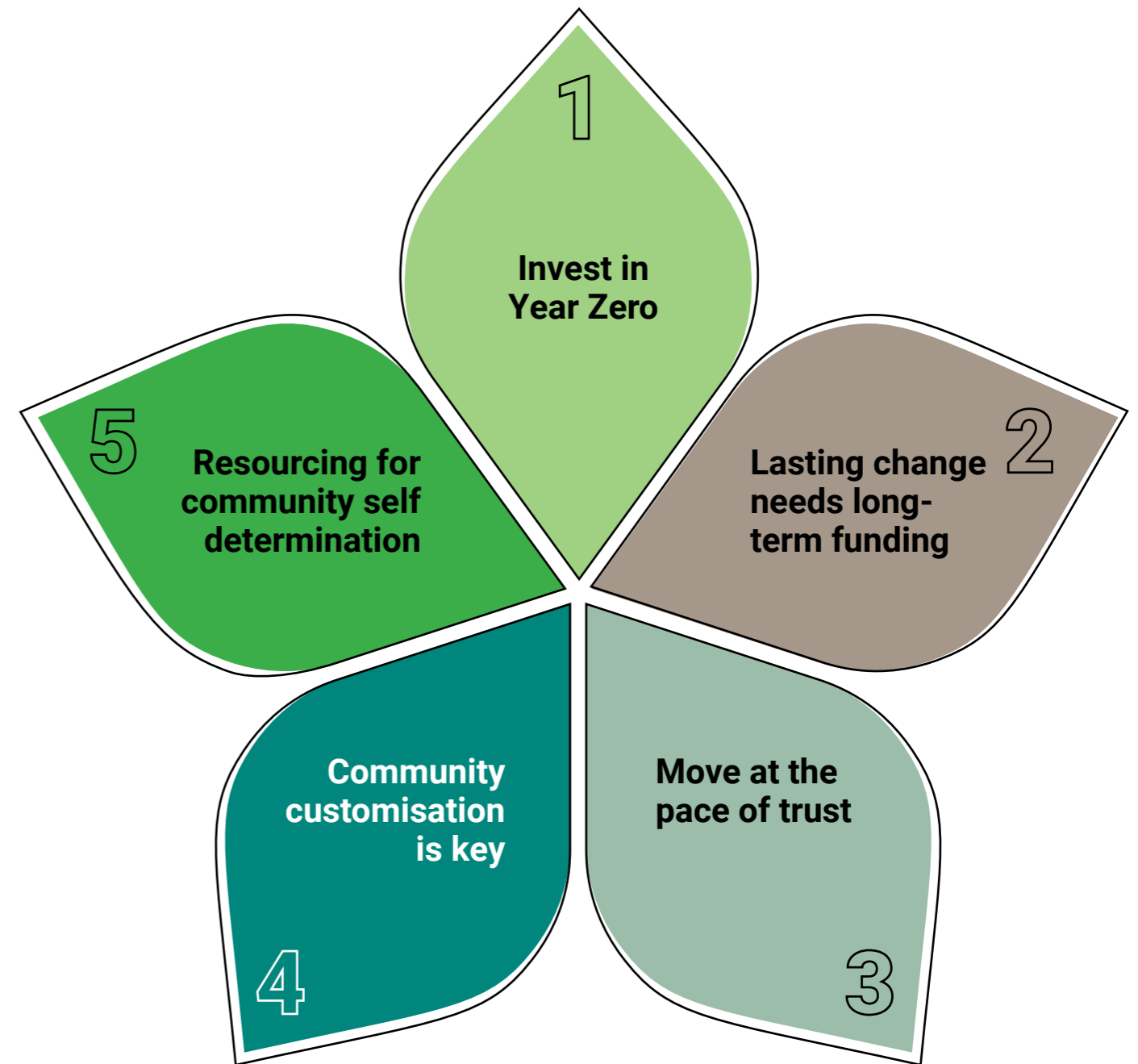


Figure 1: Five key lessons learned through Fire to Flourish activation

## 1. INVEST IN A YEAR ZERO

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

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

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

### **Insights from Fire to Flourish's work:**

**Time is needed to develop critical foundations for large multi-partner programs.** This involves co-designing a clear program vision and narrative, devising the program structure, governance and operational systems, recruiting teams and fostering cross-organisational relationships. Allowing a 'Year Zero' is recommended for program partners to align and meet these critical foundation milestones before expecting that program outcomes can be delivered. (Section 3.1)

**Deep engagement with partner communities is important to ensure their readiness and commitment to being involved.** For Fire to Flourish, this involved first identifying a shortlist of communities based on selection criteria. We then engaged with key stakeholders and met on Country with community members and organisations over an extended period, to explain the program, explore interest and grow trusted relationships needed for communities to join. (Section 3.3)

## 2. LASTING CHANGE NEEDS LONG-TERM FUNDING

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

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

In the context of disaster management, current funding processes are largely reactive, treating symptoms and providing recovery funding disaster by disaster. Communities need long-term funding models that respond to a future of more frequent and compounding disasters. This certainty of funding is critical to the transformative change that is needed at scale.

### **Insights from Fire to Flourish's work:**

**Long-term funding allows a program to move at the pace of community and build deep trust at all levels.** We have heard from many communities that the five-year timeframe of Fire to Flourish is rare and compelling. Most other community bushfire recovery funding schemes have now finished, even though recovery needs remain high. Long-term funding also allows communities to gain confidence and grow their visions and ideas over time, creating more transformative opportunities over the life of the program. (Section 3.5)

## 3. MOVE AT THE PACE OF TRUST

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

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

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

### **Insights from Fire to Flourish's work:**

**Establishing relationships with key external stakeholders helps to grow awareness and understanding of program contributions in the broader sector.** For Fire to Flourish, this enabled the program to become embedded locally and to initiate important collaborations at local, state and national levels. (Section 3.4)

**Moving at the pace of trust is a key enabler for community-led action and meaningful impact.** Ideally, trust-building occurs in person within community settings to enable a sense of place and understanding of local conditions. Meeting face-to-face in community and on Country is also a sign of respect that is important to building genuine relationships. (Section 4.1)

**Deep listening and following through on commitments are key conditions for growing trusted community relationships.** Listening in a non-judgemental way to understand deeper meanings conveyed helps to build relationships and open up conversations. Maintaining community trust requires transparency around what can be delivered and following through on promises. (Sections 4.3 and 4.4)

**Good trauma-informed practice is essential for working with communities affected by disaster or experiencing systemic inequalities.** This involves being alert to the dynamics and effects of trauma, understanding potential triggers, and working in a strength-based way, to promote safe opportunities for people to engage in the program. (Section 4.6)

**Communication must be accessible and meaningful to the experience of community members.** We have learned the importance of finding language that is inclusive, clear, meaningful and contextually appropriate for a range of participants across the program. Using strengths-based language, and avoiding narratives that focus on deficit and disadvantage, creates space to foreground and learn from local knowledge and lived-experience, including Indigenous resilience knowledge and practices. (Section 5.4)

**Relationship, trust and reciprocity must be central in bringing research expertise together with the lived expertise of community members to generate new knowledge.** Research must be conducted with high standards of ethical practice and with a commitment to go beyond traditional boundaries of engagement, scope and output type. We found that growing strong research relationships requires careful use of effective and accessible language, a commitment to decolonising research practices, demonstrating tangible value for communities and, wherever possible, involving community as co-researchers. This process also provides a mechanism for the surfacing and collation of community knowledge, which belongs to the community and is a valuable output that can be shared or used by the community to inform future plans. (Section 6.3)

## 4. COMMUNITY CUSTOMISATION IS KEY

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

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

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

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

### **Insights from Fire to Flourish's work:**

**Program principles that are well articulated and agreed upon can be a valuable touchstone and anchor to help guide flexible design and locally appropriate delivery.** This is particularly important for geographically dispersed, multi-layered programs involving groups with diverse knowledge systems and perspectives. Developing the principles collaboratively in the first stages of a program can be a helpful way to bring alignment, clarity and ownership about 'how' the program will be delivered. Principles are also helpful to support ongoing reflection and learning as program delivery unfolds. (Section 3.2)

**Identify community dynamics and respect formal and informal local governance arrangements.** This involves respecting Aboriginal or other cultural protocols and governance, being careful to avoid excluding certain groups or defaulting to dominant representatives in any community. It also means working with and across traditional community structures, being responsive to the diverse wishes of different groups about how they want to engage with the program. (Section 4.2)

**Recruiting local community teams requires flexible processes.** This is especially important if the employing organisation has established methods and procedures that may not immediately fit the local context or attract the people being sought for roles. (Section 4.5)

**Being community-led does not mean community alone; negotiation to find the right balance between being community-led and program-led is needed for each new situation.** While many core activities, elements and responsibilities in Fire to Flourish are community-led, scaffolding for community has been important for the program to fulfil its responsibility to funding partners, elevate learning with community to influence system change, and most importantly, to ensure the community is clear, safe and supported in their involvement. As each new activity or initiative has been implemented in Fire to Flourish, it has been important to negotiate the extent to which it should be informed, shaped or driven by the community. This helps to ensure clarity, empowerment and appropriate governance is in place. (Section 5.1)

**Tailored, flexible design and implementation are essential to ensure local needs and circumstances are accommodated.** Fire to Flourish has been implemented differently in each of its partner communities, mediated through community preferences and shaped and refined in conversation with communities to fit with local requirements, dynamics, governance, and priorities. It has helped to be explicit about which program elements can be implemented flexibly and which need tighter controls to maintain the program's essence and focus, and to ensure the safety of local staff representing the program and leading its implementation in their community. (Section 5.2)

**Seeking to involve people whose voices are less often heard requires intentional, tailored approaches.**

It involves prioritising participation by Aboriginal communities and other community cohorts that may be disproportionately affected by disasters, yet face barriers in accessing support and resources through mainstream recovery channels. Local staff need to draw on their deep community knowledge and connections to invite, nurture and support diverse participants while enabling cultural safety. It is also important to help identify and address any communication or support needs different groups may have to enable them to engage safely and effectively. (Section 5.5)

## 5. RESOURCING FOR COMMUNITY SELF-DETERMINATION

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

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

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

### **Insights from Fire to Flourish's work:**

**Hiring local staff committed to the recovery and resilience building of their community is critical to build community investment and ownership, and support program delivery.** Local staff provide essential on the ground support and facilitation for community-led approaches. Setting these community teams up for success involves allowing time to develop shared understanding and confidence in the knowledge and skills needed to fulfil their roles, and any training necessary. This individual and collective capacity building enables program implementation, while also supporting long-term intergenerational outcomes. Setting strong team foundations also requires ensuring processes for transparency and good governance are in place to scaffold and support community processes. (Section 5.3)

**Thinking and acting systemically is a powerful mindset and skill set for communities.** It can enable people to unpack persistent challenges and identify transformative solutions, rather than band-aid fixes. We have learned that systems thinking comes naturally to many community members. However, people can feel disempowered when the necessary system changes seem too great or beyond reach. This can be mitigated by pairing systems mapping with collectively re-imagining a hopeful future, and by unpacking different scales of influence to help communities decide where and when they want to have a voice and a role in seeking change. (Section 6.1)

**Elevating community voice can have the transformative effect of centring community lived experience and expertise.** This is critical for the development and implementation of disaster resilience policies and programs. Significant ongoing work is needed to ensure community voice is shared and heard as standard disaster resilience practice at both local and national levels. (Section 6.2)

# Introduction

## IN THIS SECTION

- 1.1 Background
- 1.2 Purpose of this report
- 1.3 Glossary of terms



*Left: Sunset on farm in East Gippsland VIC*

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

**Almost five years have elapsed since extensive bushfires tore through vast swathes of Country and communities in many parts of south eastern Australia between August 2019 and February 2020. The Fire to Flourish program was established to support the long-term recovery and resilience of communities located in some of the worst fire-affected regions of northern NSW and along the state's south coast, and the East Gippsland region of Victoria.**

In the context of climate change, Australian communities are facing more frequent, intense and compounding disasters, such as bushfires and floods. However, there is widespread and growing agreement that the current approaches to managing disaster recovery and resilience support for communities across Australia do not adequately address local community needs, priorities and aspirations, and do not allow for a needs-based distribution of available recovery resources. Further, they fail to proactively build a foundation of community disaster preparedness, or enable communities to respond more efficiently to future events.

As Australia reckons with this reality, people are increasingly calling for systemic shifts in how communities are supported to strengthen their disaster resilience. This will require us to learn together as we trial new ways of knowing and doing. We strongly believe that this collective learning will be accelerated the more we can be open with each other about lessons learned – both the opportunities and the challenges.

## 1.2 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

**The purpose of this report is to share the key lessons learned through the establishment and activation phases of Fire to Flourish during the program's first three years.**

Fire to Flourish is a five-year program (2021–2025) supporting experimentation and innovation at a local community level, aiming to learn how communities can strengthen their disaster resilience in ways that are inclusive, equitable and community-led. In addition to this intensive local focus, the program includes an ambitious learning, networking and system change agenda.

This report shares the lessons we have learned along the way – about setting strong foundations for an ambitious program of this kind, about what it takes to engage and learn alongside bushfire-affected communities, to include diverse community members and prioritise hearing from people whose voices are too often excluded or unheard.

As a new program, Fire to Flourish needed to undertake a range of foundation-building processes during its first years. This included building relationships and partnerships, and setting in place the systems and processes required to underpin work across the program. Across the broader program, this required the assembly of teams to support a diverse impact, learning and research agenda and to progress the program's networked learning and system change objectives.

With this report's focus on sharing lessons learned about the enabling conditions for and establishment of our program, it does not include detailed insights about the participatory processes taking place within the program's partner communities, the community-led resilience actions that flow from these or the specific innovations being trialled. These elements will be the focus of future publications.

### Audience

We hope the insights we share in this report will be of value for disaster-affected communities and their advocates, funders, researchers, and people and organisations working in the disaster management and community development sectors.

In particular, we anticipate the lessons shared in the report will provide helpful guidance for other organisations and agencies interested in new ways of working with communities affected by disasters. By sharing experiences from Fire to Flourish, we hope to grow understanding about how organisations can build the trust and relationships with community members and other local stakeholders that are needed to walk alongside communities to support their priorities for strengthening resilience.

