



**FIRE to
FLOURISH**

Strength through community-led action

**AUSTRALIAN
GOVERNMENT
DISCUSSION PAPER:
ALTERNATIVE
COMMONWEALTH
CAPABILITIES FOR
CRISIS RESPONSE**

Fire to Flourish Submission

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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

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

FIRE TO FLOURISH SUBMISSION: ALTERNATIVE COMMONWEALTH CAPABILITIES FOR CRISIS RESPONSE

Monash University's *Fire to Flourish* program welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion. The Commonwealth Government has a central role to play in improving national systems and capabilities to manage the risks and impacts of all types of emergencies and disasters. This includes giving attention to the drivers of risk, such as inequities and disadvantage, residual risks from previous policies and practices, the creation of risk due to housing developments and people living in risk-prone settings, and climate change.

[Fire to Flourish](#) is a large-scale philanthropically-funded initiative, trialling and scaling innovations to enable community-led disaster resilience while addressing systemic disadvantage in Australian communities. Working in partnership with communities affected by the 2019/20 bushfires, the program enables participatory processes, capability building and grant funded community-led projects to strengthen disaster resilience and develop the connections and leadership to shape a thriving future. It brings a consortium of partners together with Monash University's interdisciplinary research capabilities to support communities in this work, and to generate new evidence and insights to drive scaling pathways and systemic change at local, state and national scales.

Through our work with community members who have lived experiences of disaster, we know that the impact of recent events, and ongoing and emerging threats signal substantial challenges for Australian communities and the systems, professional and volunteer workforces, and other actors who support them. Unfortunately, the number of communities facing disasters is growing. Recent studies show that in 2022, [70% of Australia's population lived in a Local Government Area affected by flooding and extreme storms](#). With the [BOM officially declaring the El Nino](#), the number of Australians affected by bushfires and drought is expected to increase.

Communities directly experience the immediate and long-term consequences of disasters and face disaster-related risks, including the necessity to manage these risks in their everyday lives. There is, therefore, a need to redouble risk-reduction efforts while investing in strengthening community preparedness, resilience and capacity with a focus on those groups and individuals who are disproportionately affected by these events.

The insights, key messages and recommendations in our submission are grounded in the lived experiences and expertise of Fire to Flourish's partner communities, as well as the research and evidence underpinning the program's agenda, design and activities.

KEY MESSAGES:

1. The Commonwealth needs to take a systemic approach to investing in capabilities for proactive risk reduction and preparedness, alongside crisis response, while addressing systematic inequalities. A collective impact model is needed to recognise the roles and invest in the capabilities of public agencies, private businesses, civil society organisations and community members in an ecosystems approach.
2. Communities themselves are an invaluable capability for disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Future models should enable the Commonwealth to recognise community as both the first responders to disaster and as long-term resilience builders, and invest in strengthening community capabilities accordingly.
3. Indigenous communities and organisations are a key source of capability for community response, recovery and resilience. Future models should harness their role in disaster resilience, both for the benefit of Indigenous communities specifically and for their leadership in the wider community.

TAKING A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

“I believe strengthening the community for fires, floods, and other disasters requires talking to people and not telling them what they need; understanding other people’s stories and experiences; building trust and developing respectful relationships that involve local people and can continue into the future.”
— F2F Community Staff Member

Growing the national capabilities required to deal with the impacts of compounding crises requires systemic approach that can be scaled across Australia, while not being blind to the need for contextual tailoring of approaches and models to ensure they are appropriate and effective for each individual community.

A systemic approach means investing not only in capabilities for crisis response, but also for proactive risk reduction and preparedness. This reduces the burden on response capabilities from both the Commonwealth and communities and includes the need to address the root causes of community vulnerability to disasters. The [National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#) and the recently released [Second National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction](#) provide national guidelines on this key theme. As the Discussion Paper acknowledges, many communities are ‘particularly susceptible to compounding crises’ due to a narrow economic base, fragile infrastructure (e.g. energy and telecommunications services), vulnerable transport routes and food systems. These shortfalls often extend to the limited availability of, and inequitable access to, other infrastructures and services, including adequate housing, health and other social services, training and education opportunities.

A systemic approach also means recognising the complementary roles of public agencies, private businesses, civil society organisations and community members, and investing in their capabilities accordingly. While acknowledging the role of states and territories in emergency response, a scalable model must include and facilitate the capabilities of all societal domains so they can contribute to the management of disaster risks and the impacts of emergencies and disasters. Fostering collaboration and inclusivity will ensure a comprehensive and coordinated effort to address evolving challenges effectively.