### Methodology

To inform the lessons in this report, we collected data through interviews with Fire to Flourish program executive and community leads. We reviewed program documents, learning briefs and published materials, and findings of the program's national survey in 2021. We also observed community workshops and facilitated team reflection sessions.

### Structure and content

We first provide an overview of the Fire to Flourish program in section 2, before sharing lessons we have learned across four key areas:

- Establishing program foundations – Section 3
- Growing community relationships – Section 4
- Co-designing local implementation – Section 5
- Preparing for scaling and system change – Section 6.



## 1.3

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### **Action research**

Action research is a participatory and democratic orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action, reflection, theory and practice to pursue practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. It is sometimes referred to as “learning-by-doing and doing-by-learning”. Ultimately, action research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, rather than on, people. In Fire to Flourish, action research is the way community and researchers are working together to explore, analyse, co-design, implement, reflect and refine new solutions and practices

### **Adaptive capacity**

The social and technical skills and strategies of individuals that help communities to regroup and respond to a situation in which their pre-existing coping strategies are not effective in navigating a challenging situation. These enable creativity, experimentation and ‘learning by doing’ for recovery and future planning.

### **Backbone Support Team**

The program staff who direct, support and coordinate management, travel, administration, communications and other delivery and operational requirements of the program.

### **Community-led**

An approach that enables and positions community members as decision-makers on issues that fundamentally affect their own lives. Community-led does not mean community alone: The Tamarack Institute’s spectrum of community-led approaches is useful, recognising community-led can mean community owned, driven, shaped or informed (see Section 5.1, figure 5). Within Fire to Flourish, many elements are owned by community, while others are informed, shaped or driven by community with program support.

### **Community teams**

Are local, regionally-based staff employed by the program to lead, facilitate and support community-led processes and activities within each of the four partner communities.

### **Co-design**

A participatory design process to actively involve diverse stakeholders and ensure the end result meets their needs and is usable. In the case of community co-design, this is an inclusive process that can help redress power imbalances and enable people directly affected by decisions to share their knowledge and guide action.

### **Disaster**

A serious disruption to the functioning of a community in the context of a hazardous event, and which exceeds the community’s capacity to cope using its own resources. Bushfires, floods and cyclones are some of the events that may be associated with disaster in Australia. Fire to Flourish does not use the term ‘natural disaster’ as it is misleading: while some hazards may be natural, resultant disasters are caused by human action or inaction leading to increased vulnerability or exposure to the hazard

### **Executive leadership team**

Refers to the staff accountable for program strategy, design and implementation.

### **Participatory Granting**

A grant-making approach which shifts decision-making power to a community impacted by those funding decisions. Traditional granting typically has funder-developed, rigid eligibility criteria that do not necessarily address community priorities and needs. Participatory granting seeks to address this via a deliberate transfer of power, valuing people on the ground as subject matter experts and ensuring that communities (and particularly marginalised cohorts) are included in decisions that affect their future.

### **Placemaking**

A collaborative and Country-centred approach to improving the built and natural environments of neighbourhoods, towns and regions. It involves people collectively reimagining and reinventing public spaces, strengthening the connection between the places they share, and more broadly Country. While placemaking carries colonial distinctions of public and private space, its decolonising potential lies in its core aim of consensus-building and collectivism around spaces and places, a significant world view in Indigenous Knowledges.

### **Research teams**

Refers to the various researchers engaged across the program, including through action research, impact assessment and systemic analyses.

### **Resilience**

The ability to cope with short-term disruptions, adapt to long-term changes, and where necessary, transform systems so they can continue to function under future shocks and stresses. In a disaster context, resilience is the ability for communities to be prepared for disaster, recover well when they occur and continue to thrive afterwards.

### **Resilience planning**

A participatory and strategic approach to enable a group to build their collective capabilities to reduce the risk of, prepare for and manage through disruption. While there is no ‘right’ way to do resilience planning and approaches need to be tailored for a community’s unique context, common steps include anticipating shocks and stresses, understanding risks and vulnerabilities, developing resilience strategies and designing future actions. Fire to Flourish resilience planning processes also give emphasis to sharing stories of lived experience, mapping systems of people and power, identifying community strengths, developing hopeful future visions, designing change pathways and deciding on collective priorities.

### **Strengths-based**

A philosophical approach that views people and communities as resourceful and capable in the face of adversity, building on their individual and collective strengths rather than focusing on deficits. Strengths-based approaches are holistic and work to promote resilience and wellbeing.

### **System change**

A system change approach seeks to identify and address the root causes of problems, which may seem intractable and embedded. It is an intentional effort to fundamentally alter the structures and relationships that cause the system to behave in a certain way. System change is both a process and an outcome related to shifts in mental models and power structures, leading to a new pattern of organisation or system structure. It requires cross-sectoral collaboration, innovation, and active and ongoing learning.

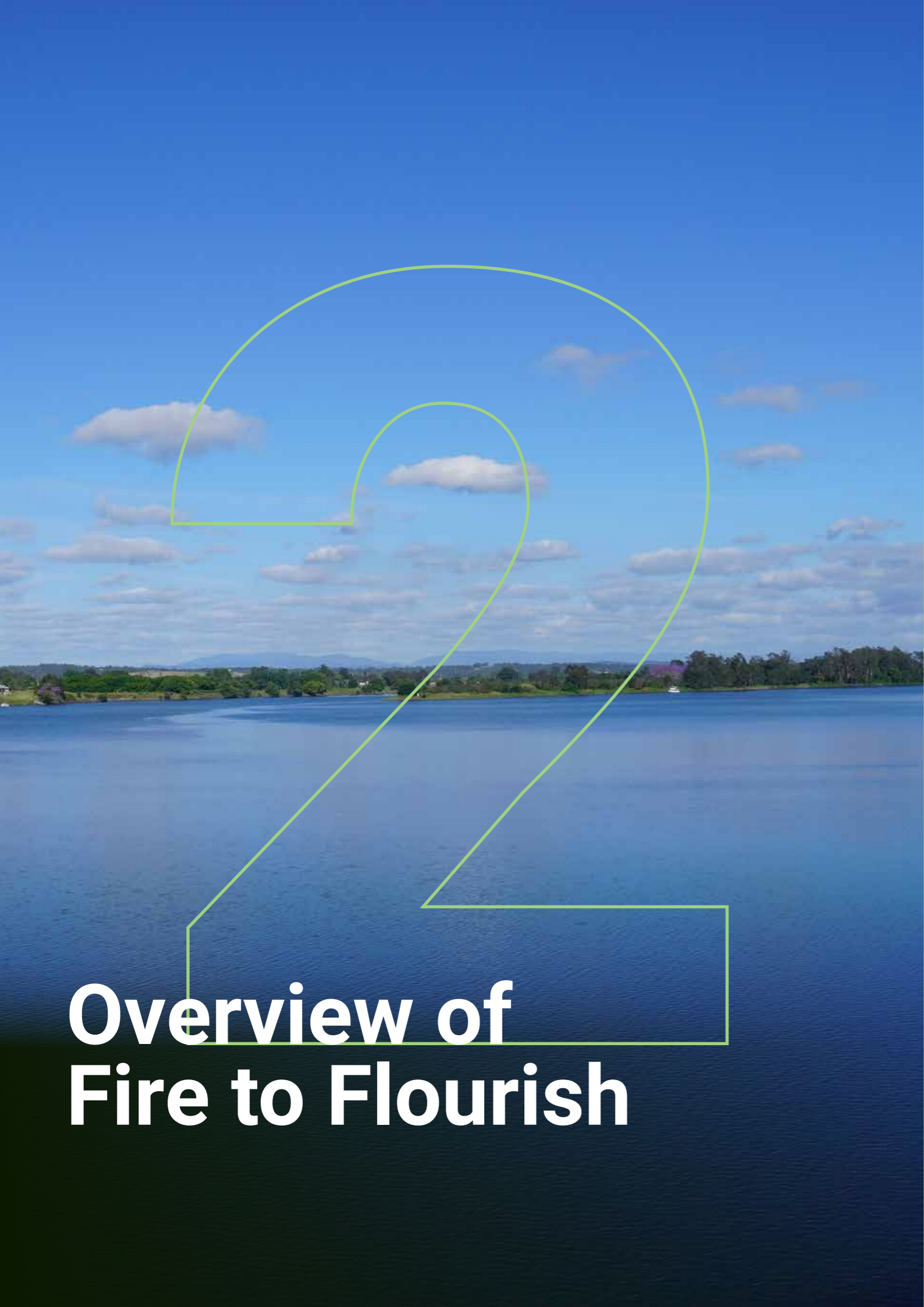
### **Transdisciplinary**

An approach that brings together community members, policymakers, practitioners and researchers from many different disciplines, backgrounds and cultures with their own unique ways of knowing and expressing. Fire to Flourish seeks to create new transdisciplinary knowledge about the complex problems facing communities in disaster contexts by drawing together insights and expertise from a range of academic and non-academic actors. This includes foregrounding Indigenous knowledge, centring the lived experiences and local knowledge of diverse communities, and drawing on the insights and analysis researchers from different fields can offer.

### **Wellbeing**

A combination of a person’s physical, mental, emotional and social health factors. A person’s wellbeing can be influenced by environmental, social and economic factors at the individual, family and community level. The wellbeing of entire communities is negatively impacted in the context of a disaster.





# Overview of Fire to Flourish



The 2019–2020 bushfire season had a profound impact on so many Australian communities, affected by trauma and grief from the loss of human and animal lives, decimation of the natural environment, and loss of community facilities, homes and livelihoods.

In the wake of the bushfires, there was a strong desire from governments, businesses, philanthropists, charities, universities and other sectors of society to help bushfire affected communities. Fire to Flourish's cornerstone philanthropic funders, the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd, were passionate about supporting communities in a way that was community-led, more systemic and designed to learn deeply from the experience.



Our philanthropic partners saw an opportunity to do something different and experiment. They felt they had an opportunity to make a transformative difference for communities they were supporting. They also saw an opportunity to do more than just grant funding to a community but to provide support and scaffolding to strengthen the capabilities and networks of communities for long-term thriving, as well as embed a learning and research agenda around that, so that they could influence system change for scaling impact.”

– Briony Rogers, CEO Fire to Flourish

## IN THIS SECTION

- 2.1 Program vision, mission and scope
- 2.2 Program model
- 2.3 Progress to date
- 2.4 Learning and reflection

## 2.1 PROGRAM VISION, MISSION AND SCOPE

### SUMMARY

As disasters in Australia become more frequent and intense, there's a need to rethink how we respond and support affected communities. Fire to Flourish empowers communities by experimenting with new disaster resilience approaches. Working with communities affected by the 2019–2020 bushfires, the program focuses on flexible grants to enhance leadership and inclusion. By collaborating with communities Fire to Flourish builds a knowledge base for scalable, community-led resilience efforts across Australia.

**As bushfires, floods and other disasters are happening more often in Australia, and with greater intensity, there's a need for new and better ways to deal with disaster – to protect Country, people and property when disasters happen, and to support community recovery and resilience building over the longer term. It is increasingly recognised that community-led action is a critical part of disaster resilience. Responses need to be tailored to local people and place, and led by the community who are at the front line. But there is much to learn about how to achieve this in practice.**

Fire to Flourish's **vision** is therefore that communities are enabled and leading effective action for equitable, inclusive and resilient futures. To support this vision, its **mission** is to trial innovations in community-led disaster resilience and influence system changes to support their scaling to other communities across Australia.

Fire to Flourish does this by working with communities affected by the 2019–2020 Australian bushfire season to experiment with new approaches, methods and tools to support community-led action for resilience. Central to the program's innovation scope is flexible, place-based models of granting that can strengthen relationships and community leadership capabilities, while maintaining a focus on extending funding to those traditionally excluded from resilience grants, including marginalised cohorts. By taking a learning-by-doing philosophy, the program is building a knowledge and evidence base through this experimentation that will support community-led disaster resilience approaches being adopted at scale.

The program is working directly with four partner communities: Eurobodalla, Clarence Valley and Tenterfield in NSW, and East Gippsland in Victoria. In addition, Fire to Flourish is also leading a number of system change initiatives to strengthen the enabling environment for widespread uptake of inclusive, community-led action for resilience. (See Section 2.2.5)

## 2.2 PROGRAM MODEL

### 2.2.1 Program partners

Fire to Flourish is led by Monash University, with cornerstone investment from philanthropic partners, the Paul Ramsay Foundation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd. Additional philanthropic funding is provided by the Lowy Foundation. Program delivery involves a range of partners in a consortium model, including specialist service providers as well as community foundations as granting partners. Program delivery is also supported through partnerships with the local Councils and other local stakeholder organisations in partner communities.

### 2.2.1 Program principles

Fire to Flourish is guided by six program principles:

- **Be Community-led:** We ensure the community shapes, drives and owns the program and their voices are foregrounded in its design and delivery.
- **Foreground Aboriginal wisdom:** We respect the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, learn from Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and foster strong collaborations and partnerships. We recognise that Indigenous knowledge is critical in a disaster recovery and resilience context to inform understanding of the interdependence of community and the lands on which they live.
- **Address inequities and enhance inclusion:** We strengthen the participation, capabilities and outcomes for people who are often underrepresented or marginalised.
- **Be strengths-based and trauma-informed:** We respect people's lived experiences, recognise and build on community strengths, and support collective healing.
- **Be holistic and impactful:** We contribute collaboratively and with evidence to improving people's lives and influencing changes in system conditions that hold problems in place.

- **Learn, adapt, evolve:** We respond to changing contexts, continually improve the program's design and delivery, and collectively advance knowledge and practices.

We further unpack the meaning of these principles and how we apply them in practice (see Section 3.2).