The Commonwealth should invest in a model of support for communities seeking to strengthen their capabilities for disaster resilience that is grounded in theories of collective impact. Collective impact models seek to bring together the many different types of people and organisations who have a role to play in driving systemic shifts to address a wicked problem, such as community disaster resilience. The current stakeholder landscape tends to be fragmented, without sufficient enablers to bring organisations and communities together around a common agenda underpinned by a strategic approach to system change for strengthened disaster resilience capabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Prioritise systemic changes that strengthen risk reduction alongside response efforts. Lessons from past disasters should inform strategies to reduce vulnerabilities and enhance preparedness.
2. Invest in building the capacity of local governments, community organisations and citizens, empowering them to effectively fulfil their disaster management responsibilities.
3. Develop an inventory of existing capabilities and gaps across all organisation types in disaster resilience ecosystems, and invest in bolstering emergent shortfalls in local, regional and national capacity
4. Invest in a model of support for communities grounded in a collective impact approach that convenes, aligns and coordinates the many different stakeholders with a role in strengthening the national capabilities for community disaster response and resilience.

INVESTING IN COMMUNITY AS FIRST RESPONDERS

“I believe that strengthening the community for fires, floods and other disasters requires us to be gathering information from community and consulting with people who’ve been through different traumas such as fires, floods, and droughts. [...] We should be listening to their experiences [...] and utilising their lessons.” — F2F Community Staff Member

“To make a difference in my community, we need to work more closely together to promote unity and inclusivity, and utilise the strengths that are in the community.” — F2F Community Staff Member

While the Discussion Paper acknowledges the role of civilians during crises, future capability models for the Commonwealth need to direct investment strategically to grow community disaster resilience capacities. This will allow communities to be properly resourced, trained and enabled to have a leading role in disaster response and longer-term resilience strengthening.

Such models will require a systemic approach to investing in community capabilities in recognition of their role as first responders during a disaster, as well as in disaster risk reduction, preparation and recovery efforts. As Figure 1 highlights, community involvement in disaster recovery precedes and follows on following the emergency system-led response phase of disasters.

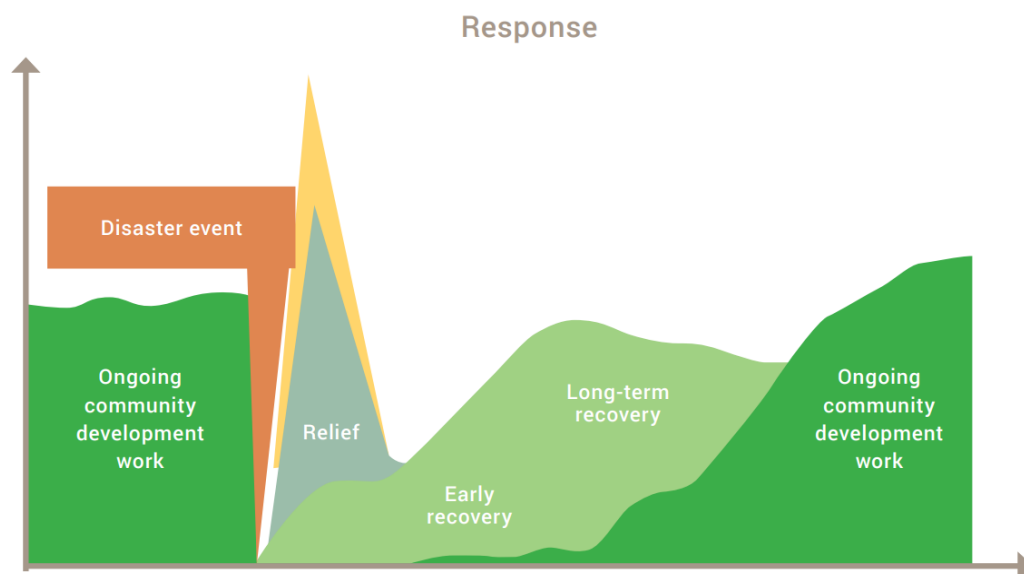


Figure 1 Community development and emergencies.
(Ref: Fire to Flourish Agenda for Change 2021, and AIDR Community Recovery Handbook 2018)

This vital role for community has already been demonstrated in communities across Australia. For example, community-led recovery groups and community-based incorporations were formed as a response to disasters and have now become central to disaster preparedness, response and recovery conversations and action. In these examples, communities play a vital role in the initial response to disasters due to their local knowledge, trusted relationships, social networks, and ability to mobilise quickly.