### 2.2.2 Program approach

Fire to Flourish is focused on trialling innovations in community-led disaster resilience. A multi-stage process is implemented across each partner community, which involves facilitation and support for community to:

1. Listen to disaster and recovery experiences
2. Understand community strengths and dynamics
3. Create visions for the future
4. Identify disaster resilience priorities
5. Develop project ideas and implementation plans that respond to community priorities
6. Tailor a participatory granting framework, including assessment criteria and process
7. Make decisions about which projects to fund
8. Support implementation of funded projects
9. Acquit grant funding, with emphasis on accountability to each other and collective learning
10. Reflect and capture the lessons learned throughout these activities

These ten core elements of the Fire to Flourish process are iterated by communities across multiple granting rounds, with each step co-designed and tailored to ensure place-based implementation reflects community interest, readiness and other contextual factors. Iterations also reflect process improvements as the program gains collective experience through its trials. Further process details are provided in the next section.

The program approach is also enhanced by activities to grow cultural understanding and connections, build community capabilities, strengthen social networks, enable action research, and provide other forms of support identified by the community as valuable as they work to achieve their disaster resilience aspirations.

These activities are guided by Fire to Flourish's broad program approach (Figure 2): walking alongside communities to explore, analyse, co-design and create new community-led solutions that strengthen disaster resilience on their own terms, while always learning and adapting as we go.

### 2.2.3 Participatory processes with community

Collaborative co-design approaches are central in the Fire to Flourish program to support community-led planning and decision-making about how to strengthen disaster resilience and allocate funding to support community-led projects.

*Participatory granting* is a key innovation process within Fire to Flourish. Traditional granting typically has funder-developed, rigid eligibility criteria that do not fully address community priorities and needs. Fire to

Flourish is experimenting with community-led decision making around grant funding allocation, and seeking to understand whether a participatory granting process that shifts power and agency to communities could lead to improved resilience outcomes, taking into account value for money, equity, inclusion and long-term benefit.

*Resilience planning* and *place-making* are two additional key collaborative approaches applied within Fire to Flourish to bring community members together. Together, these processes enable communities to develop insights and shared understandings about collective strengths, needs and challenges, to strategise, determine priorities, and ultimately enable community decision-making around which initiatives and projects to implement and allocate funding towards. Importantly, these approaches also strengthen community capabilities and networks for lasting impact.

These processes are being innovated through action research. In this way, Fire to Flourish aims to develop flexible, place-based models of granting that can strengthen relationships and community leadership capabilities, while maintaining a focus on extending funding to those traditionally excluded from resilience grants, including marginalised cohorts.

### 2.2.4 Research as an enabler

Research is woven throughout Fire to Flourish to support communities as they take action to strengthen disaster resilience. This enhances community-led innovations using evidence and different research-backed ideas. It also means we are continuously learning and evaluating as we go so that we can understand what is working, why and for whom – insights that are critical for replication and scaling of a community-led disaster resilience model.

As a Monash University led program, Fire to Flourish is in a unique position to be able to connect communities with research that is relevant and important to their lives and experiences. This includes creating opportunities for communities to contribute their wealth of lived experience and local knowledge. We also connect communities with research expertise from a range of fields, including, community resilience, emergency management, disaster risk reduction, Indigenous geography, social cohesion, sustainability transitions and systems change, policy and governance, placemaking, digital civics, public health and economics.

Our research is scoped to inform and influence an accelerated transition away from the current model of 'command-and-control' disaster management to one that empowers community to strengthen their long-term resilience. It is integrated across the program, including:

- *Analytical research* to define problems and identify priority issues
- *Participatory action research* which enables the co-creation of new frameworks, models and toolkits in partnerships with communities.
- *Evaluative research* such as community resilience measurement and developmental evaluation to highlight implementation challenges and opportunities.
- *Transitions research* such as governance studies to identify pathways to strengthen policy and practice conditions for implementing new solutions to scale.

This research is informing the development of

- toolkits that guide implementation of program frameworks and processes (including guidance manuals, implementation tools and training materials)
- reports that present evidence of community lived experiences of disaster, recovery and resilience building
- a system change agenda for community-led resilience and provide research-backed recommendations for change pathways
- policy briefs, fact sheets and other outputs that translate research findings for diverse audiences.

### 2.2.5 System change initiatives

Fire to Flourish is catalysing a number of initiatives that are designed to influence system change through networking, evidence generation and policy influence. This is a 'translation while doing' approach, demonstrating benefits to individuals, communities and the broader sector through actual implementation, in partnership with decision-makers. The program's flagship system change initiatives include the DisastersWISE Communities Network and the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience initiative.

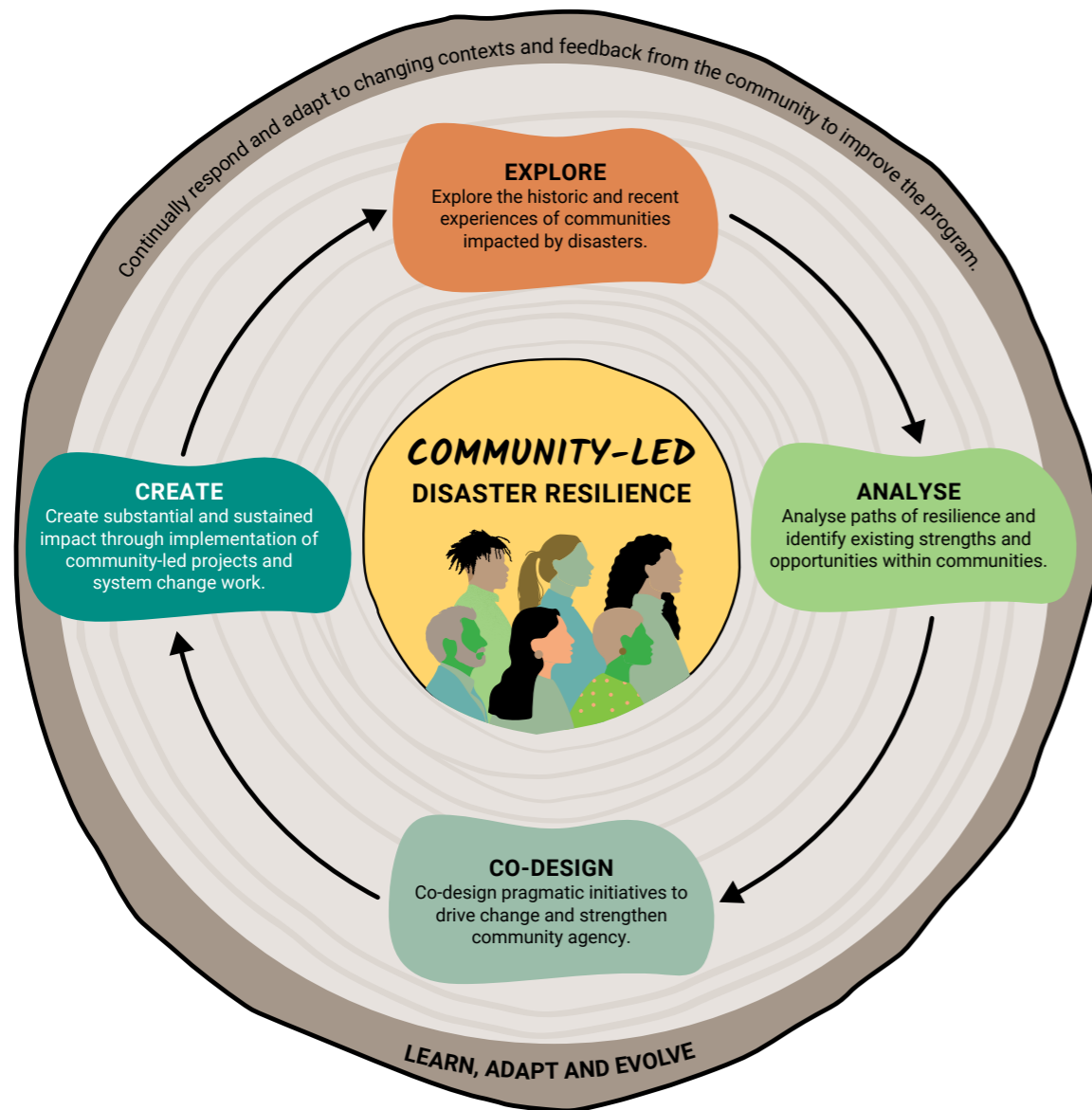


Figure 2: The Fire to Flourish program approach

The **DisasterWISE Communities Network** is a national network for communities to connect, learn and drive change. Development of DisasterWISE has been supported by a codesign process, involving people from different backgrounds across community, agency and government, with varying lived experiences across Australia. DisasterWISE's purpose is to connect communities with each other, with institutional stakeholders and with tools and resources to facilitate knowledge sharing, peer support and pathways for community knowledge to inform wider disaster policy and programs.

The **National Indigenous Disaster Resilience (NIDR)** initiative is part of a growing global movement to highlight that natural hazards produced and intensified by climate change impact on First Nations peoples in unique ways. NIDR seeks to investigate the experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities during and after major disasters. The overarching aim of NIDR is to enhance resilience within Indigenous communities by creating an authoritative knowledge base, practical resources for Indigenous communities and organisations, and championing systems change within the emergency management and disaster resilience and recovery arrangements sectors throughout Australia.

The **Envisioning Change** project is bringing community leaders together with people and organisations working in disaster resilience to be part of a collective dialogue on the systems-level changes that need to be made across Australia to enable communities to lead action in strengthening their disaster resilience. Based around a series of participatory workshops that draw on a research-based methodology, the project will take the participants through a series of discussions that engage in deep systems thinking, envisioning the future and co-producing actionable transition pathways. The project will deliver a strategic transition agenda, with an articulated vision for the future system and evidence-informed actionable change pathways.

### 2.2.5 Measures of success

Fire to Flourish was created with the intention of positively changing the lives of communities affected by disaster.

The end-of-program outcomes guiding the program's design and implementation are that:

- Partner communities have strengthened disaster resilience in ways that address inequities.
- Self-sustaining national systems of connection and learning are strengthening resilience.
- There are strengthened system conditions and capabilities for community-led resilience building.

To achieve these outcomes the program focuses on delivering impacts by taking a strengths-based approach across four key pillars of change: **community, systems, capabilities** and **networks**.



**I think I'd like our community to come out of this with a better sense of what they are up against in relation to climate change, and a better capacity to work together and support each other. I think that's something rural communities have lost to a degree – they've changed in their nature and character in lots of ways."**

– **Community Team Lead**

## 2.3 PROGRESS TO DATE

**Implementation of Fire to Flourish is following four key phases, reflecting the time and sequencing needed to develop the understanding, relationships and trust required for the program to work closely with bushfire-affected communities. At the end of 2023, the program moved into Phase 4. This report focuses on lessons learned in the activation of the program through Phases 1, 2 and 3.**

### 2.3.1 Progress in the partner communities

A brief overview of the status of the participatory granting processes in each community at the end of 2023 is provided here. In addition to these central activities, each community team, working alongside the program's backbone and research teams, has engaged in a range of other activities to strengthen local resilience building efforts.

#### Clarence Valley

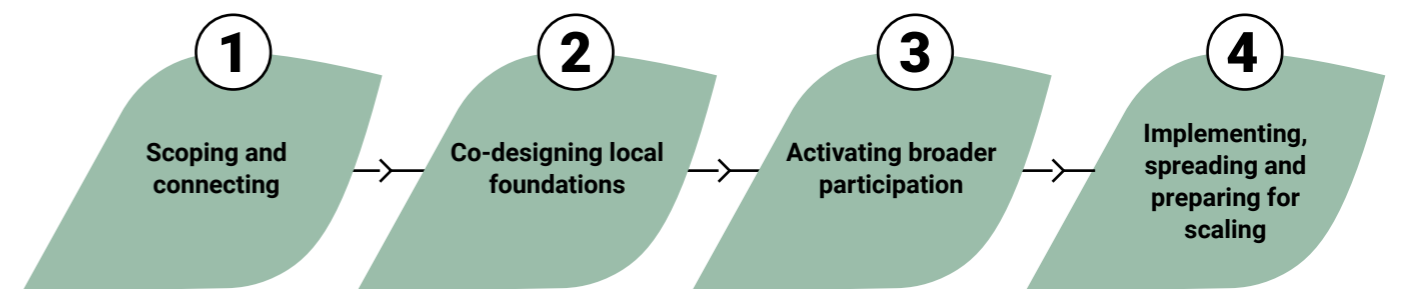
An initial prototype of a resilience planning and participatory granting process was conducted from October 2021 to March 2022, resulting in \$105k being disbursed to fund 10 community-led resilience projects.

A second process was then trialled with a small group of community members on Gumbaynggirr nation, south of the Clarence River from November 2022 to February 2023, allocating \$150k to a range of projects.

The community team have since undertaken further processes, including a resilience planning to granting round focused north of the Clarence River on Yaegl and Bundjalung nations, and a series of placemaking initiatives in collaboration with Monash Masters of Architecture and Design students who are supporting communities to envision and master plan their community rebuilding. These processes will allocate \$300k and \$800k of grant funding respectively.

Across these processes, the Clarence Valley team has taken a grassroots approach, involving community members who have not had opportunity to have their voice heard or access grant funding through other disaster recovery or resilience schemes.

To support these processes, the Clarence Valley community team has been involved in a range of events to engage the community in conversations about disaster preparedness and resilience, and capture their ideas for change. They are also supporting the implementation of grant-funded projects, with a focus on capability building and strengthening networks through project planning, delivery and acquittal.



Insights contained in this report are drawn from the first 3 phases of Fire to Flourish.

Figure 3: Four phases of the Fire to Flourish program

### Tenterfield

The Tenterfield community team have focused their program activity on two geographic areas. The team have completed their first resilience planning to participatory granting process with codesigners from Tenterfield town and surrounds, working together from February to August 2023 to allocate \$250k to community-led initiatives. The co-designers involved in Tenterfield so far are community leaders who have been strategically convened to form a powerful network that has the potential to play an important role in the community by enabling and empowering community-led action over the long-term.

Tenterfield was unfortunately affected by bushfire again in October 2023, which disrupted the program's implementation for several months. However, this event also created an opportunity for the community staff team and co-designers to mobilise a strategic response effort in the community, which was felt to be wiser, faster and more effective than for the previous fire. Fire to Flourish, in partnership with the Northern Rivers Community Foundation, provided rapid response funding to the community, which allowed further experimentation in community-led funding practices.

The team is planning a second process to be facilitated in Jubullum, a discrete Aboriginal community 70km from Tenterfield. They are also preparing for a placemaking process in Tenterfield to inform further grant funding allocation.

### Eurobodalla

The Eurobodalla community team implemented an initial trial of a resilience planning to participatory granting process from December 2022 to May 2023, involving co-designers from across the Eurobodalla Shire. Project ideas that emerged through the workshops were further developed in project concept clinics facilitated by Monash University's ActionLab, which supported the co-designers to make decisions to allocate \$300k in grant funding to nine projects. Implementation of these projects is being supported in a variety of ways focused on capability building and strengthening networks, including through bi-monthly learning circles that enable project leads to learn together.

The community team led a second grant round, learning from the initial co-design trial, focused on a more open round accessible to anyone from the wider community.

This led to \$180k being allocated across 13 projects with a further \$80k to be allocated in early 2024. The team is now preparing for a thematic grant round bringing focus to the community's priorities on caring for Country and health and wellbeing.

### East Gippsland

Activation in East Gippsland was initially at a slower pace than the NSW communities, in part because recruitment of community staff took longer – an experience common to the region, which is characterised as 'vast and sparse' and undergoing challenging economic transitions. Early work focused on building community connections with the program, including through hosting a travelling exhibition of community information and stories, attending community events and engaging in stakeholder meetings.

These activities highlighted that the model for program activation needed to be adapted for this context. An initial open grant round was implemented to deliver tangible value for the community and grow initial relationships with established community groups, as a foundation for subsequent resilience planning and participatory granting processes. This approach has enabled \$210k in funding to be allocated across 8 projects with a further \$390k to be awarded in early 2024, and the team is now preparing for a deeper resilience planning process to inform the design of subsequent grant rounds.

### 2.3.2 Program outlook

The program is now progressing into Phase 4. The focus is on refining and strengthening the methods and tools that have been experimented with in the program's small-scale trials so far. We are also continuing to expand the program's engagement to enable more community members to be involved in participatory workshops, granting rounds and community-led projects.

The program is also exploring scalable models for supporting community-led implementation of grant-funded projects, identifying patterns in lived experiences across the partner communities and analysing the opportunities for change across key areas of disaster funding, Indigenous disaster resilience and community capability building. These activities will point to systemic challenges that need to be addressed for disaster resilience to be strengthened for all Australian communities.

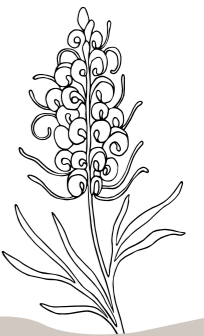
## 2.4

# LEARNING AND REFLECTION

**Learning and reflection are at the heart of Fire to Flourish. In line with the program principle to *learn, adapt and evolve*, we seek to embed a learning agenda across each level of the program.**

Taking a learning-by-doing and doing-by-learning approach means research teams work closely with community teams in each of the Fire to Flourish partner communities. Community members are considered co-researchers in leading and learning from local experimentation with activities, methods and tools on the ground. In this way, the four partner communities are integral as we test, trial, reflect, adapt and learn new approaches to strengthening community disaster resilience.

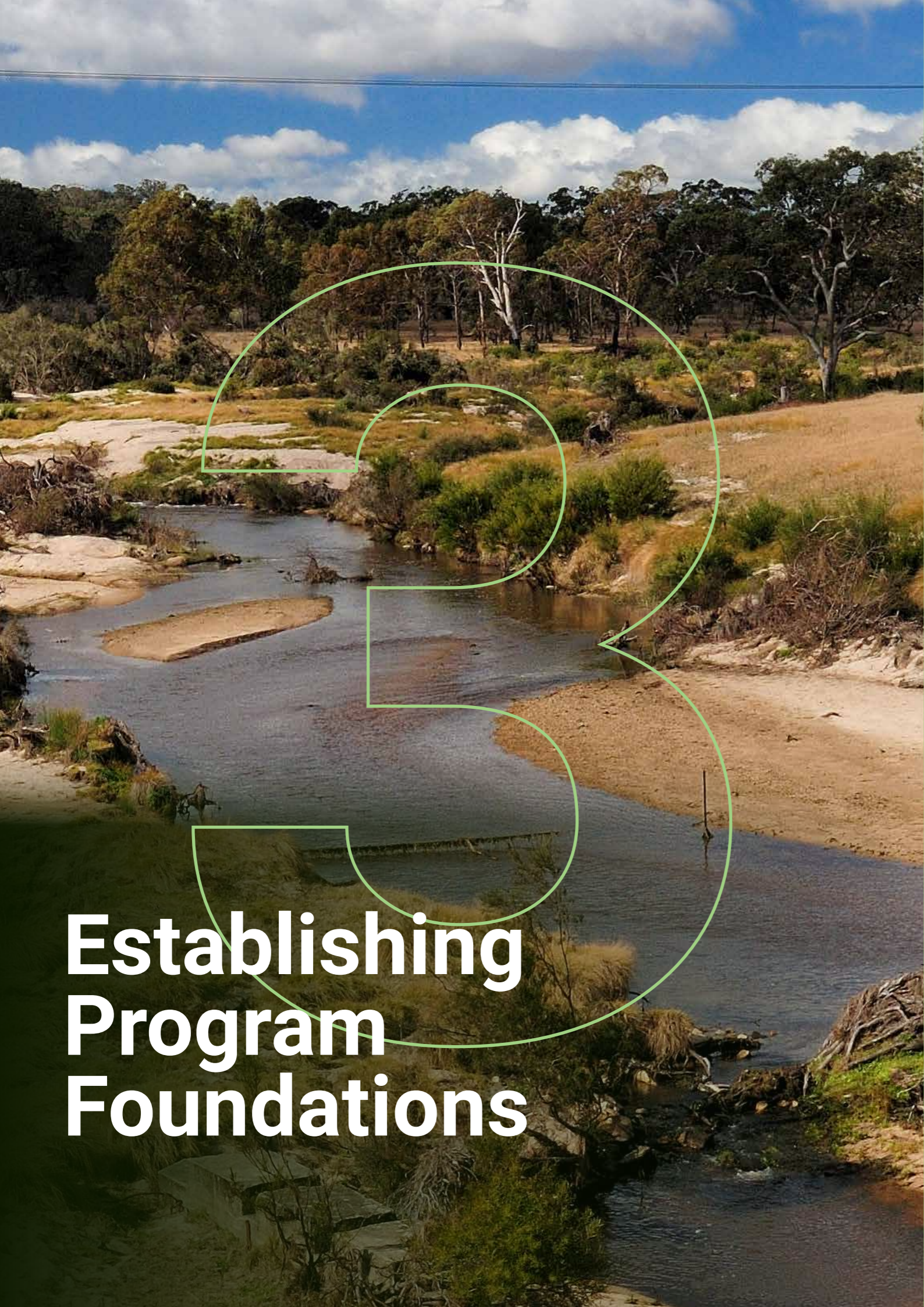
Developmental evaluation and learning wraps around the different streams of activity across the program, supporting active reflection processes to generate strategic learning and enhance our reflexive approach. It focuses on evaluating emerging initiatives to support their design and development, how the program principles are guiding program design and delivery, and how partnerships are strengthened to build strong program foundations and scale impact.



“

**We've been talking about disaster preparedness and I think moving that conversation beyond people thinking disaster preparedness is about how much water you have in the tank and how much fire-fighting equipment you have, but I personally think disaster preparedness is about social capital. You know, how well we know each other and how we can help each other out. And I think the community does have a great capacity for that, it just needs a little help in working out how we do it.”**

– Community Team Member



# Establishing Program Foundations

Fire to Flourish is an ambitious program operating at many levels, across geographically dispersed communities and teams, and involving a number of organisational partners and people with different knowledge systems. Ongoing effort is needed to enable engagement, involvement and connection across each team and program partner, including locally employed community staff, leadership, backbone and research teams, delivery partners and funding partners.

## IN THIS SECTION

- 3.1 Setting a 'Year Zero' with appropriate milestones
- 3.2 Embedding program principles for anchoring the program
- 3.3 Inviting partner communities
- 3.4 Establishing stakeholder relationships and program visibility
- 3.5 Setting a sufficient program timeframe



Left: Creek at Tenterfield, NSW

## 3.1

## SETTING A 'YEAR ZERO' WITH APPROPRIATE MILESTONES

### INSIGHT

**Time is needed to develop critical foundations for large multi-partner programs.** This involves co-designing a clear program vision and narrative, devising the program structure, governance and operational systems, recruiting teams and fostering cross-organisational relationships. Allowing a 'year zero' is recommended for program partners to align and meet these critical foundation milestones before expecting that program outcomes can be delivered.

**Where multiple partners are coming together for the first time to deliver a large, complex multi-year program, we have learned that significant time is needed to set a program up with strong foundations before starting delivery in community.**

Time is needed to co-design a clearly articulated program vision, narrative and model, as well as for partnership, team building and developing fit-for-purpose processes and systems. Shared understanding and agreement on these foundational components is critical for everyone to be aligned on the program's purpose and its plan for implementation. To achieve this requires time, collaboration and communication.

With hindsight, some of the delivery milestones set for the first year of Fire to Flourish were too ambitious, given the foundational work that was needed to set the program up for success over its subsequent years. This important establishment work needs dedicated investment and support by funding and delivery partners alike.

A 'year zero',<sup>2</sup> with milestones focused on establishing fundamental enabling conditions, clarity, capabilities and relationships, would strengthen the design and structure of a complex, multi-faceted program and, ultimately, facilitate accelerated implementation and impact over subsequent years.

'Year zero' milestones might include:

- Aligning organisational partner relationships, roles and ways of working
- Establishing program governance and critical operational systems and processes
- Developing the program structure, agreeing on guiding principles and overarching program goals (for example, an initial theory of change, model design and impact framework)
- Articulating a clear vision and developing communications about the program
- Establishing and building stakeholder relationships and increasing the external visibility of the program
- Identifying the program's unique value-add in an effort not to duplicate or replicate other initiatives
- Recruitment, onboarding and upskilling of teams
- Engagement of prospective partner communities with a focus on trust and relationship building.

Allowing the time required to set foundations is an essential and valuable investment toward establishing relationships, alignment, clarity, communications, systems, processes and other enabling conditions for accelerated delivery. Cross-organisational relationships and alignment are important, especially when diverse knowledge systems, cultures and practices are being brought together; this is not always straightforward to achieve.

<sup>2</sup>We acknowledge that the concept of a 'year zero' arose out of work undertaken by Clear Horizon for Fire to Flourish

“

You're bringing together quite a diverse range of organisations and people. So a key leadership challenge is – how do you ensure alignment of approach and then how do you organise to deliver? And so, the program principles, the program framework, playbook and so on were artefacts that were codesigned, in order to shape that alignment – to shape the codification of what we're doing.

And the process of these was as important as the eventual artefacts – because the intent is always to build ownership, so that they can come to life in the everyday of the program. As we are engaging with community, we're aligned and consistent in the way we're presenting across multiple different communities and so on. So, the intent of those processes was alignment, clarity of direction, clarity of the way we're engaging with the world and then clarity of the way we are going to be operationalising and implementing.”

– Fire to Flourish Executive Leadership Team Member



## 3.2

## EMBEDDING PROGRAM PRINCIPLES FOR ANCHORING THE PROGRAM

### INSIGHT

Program principles that are well articulated and agreed upon can be a valuable touchstone and anchor to guide flexible design and locally appropriate delivery. This is particularly important for a geographically dispersed, multi-layered program involving groups with diverse knowledge systems and perspectives. Developing the principles collaboratively in the first stages of a program can be a helpful way to bring alignment, clarity and ownership about 'how' the program will be delivered. Principles are also helpful to support ongoing reflection and learning as program delivery unfolds.

**Clearly articulated and agreed program principles can be a valuable touchstone, especially for a program that is geographically dispersed, multi-layered and involves many partners and stakeholders working with diverse knowledge systems.**

Six clear program principles were developed for Fire to Flourish with the intent that they would anchor and guide the design and delivery of the program. The process of collaboratively developing and refining these principles was an important step for the newly formed program team, helping to achieve alignment across program partners, teams and participants on how the program would be delivered.

Fire to Flourish's program principles are frequently invoked, unpacked, discussed and actively applied day to day. They influence decisions about implementation across various levels of the program and in partner communities. For example, the community teams have found it useful to collectively explore the program principles with new co-designers at initial workshops to inform the development of group agreements on how they commit to working together respectfully and effectively.

## FIRE TO FLOURISH PROGRAM PRINCIPLES IN FOCUS

### BE COMMUNITY-LED

**We ensure the community shapes, drives and owns the program and their voices are foregrounded in its design and delivery.**

#### What this means in practice

Fire to Flourish's community staff teams lead the pace and direction of the program's community work, and they control program budgets directed towards strengthening community impact through community events, activities, capability building and other forms of engagement. Community participants decide where grant funding will be directed and lead the implementation of their funded initiatives. They share their stories and engage the wider community.

We note that 'community-led' does not mean 'community alone'. The program is creating the platform and scaffolding to support community teams as they lead this work locally. In addition, aspects of the program are led by Monash as the lead partner. For example, Monash is responsible for ensuring that funder requirements are met, that program outcomes are delivered, that program funding is used efficiently and effectively, and critically, that community staff are not put in vulnerable positions due to their program role in the community. (Section 5.1)

### FOREGROUND ABORIGINAL WISDOM

**We respect the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, learn from Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and foster strong collaborations and partnerships. We recognise that Indigenous knowledge is critical in a disaster recovery and resilience context to inform understanding of the interdependence of community and the lands on which they live.**

#### What this means in practice

Fire to Flourish prioritises the inclusion of Indigenous participants across all areas of the program. Aboriginal leadership within the program, including in the executive, community, research and backbone teams, has been vital to support the cultural safety and strong relationships needed to support high levels of Aboriginal participation in the program. Recruiting a strong cohort of Aboriginal community staff and involving Aboriginal community members in all community processes has helped shape activities that can foreground their knowledge and ways of being for the benefit of all participants. (Section 4.5)

Also critical for the program has been ongoing cultural capability building of all program team members. For example, Fire to Flourish invests in activities that increase awareness of cultural protocols and cultural safety, supports researchers to decolonise their methodologies and strengthen collaborative foundations for cross-cultural teams. Recognising the value of Indigenous cultural and research practices, the program is committed to adopting methodologies such as deep listening, storytelling and yarning circles in the design of program activities. (Section 4.3)

## ADDRESS INEQUITIES AND ENHANCE INCLUSION

**We strengthen the participation, capabilities and outcomes for people who are often underrepresented or marginalised.**

### What this means in practice

Many people within communities face barriers when it comes to accessing resources and support for disaster relief, recovery and resilience. For this reason, we actively seek to bring lesser-heard voices into community discussions about creating strong and resilient futures. We have found that community members are aware of who is missing from important conversations and mindful of where extra effort might be needed to bring people around the table.

To be inclusive, it is important to be intentional in seeking out people who may not have had an opportunity to participate before in decision-making that directly affects their own lives and their community. Where needed, it also requires a focus on fostering the capabilities of participants to confidently take part. For example, community teams have strived to invite even numbers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members to be involved in codesign groups, and then implemented various ways to promote cultural safety and inclusion for all participants. (Section 5.4)

## BE STRENGTHS-BASED AND TRAUMA-INFORMED

**We respect people's lived experiences, recognise and build on community strengths, and support collective healing.**

### What this means in practice

Fire to Flourish recognises that diverse capabilities and strengths exist within communities, and that these strengths are an important source of resilience. A strengths-based approach focuses on what communities have to share – including the knowledge, insights and capabilities gained through lived experience of disasters and other challenging events. The program model supports communities to identify where local strengths lie before considering where there may be gaps or areas of opportunity they might prioritise for investment.

Trauma-informed practice recognises the widespread impact of trauma on individuals and seeks to create safe and supportive environments. It involves understanding how traumatic experiences can affect mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. In Fire to Flourish, this awareness is integrated into the design of program activities, emphasising safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment, and in doing so, we aim to promote healing, resilience and recovery. We also seek to be sensitive to potential triggers and to avoid re-traumatisation through engagement with the program. (Section 4.6)

## BE HOLISTIC AND IMPACTFUL

**We contribute collaboratively and with evidence to improving people's lives and influencing changes in system conditions that hold problems in place.**

### What this means in practice

Fire to Flourish is working concurrently at local and systems scale to create transformative impacts for the program's partner communities and other communities across Australia. Understanding what system changes are needed and then working collaboratively to drive these changes is core to the program model.

At a community scale, discussions are grounded in a holistic resilience framework, which considers how social capital, health and wellbeing, economic well-being, built and natural environments are interconnected, avoiding siloed thinking that can undermine efforts to strengthen the conditions for long-term disaster resilience and community flourishing. Discussions also seek to identify who holds influence and decision-making power within a community, which is important for anticipating where there may be barriers and enablers for community-led initiatives and action that have been prioritised, as well as where advocacy, influence or collaboration with others may be needed to achieve successful outcomes. (Section 6.1)

At a systems-scale, Fire to Flourish is committed to not duplicating effort and is joining forces with others for amplified impact. This means coordinating and collaborating with other organisations and programs both locally and nationally to ensure our collective efforts have maximum impact. (Section 3.4)

## LEARN, ADAPT, EVOLVE

**We respond to changing contexts, continually improve the program's design and delivery, and collectively advance knowledge and practices.**

### What this means in practice

Fire to Flourish is, at its heart, an experiment in community-led disaster resilience, trialling new solutions and practices to demonstrate what is possible when community power is strengthened and to learn what is needed to support their successful implementation.

As such, learning-by-doing and doing-by-learning is a primary strategy for the program. We enable this through action and evaluative research in partnership with communities to diagnose issues, experimentation with new solutions, generation of evidence and insights, and identification of pathways to strengthen conditions for implementing new solutions. In essence, we set out to learn what is and is not working in communities, why and how, and what needs to shift systemically to support this type of community-led resilience work at scale.

Regular cycles of reflective practice are implemented across the program to enable ongoing learning that will be responsive and timely, so the program's research, design and delivery will continue to be impactful and relevant.

This report is presented in line with the program commitment to this learning principle, by way of sharing key lessons learned to date across the program during its first three years.



**Discussions that may help heal in a supported and inviting place. A chance to build an open caring community that looks after Country and each other respectfully. When we are connected to Country and each other we'll be better able to support each other and be prepared for what the future brings."**

– Fire to Flourish Executive Leadership Team Member

## 3.3

# INVITING PARTNER COMMUNITIES

### INSIGHT

**Deep engagement with partner communities is important to ensure their readiness and commitment.** For Fire to Flourish, this involved identifying a shortlist of communities via selection criteria, and then engaging with key stakeholders and meeting on Country with community members and organisations over an extended period, to explain the program, explore interest and grow trusted relationships needed for communities to join.

**Fire to Flourish needed to take a number of important steps to identify and invite potential partner communities to be involved in the program, and then to establish and grow key relationships to enable its commencement:**

- Identifying initial candidate partner communities according to criteria aligned with program objectives (see Selecting Partner Communities box, page 35).
- Engaging with key stakeholders to explore their interest in the program being delivered in each local government area. This included Local Councils, Aboriginal Land Councils and Community-Controlled Organisations, Traditional Owner groups, and other local organisations, as well as representatives of relevant state government agencies. Formal letters of support were received from key local groups before commencing the program in each partner community.

- Repeated in-person visits on Country, meeting with community members and local organisations over a period of at least six months. This enabled us to share information about the program with different groups, grow trusted relationships, and identify key community leaders who would be likely to have some involvement in the program's local implementation.
- Recruitment of local staff in each partner community to form community teams responsible for implementing the program in their area. The time spent on Country prior to recruitment was important to be able to share the program's goals and principles, and the nature of the roles and capabilities we were looking for with many different groups. This encouraged applications from diverse people, including Aboriginal community members and people who were strong community leaders but may not have had prior experience in professional roles.

### SELECTING PARTNER COMMUNITIES

**A shortlist of 12 Local Government Areas (LGAs) was initially developed using three criteria:**

1. **High fire impact:** LGAs with > 30% of LGA burnt and with number of houses destroyed >50.
2. **Sizable population experiencing disadvantage:** LGAs with at least one moderate or large sized Statistical Area 2 (SA2 >5000 population) in the two lowest deciles in Australia according to the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA).
3. **Aboriginal community:** Having an Aboriginal population that is higher than the national average.

This shortlist was narrowed to four candidate LGAs by analysing local contextual features. We sought a portfolio of Natural Resources Management regions with a diversity of cultural nations, geographical regions and economic activity. This would enable us to examine similarities and differences in the implementation of community-led innovations across a variety of contexts.

Engagement with key local stakeholders then confirmed the interest and readiness of communities in each of the candidate LGAs to be involved. It guided us to an initial geographic scope within the LGA for the program's focus, which also informed staff recruitment plans.



“

**I (want to) see that our community has the confidence that if something does happen they definitely have the confidence to be able to pick themselves up quickly and be able to maintain a healthy lifestyle after a disaster.”**

– Community Team Lead

## 3.4

# ESTABLISHING STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS AND PROGRAM VISIBILITY

### INSIGHT

**Establishing relationships with key external stakeholders helps to grow awareness and understanding of program contributions in the broader sector.** For Fire to Flourish, this enabled the program to be embedded locally and to initiate important collaborations at local, state and national levels.

**Establishing and strengthening stakeholder relationships in each region, as well as growing the profile of Fire to Flourish within the sector, has been important foundational work in the first three years of the program to grow the platform needed to achieve local and national impact ambitions.**

In post-disaster settings there are typically many organisations and agencies seeking to contribute to a community's disaster recovery in various ways. Fire to Flourish needed to spend considerable time understanding what organisations and services were already active in the program's partner communities and ensure the program's offering would complement, rather than duplicate, what was already available. Once the local community teams came on board, they led the development of local stakeholder relationships, looking for opportunities to collaborate to enhance value for their community.

At the state and national scale, Fire to Flourish has sought to connect with many organisations that are active in disaster recovery and resilience. Goals for the first half of the program were to:

- Deepen understanding of the ecosystem of support available to communities
- Grow relationships with aligned groups that may be interested in collaboration
- Identify potential delivery partners for aspects of the program
- Fine-tune program design and implementation plans to ensure we are providing unique value and not duplicating efforts
- Share program objectives, approach and insights openly and widely so that we can contribute to the sector's learning and innovation journey
- Lay relational foundations for us to be part of a collective effort to influence systems change for strengthened community-led resilience.

Through this relationship and visibility work we have learned that, while there is widespread appetite for collaboration across the sector, there is a need for more mechanisms to resource and organise the coordination of organisational offering so that communities can access effective, streamlined support in ways that work for them.

## 3.5

# SETTING A SUFFICIENT PROGRAM TIMEFRAME

### INSIGHT

**Long-term funding allows a program to move at the pace of community and develop trust at all levels.** We have heard from many communities that the five-year timeframe of Fire to Flourish is rare and compelling. Most other community bushfire funding schemes have now finished, even though recovery needs remain high. Long-term funding also allows communities to gain confidence and grow their visions and ideas over time, thus creating more transformative opportunities over the life of the program.

**Long-term funding is critical for any program that seeks to drive transformative change within communities and systems. Many communities have expressed that the five year timeframe of Fire to Flourish is unusual and appealing.**

In the first months and years after a major disaster, it is critical and appropriate that there is a focus on delivering timely service support and funding that is geared to people's immediate relief and recovery needs. Beyond these first years however, recovery funding and other supports typically come to an end. There is evidence that personal and community recovery trajectories vary greatly and many communities will need support and financial backing over a much longer period to enable healing, ongoing recovery and resilience building.<sup>3</sup>

When communities have experienced significant trauma such as the 2019–2020 bushfires, and the COVID-19 pandemic that followed, it has taken considerably longer for people to regroup as a community and consider what else may be needed to continue recovering and how to strengthen community resilience to future challenges. Community members have shared that they found most of the initial support was curtailed and grant funding closed by the time their community had been able to come together and identify needs.

The longer timeframe offered by Fire to Flourish has enabled the program's partner communities to progress their planning and decision-making at a pace that has suited them, in addition to offering funding that they can spend time considering and allocating appropriately.

Planning a longer duration for Fire to Flourish has allowed the program to move at the pace of community and allow trust building at all levels to be prioritised. It has also allowed time for various groups within each partner community to gain confidence and grow their visions and ideas over time, thus enabling more transformative opportunities to emerge over the life of the program.

<sup>3</sup> Gibbs L, Molyneux R, Harms L, et al (2020) 10 Years Beyond the Bushfires Report. University of Melbourne.

# Growing Community Relationships



Moving at the pace of trust is a critical approach adopted by Fire to Flourish. Taking the time needed to build relationships and trust with people and groups in the four partner communities has been critical, as has ensuring the program's implementation happens at a pace that works for each partner community.

## IN THIS SECTION

- 4.1 Investing in in-person opportunities to build trust
- 4.2 Respecting formal and informal community governance arrangements
- 4.3 Practicing deep listening
- 4.4 Following through on commitments
- 4.5 Recruiting local community staff
- 4.6 Being trauma-informed



The mark of Fire to Flourish is going to be relationships and strengthening relationships.”

– Fire to Flourish Community Team Member



Left: Mount Dromedary near Tilba in Eurobodalla, NSW

## 4.1

# INVESTING IN IN-PERSON OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD TRUST

### INSIGHT

**Moving at the pace of trust is a key enabler for community-led action and meaningful impact.**

Ideally, trust-building occurs in person within community settings to enable a sense of place and understanding of local conditions. Meeting face-to-face in community and on Country is also a sign of respect that is important to building genuine relationships.

**Regular in-person visits were critical for Fire to Flourish to establish early relationships in partner communities. This was hampered by extensive COVID-19 lockdowns in the program's first year, which delayed local activation of the program by about six months, as program staff were not able to travel to communities until early 2022.**

While the program was able to have some productive engagements over the lockdown periods, there was evident exhaustion and overwhelm in bushfire-affected communities, many of whom had received numerous invitations to participate in projects and supply information. It was clear that people needed time to decide to commit or trust in new program offerings, particularly where they had experienced other offers or promises that had not ultimately been delivered. We learned that:

- Communities need time to build their understanding of the program and consider how it might benefit them and their future resilience.

- Meeting in-person and on Country enables outsiders to develop a sense of place, community and understanding of local conditions, all of which help to build trust. Spending time face-to-face is a sign of respect that goes a long way toward fostering genuine relationships.
- Going at the pace of the community and being community-led means that while the program can identify broad delivery timelines, it cannot prescribe the speed at which progress or change occurs.
- We need to be respectful of each community's need to consult, consider, reflect and question.

Like all complex policy issues, there is an inevitable tension in the time needed to deliver outcomes when trust and relationships must first be established. The program has navigated this by remaining flexible and responsive to the needs of each partner community, slowing down where necessary and accelerating where possible, and ultimately providing appropriate support for the readiness and appetite of each community. The four implementation phases (see Section 2.3) articulate the gradual embedding of the program in each partner community, which allowed us to guide and monitor progress while not enforcing a strict time-based implementation plan.

Over time it has become clear that moving at the pace of trust for each community has been absolutely essential for Fire to Flourish. Program funders have needed to come along on this journey, and the program executive leadership needed to adjust their own expectations, as implementation plans needed revision in response to community need. While this can seem slow and frustrating, a commitment to showing up differently is ultimately what enables meaningful impact and community-led action.

## 4.2

# RESPECTING FORMAL AND INFORMAL COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

### INSIGHT

**Identify community dynamics and respect both formal and informal local governance arrangements.**

This involves respecting Aboriginal cultural protocols and governance, being careful to avoid excluding certain groups or defaulting to dominant representatives in any community, and being responsive to the diverse wishes of different groups about how they want to engage with the program.

**Understanding and respecting the formal and informal dynamics and governance arrangements of local communities was critical for Fire to Flourish to grow strong relationships with partner communities. This includes the formal organisational structures that exist locally, the ways that groups self-organise around common cultures or interests and the people who are seen as local leaders.**

The program sought guidance from various local community members about the individuals who would be appropriate and essential to connect with during the early stages of introducing the program. Additionally, it was important to identify the specific people and groups that would require more formal engagement to solicit input and endorsement as implementation plans were shaped and developed.

Our experiences highlighted that:

- Understanding Aboriginal governance arrangements (including Traditional Owner groups, Land Councils and Community-Controlled Organisations) and following appropriate local protocols is critical. These arrangements vary widely from place to place, so leadership and guidance from local Aboriginal community members is essential.
- 'Community' is not homogenous, and in fact, places typically have a wide variety of communities that live and work within the same area. Fire to Flourish needed to ensure it was not excluding groups or defaulting to engaging with dominant representatives or the 'usual suspects'. It was important for the program to reach out to local leaders who are not necessarily in organisational roles, such as, local government and emergency services.
- It was also necessary to be responsive to how diverse groups wanted their relationship with the program to be established. For example, some desired a mechanism (e.g. Memorandum of Understanding or Collaboration Agreement) to establish a formal partnership, while others were satisfied with keeping the relationship informal. Some groups wanted regular meetings, while others preferred written updates about upcoming activities. Fire to Flourish has taken a flexible approach, initiating explicit discussions with local stakeholders about their interests in being involved in the program and how they wanted to be engaged.

## 4.3

### PRACTICING DEEP LISTENING

**The Indigenous practice of deep listening is a powerful tool.<sup>4</sup> It involves slowing down and listening carefully and deeply to people to understand their stories and the meanings conveyed. This process is especially important when engaging with people who may not have had much opportunity to speak their truth or have their experiences acknowledged. Listening in a non-judgemental way builds relationships and opens up conversations.**

Storytelling is woven into the design of Fire to Flourish program activities, in acknowledgment of the important Indigenous methodology of storywork. Proponents of storytelling approaches have emphasised the self-determining role it can play when voices from the margins are put at the centre.<sup>5</sup>

In workshops and discussions, we have learned the importance of having a clear agenda and purpose, while also remaining flexible to allow community members to lead discussions in the direction they see as a priority.

<sup>4</sup> Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness, *EarthSong Journal: Perspectives in Ecology, Spirituality and Education*, Vol 3, Issue 4, Mar 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Larissa Behrendt, Indigenous storytelling: Decolonising institutions and assertive self determination, in *Decolonising Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*, 2019, p183.

## 4.4

### FOLLOWING THROUGH ON COMMITMENTS

#### INSIGHT

Deep listening and following through on commitments are key conditions for growing trusted community relationships. Listening in a non-judgemental way to understand deeper meanings conveyed can help build relationships and open up conversations. Maintaining community trust involves being transparent about what can be delivered and following through on promises.

**Community members have shared that part of the reason they may be slow to trust or commit to projects is that they have had repeated experiences of organisations making, but not following through on, promises. This has included making return visits, delivering new forms of support or being available over the long term.**

To build and maintain trust, we learned the importance of being careful to promise only what we can deliver and to follow through on these promises. This commitment needs to be underpinned by transparent and proactive communication about the program, its scope, and what support it can offer to communities.



**When disaster hits it can make or break a community, and I believe it's the pre-existing bonds that determine this. I feel community connections are key to strengthening disaster resilience and I believe this has emerged strongly in our group of co-designers and the projects that are surfacing."**

– Community Co-designer



## 4.5

# RECRUITING LOCAL COMMUNITY STAFF

### INSIGHT

**Recruiting local community teams requires flexible and bespoke processes.** This is especially important if the employing organisation has established methods and procedures that may not fit the local context or attract the people being sought for roles.

**Fire to Flourish made a commitment to recruiting local staff to facilitate and lead local implementation of the program. This would comprise a Community Lead and up to three Community Facilitators, including an identified Indigenous Community Facilitator, in each of the partner communities.**

The program principles were very much at the forefront during every stage in the recruitment of these local staff. This involved taking active steps to be community-led in approach and trying to make recruitment as accessible and inclusive as possible. Efforts were made to think holistically about recruiting people with a balance of skills and community networks across the teams, and recruiting people with connections into community segments that may be harder to reach.

Early in-person visits to partner communities by members of the Fire to Flourish executive leadership team helped to raise awareness about the program and local job opportunities that would soon be offered. This approach was essential to reach people who were unlikely to read standard job advertisements through typical University channels. We identified people who may be interested in applying themselves or know of others with the right skills. Applications were encouraged from people who might not

have otherwise viewed themselves as potential candidates, focusing on their strong community networks and local leadership skills rather than academic qualifications.

This stage was resource-intensive, involving close collaboration with Monash's Human Resources department to adapt and amend usual recruitment procedures and develop bespoke processes that would suit the roles being recruited and the program's operating context. This included a flexible approach to application processes, such as offering alternatives to people finding the university's online application portal difficult to navigate. We also needed to ensure that job interviews were more conversational and strengths-focused than might ordinarily be the case in competitive academic or professional recruitment to university roles.

In most communities, there was strong interest in the community staff roles being offered, and applicant feedback confirmed the impact of the face-to-face engagements in the lead-up to recruitment. It helped to spread the word and encourage diverse applicants to see themselves as candidates. Furthermore, we learned that Fire to Flourish's principles resonated and attracted people to apply for staff roles. Over half of the initial cohort of new community staff were Indigenous, including three of four recruited Community Leads; this was considered a very positive and successful outcome by the program leadership and funding partners.

Following the COVID-19 delays, the program recruited and commenced all community team roles concurrently to accelerate the program's local implementation. With hindsight, it may have been better to first recruit the Community Lead roles before bringing on the wider team of Facilitators, so that the Leads could become more firmly established in their role before building the local team. The first year of locally-led implementation saw some changes to local staffing, as the natural dynamics of newly formed teams stabilised. A small number decided the work was not for them, and vacant roles were readily filled.

## 4.6

# BEING TRAUMA-INFORMED

### INSIGHT

**Good trauma-informed practice is essential for working with communities affected by disaster or experiencing systemic inequalities.** This involves being alert to the dynamics and effects of trauma, understanding triggers, and working in a strengths-based way, to promote safe opportunities for people to engage in a program of this kind.

**There are a large number of people involved in Fire to Flourish who have experienced bushfires and other disasters, including community staff and co-designers, research and backbone staff, and DisasterWISE Community Network members. This lived experience and expertise is vital and brings incredible insights, sensitivity and awareness. However, it means the program has a responsibility to ensure that we are all working in ways that are trauma-informed.**

Good trauma-informed practice involves understanding the dynamics and effects that trauma can have on a person's health, well-being, emotions, relationships and sense of self and identity.<sup>6</sup> It means understanding how trauma can be triggered and what a supportive response looks like when someone is feeling triggered. Trauma-informed practice involves being intentional about striving to work in a strengths-based way with trauma survivors, to enable physical, psychological and emotional safety for those affected. This can help create opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> C Kezelman, *Trauma-informed practice*, 2014, Mental Health Australia website: <https://mhaustralia.org/general/trauma-informed-practice>

<sup>7</sup> *Trauma-informed care and practice*, Mental Health Coordinating Council website: <https://mhcc.org.au/>

For Fire to Flourish, being trauma-informed also means ensuring professional support is accessible and available to anyone taking part in the program, whenever it is needed. Examples of what this has looked like in practice to date include:

- Engagement of a local trauma specialist to attend co-design workshops in Eurobodalla.
- Trauma-informed and mental health first aid training prioritised for the community staff and co-design participants in Clarence Valley.
- Program team members being trained to work in trauma-informed ways.
- All program staff having access to free psychological counselling sessions via Monash University's Employee Assistance Program.

The program continues to maintain focus on training and other ways to strengthen trauma-informed practice.



**The level of trauma is extraordinary – that's been one of my big learnings and reflections ... through the conversations day to day, with community members, community staff – it is so present and so debilitating, and it so influences how we need to show up and turn up. I think there is something for us to think about in terms of how we support our staff and partners to turn up in a way that is supportive and productive, and mindful of that context, not to overburden the community and so on."**

– Fire to Flourish Executive Leadership Team Member



# Co-designing Local Implementation

Being community-led is a fundamental program principle for Fire to Flourish, guiding the way that all place-based community work is conducted. However, community-led does not mean that communities are left to do all of the work alone. Various supports and inputs are critical for program outcomes to be achieved, particularly for the program ambition of coupling transformative local impact and systems change at the national scale.

Achieving an appropriate balance between 'community-led' and 'program-led' involves regular reflection, negotiation and co-design. This helps to ensure all aspects of the program's local implementation are carried out in ways that provide a framework for deeper community-led engagement and decision-making, alongside appropriate program governance.



## IN THIS SECTION

- 5.1 Defining community-led for the program
- 5.2 Co-designing a local approach to suit each community
- 5.3 Setting community teams up for success
- 5.4 Making language meaningful and accessible
- 5.5 Including people whose voices are less often heard

# 5.1

## DEFINING COMMUNITY-LED FOR THE PROGRAM

### INSIGHT

Being community-led does not mean community alone; negotiation to find the right balance between being community-led and program-led is needed for each new situation. While many core activities, elements and responsibilities in Fire to Flourish are community-led, scaffolding for community has been important for the program to fulfil its responsibility to funding partners, elevate learning with community to influence system change, and most importantly, to ensure the community is clear, safe and supported in their involvement. As each new activity or initiative has been implemented in Fire to Flourish, it has been important to negotiate the extent to which it should be informed, shaped, driven or owned by the community. This helps to ensure clarity, empowerment and appropriate governance is in place.

**There is increasing advocacy and evidence for the importance of communities being able to own and lead decisions that affect their own lives, particularly in a post-disaster context. Community-led approaches foreground the right of every person to contribute to decisions that affect their lives. It is about people working together to create and achieve locally-owned visions, goals, projects and infrastructures.**

It is evident in Fire to Flourish's partner communities that people who have been through the uncertainty and chaos of disaster, and who are experiencing trauma, want to regain a sense of normality and control through being involved in community recovery efforts. Fire to Flourish's focus is, therefore, on supporting community-led action for bushfire recovery and disaster resilience.

However, the program itself is led by Monash University. This means there are some elements and activities that are program-led, rather than community-led (see Figure 4 for some illustrative examples). Key reasons for this include: Monash University's responsibility for ensuring that funder requirements are met, program governance is strong, outcomes are delivered, funding is used efficiently and effectively and, critically, that community staff are safe in conducting their work.

It took the program team time and negotiation to align on what 'community-led' means for the program overall. Negotiation with community staff was needed to determine how it would be operationalised for each specific situation. We learned that if there is a misalignment between partners or staff on what core principles mean, there can be divergence in the underlying assumptions people hold, influencing their understanding and ideas on how program design and implementation should be approached. Foundational matters like defining 'community-led' in practice, therefore need to be resolved as early as possible, which can involve challenging discussions and decisions.<sup>8</sup>

As each new activity or initiative has been implemented in the program, it has been important to continue to define the scope and balance between being community-led and program-led. We have found explicit conversations useful to draw out people's assumptions and distill what is important about each activity and shape implementation accordingly.

In navigating these discussions, we found it useful to draw on the Tamarack Institute's spectrum of community-led approaches (see Figure 5), ranging from being community-informed, where communities are consulted and plans are adapted to suit local conditions, through to community-owned, where local plans are defined and implemented by the community who are in control of all resources, parameters and decisions. Some examples of how this spectrum of community-led approaches has been applied within Fire to Flourish are outlined in Figure 5, below.

We also learned that communities have differing levels of capability to lead and engage with these activities. A focus on long-term capability building is therefore important to support communities to drive change processes and ultimately enable community-owned outcomes.

PROGRAM-LED	COMMUNITY-LED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funder requirements</li> <li>Program scope and outcomes</li> <li>Some granting parameters</li> <li>Impact assessment design</li> <li>State and national partnerships</li> <li>System change priorities and projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local design and implementation</li> <li>Some granting parameters</li> <li>Grant funding allocation</li> <li>Capability development needs</li> <li>Community partnerships</li> <li>System change priorities and projects</li> </ul>

Figure 4: Examples of Program-led and Community-led areas of responsibility

	Community Owned	Community Driven	Community Shaped	Community Informed
Fire to Flourish approach	Local visions for change are defined and implemented by the community, who are in control of all resources, parameters and decisions.	Local visions for change are created in partnership with community members and organisations, who share resources and collaborate to set parameters and make decisions.	Local visions for change are defined by the community within a set of parameters that provided by an organisation to achieve shared goals.	Visions for change are adapted to suite the local context through community consultation.
	Decision making about grant funding is <b>owned</b> by community, with process support by the central program team available for community teams to access.	Approaches to resilience planning are being <b>driven</b> by community, e.g. with workshop designs and facilitation led by community teams with central program support.	Approaches to evidence generation are being <b>shaped</b> by community, e.g. through co-developing research objectives, methods and implementation details.	Overall program vision and model were <b>informed</b> by community, with community input in the design to ensure it would address community priorities.
	← Community-led		Organisation-led →	

Figure 5: Adapted from the Tamarack Institute spectrum of community-led approaches (2020)

<sup>8</sup> Attygalle L (2020) *Understanding community-led approaches to community change*. Canada: Tamarack Institute.

## 5.2

# CO-DESIGNING A LOCAL APPROACH TO SUIT EACH COMMUNITY

### INSIGHT

**Tailored, flexible design and implementation are essential to ensure local needs and circumstances are accommodated.** Fire to Flourish has been implemented differently in each of its partner communities, mediated through community preferences and shaped and refined in conversation with communities to fit with local requirements, governance and priorities. It has helped to be explicit about which program elements can be implemented flexibly and which need tighter controls to maintain the program's essence and focus, and to ensure the safety of local staff representing the program and leading its implementation in their community.

**As Fire to Flourish commenced engagement within the program's four partner communities, it was clear that a one-size-fits-all approach would not apply. Rather, flexibility and tailored approaches were needed to ensure local needs and circumstances in each region could be accommodated. Each dimension of the program needed to be carefully mediated to suit local preferences, best fit local requirements and governance and be able to address local priorities.**

Co-design methods were used to enable communities to be actively involved in shaping many aspects of local implementation. As resilience planning and participatory granting approaches were trialed in each location, teams of community co-designers were invited to help shape and refine the local approach. In this way, many key decisions about local implementation were led by each community.



**“What spoke to me most (about Fire to Flourish) was that it's a community-led program. And after the bushfires, helping as a volunteer ... I saw how the community are the lead within their community, before everybody else comes into town. So, the community people are the ones that get their feet on the ground first, they're the people who are there to support each other.”**

– Fire to Flourish Community Team Lead

## 5.3

# SETTING COMMUNITY TEAMS UP FOR SUCCESS

### INSIGHT

**Hiring local staff committed to the recovery and resilience building of their community is critical to build community investment and ownership, and support program delivery.** Local staff provide essential on the ground support and facilitation for community-led approaches. Setting these community teams up for success involves allowing time to develop shared understanding and confidence in the knowledge and skills needed to fulfil their roles, and any training necessary. This individual and collective capacity building enables program implementation, while also supporting long-term intergenerational outcomes. Setting strong team foundations also requires ensuring processes for transparency and good governance are in place to scaffold and support community processes.

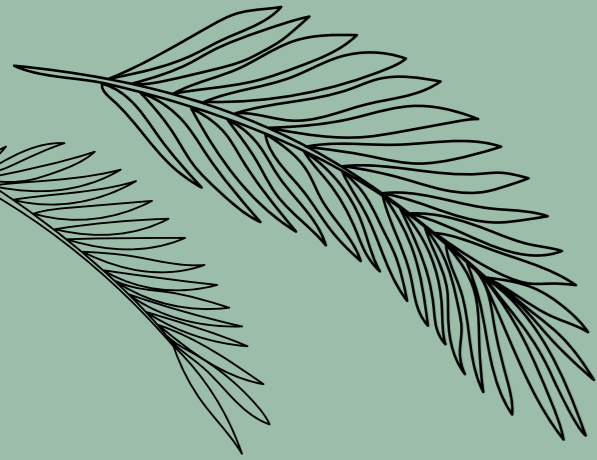
**In any new team, time and support is necessary to facilitate people to settle into their roles and gain an understanding of the program and the work that lies ahead. Community staff needed to have clarity on their role, and that of the program, in their community.**

This onboarding took more time than anticipated. We needed to learn together what level of structure and scaffolding (e.g. strategic direction, policy and procedural guidance, professional development and training) was necessary to help the community teams feel safe and effective in their work. Finding the right balance between 'community-led' and 'program-led' was critical for this phase, ensuring that program structure and processes were not so prescriptive that they undermined the program principles, but also not so loose as to create ambiguity, confusion and vulnerability for community staff.

We learned that program-led direction and professional development were critical for issues relating to governance, risk and safety. They were also essential for initiatives that required consistency of implementation across communities and for activities that involved community staff engaging with new concepts, skills or ways of working. Training priorities included cultural safety, psychological first aid, disaster resilience, group facilitation and leadership development.

Conflict of interest emerged as a key matter requiring program-led scaffolding. In small communities, potential, perceived and actual conflicts of interest are inevitable and standard policies and procedures of large organisations may not be appropriate or sufficient for their management. Furthermore, Fire to Flourish's community staff wear many hats — as community members, Fire to Flourish representatives and employees of Monash University. In addition, some part-time staff in the program have their own businesses or other formal roles in their community that, at times, have presented a conflict of interest.

The program executive leadership team needed to tailor policy and procedural guidance for community staff to ensure their reputations were protected and that conflicts of interest were managed effectively. This included having clear program-led policies and processes relating to aspects like recruitment, procurement, partnerships and grant allocation, so that individual community staff were a step removed when they needed to be. Regular feedback from community staff indicated that they appreciated the program-led structure, particularly around sticky conflict of interest issues, and felt it protected their professional and personal position in the local community.



Governance of grant funding was another key matter requiring program-led scaffolding to protect community staff and manage program risk. A total of \$2.6M in grant funding is available to each partner community, to be allocated through participatory community-led decision-making, an experimental approach. Innovation was needed to reimagine granting schemes, which are often criticised for being overly bureaucratic, misaligned with community priorities and problematic in their pitting of community groups against each other to compete for funding. Good governance is therefore critical for providing appropriate oversight while also enabling innovative practice. For example, a lack of clarity around decision-making processes for grant allocation may create or inflame local tensions if a perception of conflict of interest, bias or unfairness arises.

We have identified that transparency and good governance to support community processes involves:

- Being clear and transparent about how local decisions will be taken, including who will develop the criteria to support group decisions.
- Processes to manage conflict of interest that may arise and protect community member participants and staff from perception of bias.
- Being alert to avoid exacerbating pre-existing local tensions that are beyond the scope of the program to resolve.



**Issues around risk, liability and conflict destroy relationships, they jeopardise relationships. And the local teams are really mindful of that. And I think the other thing to be mindful of is that, in these communities our local teams are the face of the program (and that) puts them at a particular vulnerability.”**

– Fire to Flourish Executive Leadership Team Member

## 5.4

# MAKING LANGUAGE MEANINGFUL AND ACCESSIBLE

### INSIGHT

**Communication must be accessible and meaningful to the experience of community members.** We have learned the importance of finding language that is inclusive, clear, meaningful and contextually appropriate for a range of participants across the program. By using strengths-based language, and avoiding narratives that focus on deficit and disadvantage, we also create space to foreground and learn from local knowledge and lived-experience, including Indigenous resilience knowledge and practices.

**We have learned about the importance of finding language that is inclusive, clear, meaningful and contextually appropriate for diverse participant groups across the program.**

This was often challenging, particularly due to the transdisciplinary nature of Fire to Flourish, involving community members, practitioners and researchers from many different disciplines, backgrounds and cultures, with their own unique ways of knowing and expressing.<sup>9</sup>

#### 5.4.1 Communicating across boundaries

Fire to Flourish community staff have emphasised the need to tailor language to communicate effectively in their local settings. Making language accessible does not mean “dumbing it down”; instead it involves being thoughtful in selecting and translating concepts that might be overly

<sup>9</sup> A transdisciplinary approach is one that seeks to create new knowledge by drawing together insights and expertise from a range of academic and non-academic actors. This includes foregrounding Indigenous knowledge, centring the real-world experiences and local knowledge of diverse communities, and drawing in the insights and analysis researchers from different fields can offer.

academic or specific to certain practices or disciplines, in order to be clear and inclusive. It has been important to find language that conveys the program in ways community members understand and that is meaningful to their experience, without diluting the essential messages and meanings behind the terms used.

We learned that taking the time to unpack central concepts together is valuable to develop a shared understanding of what is meant and to find the best language to represent them. For example, one of the program principles emphasises being ‘holistic’ and grounding the program in ‘systems thinking’ is fundamental. After initial hesitation in using such terms, one of the program’s community team leads, an Aboriginal woman, spent time with a member of the research team to explore the terms together. She eventually declared that these terms align well with Aboriginal ways of thinking, being and doing, and the pair were able to work together to decide how they would express these ideas in upcoming resilience planning workshops.

In a transdisciplinary program, there are inevitably variations in the definitions and usage of key terms. Additionally, there are other common meanings of words within communities and cross-cultural contexts that differ from their technical definition in particular disciplines. We have needed to pay close attention to how different people respond to the language used and either make adjustments or clarify meanings to ensure that communication is effective.

For example, we have frequently heard from community members that the word ‘resilience’ does not resonate with them. Discussions in the media and other contexts about disaster-affected communities needing to ‘be resilient’ can be interpreted as implying that they must bounce back on their own, without assistance from government or other agencies. It also fails to recognise

that disaster-affected communities undertaking the daily work of recovery and rebuilding, sometimes with little or no support, already demonstrate significant resilience. Communities have repeatedly told us that this framing can feel insulting and judgemental, placing too much responsibility onto them when they are under enormous stress and face extraordinary levels of need post-disaster.

#### 5.4.2 Using strengths-based language

Aboriginal and other community members engaged in Fire to Flourish have consistently conveyed their rejection of deficit labels such as 'vulnerable' and 'disadvantaged', which do not reflect the many values, strengths and capabilities that exist within their communities. It is clear that avoiding the perpetuation of pejorative narratives is fundamental to enabling inclusion. It also creates space to foreground the offerings and lessons to be learned from Indigenous resilience knowledge and practice, about surviving adversity and living in relationship with Country over millennia.<sup>10</sup>

Deficit-based language can imply communities are responsible for their circumstances, directing attention away from the root causes of systemic disadvantage, including decades of underinvestment in regional infrastructure and services. We must never assume that people with less access to financial resources are less resilient. In fact, communities that typically face challenges with fewer resources, may exhibit higher levels of social cohesion, resilience and resourcefulness, developed out of necessity.

Using the terms 'top down' and 'bottom up' to refer to actions that are government-led versus community-led has also been identified as potentially unhelpful to local communities, since they may convey a sense of deficit by positioning communities at the 'bottom', rather than at the centre of their experience and place.

<sup>10</sup> Williamson B, Weir J and Cavanagh V (2020) Strength from perpetual grief: how Aboriginal people experience the bushfire crisis. *The Conversation* 10 January, 2020

As a program, Fire to Flourish is pursuing an ongoing journey to decolonise its methodologies, including the need for careful choice of language. This involves deliberately re-centring community perspectives and avoiding language of deficits that may inherently reinforce deficit thinking or judgement.

Another important practice within Fire to Flourish has been enabling each of the community teams to communicate about the program using their own language. While there are central program communications and common text around key aspects of the program, local staff teams have been empowered to produce their own communications materials to speak directly to their local community. Given how tightly communications functions are held in most organisations, this has been an important community-led element of the program.

## 5.5 INCLUDING PEOPLE WHOSE VOICES ARE LESS OFTEN HEARD

### INSIGHT

**Seeking to involve people whose voices are less often heard requires intentional, tailored approaches.** It involves prioritising participation by Aboriginal communities and other community cohorts that may be disproportionately affected by disasters, yet face barriers in accessing support and resources via mainstream recovery channels. Local staff need to draw on their deep community knowledge and connections to invite, nurture and support diverse participants while enabling cultural safety. It is also important for the program to help identify and address any communication or support needs different groups may have to enable them to engage safely and effectively.

**Community disaster resilience is weakened when risk reduction, preparation and recovery efforts are not inclusive, and when the particular needs of different cohorts are not accounted for. Fire to Flourish has intentionally set out to involve people from diverse parts of each partner community and to include people whose voices are less often heard. This meant prioritising the involvement of Aboriginal community members as well as people from other community cohorts that may find themselves significantly and disproportionately affected by disasters, but often experience barriers when accessing support and contributing their ideas through mainstream channels.**

The program has sought to avoid entrenching unhelpful power dynamics or tensions within a community by enabling employment and participation opportunities for individuals beyond the 'usual suspects' with established power, a prominent voice and strong influence in communities.

This has, at times, been challenging and has relied on the deep community knowledge and connections of the program's community staff, and thoughtful approaches to grow relationships and encourage participation by diverse members of the community. For example, we have visited people in places they are comfortable, designing activities that emphasise fun and connection, and facilitating pre-work with a focus on connection when bringing different combinations of people together for the first time. Additionally, we have sought to ensure the program's administrative requirements and processes are flexible so they can be readily navigated by people who may have low levels of literacy or not had experience in professional settings.

Fire to Flourish has particularly sought to include and amplify the voices of Aboriginal people within each partner community. We have heard from community staff and program participants how much they have valued the opportunity to engage and learn alongside Aboriginal elders and peers, given their unique cultural perspectives and connections to Country.

Ensuring cultural safety for Aboriginal participants involved in community workshops with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants was critical. The program's resilience planning and participatory granting processes needed adaptation to build in cultural awareness and trauma-informed training sessions for participants at an early stage of any new group's formation, to support safe and healthy group dynamics that grow as the group forms.


To further support inclusion and cultural safety, we have encouraged and promoted the inclusion of cultural elements within program events and within the design of the community workshops. Activities have typically included an emphasis on storytelling and deep listening methodologies, that are strongly influenced by Aboriginal ways of being and doing. (See Section 4.3)

It has also been important to recognise and acknowledge Country and local cultural protocols. We have done this by incorporating cultural elements, such as welcome and smoking ceremonies, dance and other cultural activities, into Fire to Flourish collaboration and learning days and events. Walking and being on Country led by local Aboriginal guides has also frequently been included within workshop activities.

We learned to consider the communication and support needs of different groups to enable them to engage safely and effectively. For example, people may not be used to taking part in public forums, or they may lack computer equipment or literacy skills required to participate in particular activities. The program's community, backbone and research teams have worked closely together to design communication materials, workshop engagements and administrative processes to ensure there are no barriers to participation for people, and that extra support that may be needed is identified and accommodated.



# Preparing for Scaling and Systems Change



Fire to Flourish is now moving into Phase 4: Implementing, spreading and preparing for scaling. This phase will involve an increased focus on accelerating program implementation in partner communities, codifying and sharing the evidence being generated and the lessons being learned, and influencing the system conditions needed for community-led disaster resilience innovations to be adopted at scale. The program has been laying the groundwork for this scaling and systems change work in its first three years.

## IN THIS SECTION

- 6.1 Supporting communities to think and act systemically
- 6.2 Elevating community voice
- 6.3 Enabling research evidence and knowledge generation

Left: Clarence River Gorge, Clarence Valley NSW



## 6.1

## SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES TO THINK AND ACT SYSTEMICALLY

### INSIGHT

**Thinking and acting systemically is a powerful mindset and skillset for communities.** It can enable people to unpack persistent challenges and identify transformative solutions, rather than band-aid fixes. We have learned that systems thinking comes naturally to many community members. However, people can feel disempowered when the necessary system changes seem too great or beyond reach. This can be mitigated by pairing systems mapping with collectively re-imagining a hopeful future, and by unpacking different scales of influence to help communities decide where and when they want to have a voice and a role in seeking change.

**Place-based approaches do not exist in a vacuum of regional, state or federal systems. It is therefore imperative to highlight aspects of extra-local systems that may lead to greater vulnerability and entrenched disadvantage into the future, as well as aspects that can be important levers for strengthening community-led resilience.**<sup>11</sup>

Systems thinking is a powerful skill for communities as they seek to understand the strengths, needs and opportunities of their people and place, including in disaster resilience contexts. It helps people recognise the interconnections between the social, cultural, economic, wellbeing, infrastructural and environmental domains of life, and develop ideas that enhance community resilience holistically.

Systems thinking helps people unpack the root causes of persistent challenges so that transformative solutions can be developed, rather than band-aid fixes. It also helps people identify who the stakeholders in their community are, what resources might be drawn upon and where influencing and decision-making power lies. This enables communities to anticipate where there may be barriers to the success of community-led initiatives, as well as where there might be collaboration opportunities or unexpected support.

Fire to Flourish has spent considerable time in its first three years working with community staff and co-designers to explore their communities as a place-based system, and to develop their systems thinking capabilities as a foundation for transformative community agency. We have learned that systems thinking comes naturally to many community members, particularly Aboriginal people whose ways of knowing are deeply ingrained in recognising patterns, seeing connections and taking a holistic perspective.<sup>12</sup>

They have readily embraced the systems thinking tools we introduced and were eager to use them in other contexts. They were keen to learn about the systems at local, state and national scales that influence their community's experiences. They intuitively explored ideas through a systems lens, seeing connections across their lived experiences within their own, and across other partner communities, and drawing out implications for systems change. They were passionate about developing solutions and funding projects that would go beyond 'quick-fixes' to address deep levers for change that would not only increase disaster resilience but address systemic inequities in their communities.

We learned that communities can feel disempowered and dispirited when systems mapping reveals that change will require a level of influencing and advocacy work that seems too great or beyond reach. This is particularly so when people are feeling exhausted and worn down by trauma on their disaster recovery journey.

However, we also learned this sentiment can be mitigated by coupling systems mapping with envisioning steps that invite communities to collectively reimagine a hopeful future. Unpacking who holds responsibilities for decision-making, regulation and service delivery at different scales and in different contexts is also helpful. This enables communities to identify when and where they want to have a voice and a role in leading action they identify as necessary.



**Stronger communities will respond better to disaster and those communities can be supported through providing economic development opportunity, arts opportunities and other unexpected things outside the obvious resources to respond directly to fire or flood.”**

– Community Co-designer



<sup>11</sup> B Rogers et al (2021) *An Agenda for Change: Community-led Disaster Resilience*. Melbourne, Australia: Fire to Flourish, p45.

<sup>12</sup> R Glynn-McDonald (2021) First Nations Systems Thinking. *Common Ground* [Online]. <https://www.commonground.org.au/article/first-nations-systems-thinking>

## 6.2 ELEVATING COMMUNITY VOICE

### INSIGHT

**Elevating community voice can have the transformative effect of centring community lived experience and expertise.** This is critical for the development and implementation of disaster resilience policies and programs. However, significant ongoing work is still needed to ensure community voice is shared and heard as standard disaster resilience practice at both local and national scales.

**A key systems influencing strategy for Fire to Flourish is to elevate community voice in diverse forums at local and national scales. By doing this, we seek to demonstrate the transformative impact of centering community lived experience and expertise in the development and implementation of policies, programs and projects.**

The response from both community members and disaster resilience professionals has been overwhelmingly positive. At a local scale, people in Fire to Flourish’s partner communities have felt better supported and more resilient when they have been able to advocate for their needs and priorities. Local emergency management stakeholders have valued the opportunity to develop deeper relationships and understanding in their community.

At a national scale, we have had great success in hosting in-person and online events that convene a diverse cross-section of professionals and community members, all interested in working together to strengthen community disaster resilience. This has highlighted for us the

importance of creating intentional platforms that amplify community voices and bring people together in ways that allow new insights and connections.

We have seen the importance of fostering horizontal and vertical networks that can facilitate rapid sharing of information within and between communities, and from communities to senior levels of decision-making. For example, community members and disaster resilience professionals have valued Fire to Flourish’s ability to bridge grassroots communities and state and federal agencies, as it has allowed community voice to be heard, their lived experiences to be understood and their priorities to be acted on.

We have also learned that significant work is needed to ensure community voice is shared and heard as standard disaster resilience practice at all levels. This requires formal mechanisms that embed community in disaster resilience governance arrangements, as well as informal relationships and opportunities that enable community voice to be invited into diverse disaster resilience forums.



**Highlights for me have been when we’ve brought community members together with professionals working in the disaster resilience space and helped influence a change in narrative. I think we have demonstrated the critical importance of including community voice into any discussion about disaster resilience, and Indigenous people and communities as well.”**

– Fire to Flourish Executive Leadership Team Member

## 6.3 ENABLING RESEARCH EVIDENCE AND KNOWLEDGE GENERATION

### INSIGHT

**Relationship, trust and reciprocity must be central in bringing research expertise together with the lived expertise of community members to generate new knowledge.** Research must be conducted with high standards of ethical practice and with a commitment to go beyond traditional boundaries in engagement, scope and output type. We have found that growing strong research relationships requires careful use of effective and accessible language, a commitment to decolonising research practices, demonstrating tangible value for communities, and, wherever possible, involving community as co-researchers.

This process also provides a mechanism for the surfacing and collation of community knowledge, which belongs to the community and is a valuable output that can be shared or used by the community to inform future plans.

**Bringing research evidence and expertise together with the lived experience and expertise of community members has been a priority for the Fire to Flourish program from the outset. Laying strong foundations between the program’s community and research teams to enable this collaborative work has taken more time than envisaged. We have learned a lot about key enablers, as elaborated here.**

### 6.3.1 Growing strong research relationships

Like all aspects of Fire to Flourish, strong relationships have been a critical underpinning so that partner communities feel ready and comfortable to engage with the program’s research and research teams. This involved taking time to build trust and relationships, and to demonstrate good ethical practice in all research engagements.

We observed a range of reasons why communities initially felt reluctant to engage with researchers. Past or remembered historical experiences of extractive, unethical research practices inevitably colour the way research institutions and researchers are viewed, especially by Indigenous communities. Historically, research has been entwined with colonisation and supported the colonial project, interpreted through Western paradigms of knowledge creation and values, with Indigenous participants given little or no understanding of the research purpose or access to its outcomes or benefits.

To overcome these concerns and unlock the full potential of community-research engagement, it has been essential for Fire to Flourish to place a strong emphasis on reciprocity and high standards of ethical practice.

We found that trust building required opportunities for community teams to spend time with the research teams, meeting face-to-face wherever possible. It also meant being careful with language so that communication between researchers and other program team members was effective and accessible.

Trust building has meant giving focus to the continued evolution of the program’s data governance policy and systems so that community members trust us with their data. While it is an ongoing work in progress, we are

seeking to embed Indigenous data sovereignty principles and practices in the program, which mitigates the risk that Indigenous knowledge may be colonised or extracted without recognition of ownership and benefits conferred for the Indigenous owners of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> For example, when valuable cultural knowledge about caring for Country is shared, it is important that this knowledge is not simply taken and integrated into Western land management regimes, but that traditional holders of knowledge are recognised for this contribution. The associated benefits should flow to local communities, for example through paid employment within ranger programs.

**“ I think there is a bit of learning and experimentation we are doing as a program, to consider how do you harness the research expertise, the depth of that, the specificity, all of that – and actually put this in front of communities in ways that are meaningful and not overwhelming.”**

– Fire to Flourish Executive Leadership Team Member

It has been critical for the Fire to Flourish program to embrace a journey of decolonising research practices, including through training, peer support and regular open reflection. Decolonising research involves researchers examining their own motivations in research engagements with communities. Tuhiwai Smith importantly reminds us of the need to avoid the taken-for-granted assumption that all research is beneficial and that people will want it.<sup>14</sup>

Maintaining a reflexive stance is essential for Fire to Flourish’s engagement with Aboriginal communities specifically. It is also an important consideration for any research engagements involving people from disaster-affected communities. Experiences within the program have reinforced the need for researchers to be mindful of the purpose of each research undertaking. They must question their own standpoints and motivations, consider who will benefit and how, and put in place reciprocal and ethical practices to ensure that any benefits arising from the research are shared with those involved.

### 6.3.2 Creating tangible value for community

Reciprocity is central to decolonising research. It involves finding ways to demonstrate the direct benefits of research for the communities taking part. It may also involve researchers responding to requests for particular tailored types of research to be carried out to meet a community’s needs. In addition, research can enable community members to share their experiences and what they have learned with other communities facing similar challenges in the future.

While we were initially unsure about how communities would respond to research being integrated through the Fire to Flourish program, we have been pleased with the value communities have placed on research as a core strength of the program. In fact, for some community members, the research dimension has provided an additional reason to participate, as their involvement helps to support other communities and drive improved practice across the sector.

Fire to Flourish’s research goals include generating evidence and developing scalable innovations, and the commitment of program research teams to contribute to the partner communities in various ways. For example, researchers:

- Share evidence, insights and tools from past research into community disaster resilience
- Provide training and mentoring to community teams in facilitating disaster resilience workshops and activities
- Facilitate workshops and convene neutral collaboration spaces across community groups
- Ask probing questions to support reflexivity and critical thinking
- Take discussion notes and make observations to share back with community groups
- Collect and analyse local data to provide new evidence and insights to inform planning, advocacy and action for strengthened disaster resilience
- Measure and monitor community changes over time to inform refined plans and actions
- Document lived experiences to generate local evidence and influence decisions and outcomes elsewhere.

### 6.3.3 Involving community as co-researchers

To encourage genuine ownership and involvement in the program’s learning, evidence and research agenda, we found it important for community members to feel they have a key role in driving the purpose, implementation and outcomes of the research. Creating opportunities for community members to see themselves as co-researchers in knowledge production has been an important approach for Fire to Flourish research teams. In particular, we involve community teams and community members in learning-by-doing approaches.

Fire to Flourish community staff are closely involved in planning research activities and some projects have employed other local community members as fieldworkers to be involved in collecting and analysing data. This strengthens the research outcomes by ensuring local people bring their expertise to the design and implementation of the research activities. It also creates valuable additional skills building in the community, which may help to open up new education and employment opportunities in the future.



<sup>13</sup> Williamson B, Weir J and Cavanagh V (2020) Strength from perpetual grief: how Aboriginal people experience the bushfire crisis. The Conversation 10 January, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Tuhiwai-Smith L (1999/2010) Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples.



# Conclusions

**There is no simple roadmap for establishing and implementing a program to strengthen disaster resilience in inclusive, equitable and community-led ways. It requires innovation and experimentation at a local community scale.**

The foundational years of Fire to Flourish have provided a unique opportunity to contribute to collective learning about how organisations and programs can walk alongside communities, partner with them, and support the testing and trialling of approaches that challenge existing practice. By doing so, the program is enabling communities to lead their own recovery and set foundations for long-term resilience and wellbeing.

In reviewing our experiences across program establishment, community relationship development, co-design of local implementation, and preparation for scaling and systems change, we have synthesised our deep learning into five key lessons. Of critical importance is time, resourcing, building relationships and establishing good process — all essential ingredients to working in deep partnership with community.

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

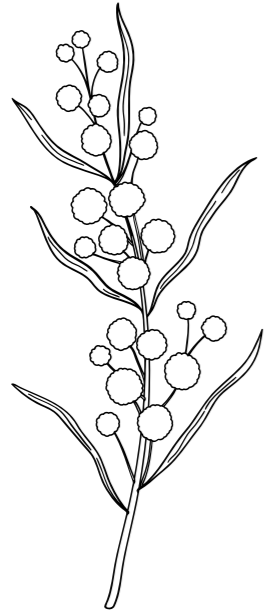
The lessons shared in this report have helped lay the foundations that are essential for the Fire to Flourish program to deliver transformative impact in communities.

Fire to Flourish is now accelerating program implementation across its four partner communities and sharing the evidence and lessons we are generating, while also striving to influence the system conditions needed for community-led disaster resilience innovations to be adopted at scale.

Learning within the program is ongoing, and whilst contexts and circumstances vary, our intention is to continue contributing to collective learning by sharing insights from the Fire to Flourish journey.

*Left: Guerilla Bay near Batemans Bay in the Eurobadalla Shire on the South Coast, NSW*

**FEATURED ILLUSTRATIONS**



**Golden Wattle,**  
*Acacia pycnantha*



**Bottlebrush,**  
*Callistemon*



**Spider flower,**  
*Grevillea*



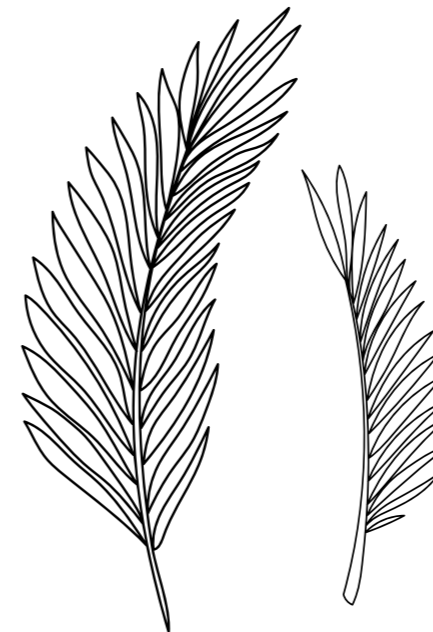
**Red-flowering eucalyptus,**  
*Eucalyptus sideroxylon rosea*



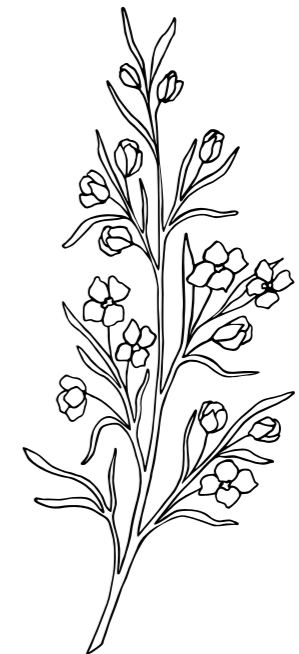
**Kangaroo Paw,**  
*Anigozanthos*



**Round-leaved eucalyptus,**  
*Eucalyptus orbifolia*



**Native tree-fern,**  
*Cyathea australis*



**Boronia,**  
*Boronia*

**FEATURED ILLUSTRATIONS**

# FIRE to FLOURISH



Strength through community-led action

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

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

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

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