However, Fire to Flourish’s partner communities have faced many barriers in undertaking these efforts, particularly over the long-term. These barriers include a lack of secure long-term funding to sustain the local

efforts needed for strengthening networks and growing capabilities in the community, as well as disconnection or exclusion from dialogues led by formal agencies with emergency management responsibilities.

These anecdotal community experiences highlight the need for a comprehensive analysis of current community-led disaster response efforts, highlighting successful examples, challenges and enablers. This should include a focus on the emerging role of community-led recovery groups, community-based incorporations and community foundations that have been formed as a response to disasters and that work with and within the emergency management system. This analysis will improve understanding of community dynamics, the diversity of community needs in disaster response, and of how community-led entities can work within an ecosystem of organisations with important roles before, during and after a disaster.

Strong working relationships between these sorts of community-led groups and government agencies, NGOs and businesses are a key ingredient for communities to be more resilient. Investment in strengthening community governance so that productive and collaborative relationships can be fostered is critical

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Analyse and evaluate current community-led disaster response and resilience efforts to identify successful examples, common challenges and key enablers for effective community action, including case studies of successful community-led initiatives that have received Commonwealth support. This analysis should acknowledge the diversity of communities, including Indigenous groups, youth and the disabled, and their unique needs and capabilities in disaster response.
2. Develop a comprehensive roadmap that outlines funding priorities, allocation strategies and measurable outcomes for how Commonwealth investment can be strategically allocated to grow community capabilities for disaster response and resilience.
3. Invest in education and training for community members to act safely and effectively in disaster situations as first responders in the disaster response ecosystem, and to grow their capabilities for long-term disaster risk reduction and resilience action.
4. Invest in long-term sustainable community-led disaster resilience programs that empower community before, during and after a crisis.
5. Invest in community governance and support for fostering collaboration between community members and groups with government agencies, NGOs, private businesses and other stakeholders to enhance local disaster resilience.
6. Formalise inclusive community voice, representation and partnerships in disaster resilience policy and programs at local, state and national scales.

RECOGNISING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AS SOURCES OF CAPABILITY

“Especially for the people here on the South Coast, we have a deep connection with our country. To be able to work with researchers on the impacts of [...] disasters such as fires and floods, that’s going to be extremely helpful to heal the land and ourselves.” — F2F Community Staff Member

First Nations people have been successfully caring for Country for tens of thousands of years. Fire to Flourish strongly endorses Indigenous leadership in disaster resilience.

While systematic inequities place Australia’s First Nations’ people at higher risk during disaster events, Indigenous communities often possess customary knowledges that enhance resilience. This knowledge includes information about local ecosystems, weather patterns, and natural hazards. These knowledges may be invaluable for predicting and mitigating the impact of disasters. For example, Indigenous communities may have a deep understanding safe passage for livestock or points of refuge for endemic native animals.

Many First Nations groups who are active in caring for Country, such as through ranger groups, would also have intimate and current knowledge of landscape values and previous land management activities, providing a wealth of information critical to forming effective disaster responses. Traditional land management practices, such as cultural burning, have been used for millennia to enhance ecosystems and reduce the risk of catastrophic bushfires. It is vital that these practices be further integrated into current risk reduction strategies, to help prevent and mitigate the impacts of major bushfires.

Additionally, First Nations communities are closely connected with a cultural infrastructure that ensures that families, children and babies, elders, people with a disability, and those living with chronic health conditions are known and supported in times of crisis.

First Nations communities can also contribute by collaborating with government agencies and emergency services to provide critical information, share customary knowledge, and actively participate in disaster planning and response efforts. The widespread and deeply embedded community governance framework in First Nations communities make them a resource and valued partner for willing and culturally safe government agencies.

Based on the enduring resilience and knowledges of First Nations’ people, Commonwealth capabilities for disaster response would be strengthened by the inclusion of initiatives and programs that foster and develop formalised Indigenous leadership in disaster resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Investigate how Indigenous knowledge systems and practices relate to contemporary notions of disaster resilience.
2. Identify strategies for engaging Indigenous communities in disaster management grounded in self-determination.
3. Create incentives to build partnerships between the government agencies and Indigenous organisations.
4. Create and fund initiatives to support the capacity-strengthening of Indigenous communities in disaster response and recovery.
5. Ensure cultural sensitivity and respect in disaster management practices involving Indigenous communities.



FIRE to FLOURISH

Strength through community-led action

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

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A partnership between:

