



20 February 2023

Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience
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The Sidney Myer Fund

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Dear Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience, Senator Jacqui Lambie,

The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience Inquiry. The Foundation is particularly pleased to see the recognition of volunteer and community organisations in the Terms of Reference.

FRRR's submission to the inquiry

FRRR's expertise is in supporting the needs and aspirations of remote, rural and regional communities across Australia. Consequently, FRRR's submission to this Inquiry is focused on one part of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

- (a) Current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, including:
- iv. the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability.

The focus of our response is on the vital and often under-resourced preparedness and long-term recovery roles played by community organisations.

About FRRR

The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal is the only national foundation specifically focused on ensuring the social and economic wellbeing of remote, rural and regional communities. Established in 2000 with the Australian Government and the Sidney Myer Fund as members, FRRR connects common purposes and funding from government, business and philanthropy with the genuine local needs of rural people and places.

FRRR provides funding and capacity building support at the hyper-local level; aligning funding, big and small, to community-led solutions that build resilience and long-term viability and vitality of smaller remote, rural and regional communities across Australia.

Since its establishment in 2000, FRRR has delivered in excess of \$155 million to more than 13,000 local projects.



FRRR's work supporting disaster preparedness and recovery

A significant proportion of FRRR's granting is made to projects in a disaster context. From fires, to droughts, cyclones and floods dating back to Cyclone Larry in 2006, FRRR has been instrumental in supporting remote, rural and regional communities across Australia in their medium to long-term recovery process.

Since its inception 22 years ago, FRRR has distributed more than \$58 million in grants supporting communities to respond, recover *and* prepare for disasters. In FY2021/22, 62% (\$12.3M)¹ of FRRR's grants were distributed to projects aiding preparedness or recovery efforts of community groups and not-for-profits.

It is with this experience, that FRRR makes this submission.

The role of Australian civil and volunteer groups and not-for-profit organisations in preparing for, and recovering from natural disasters

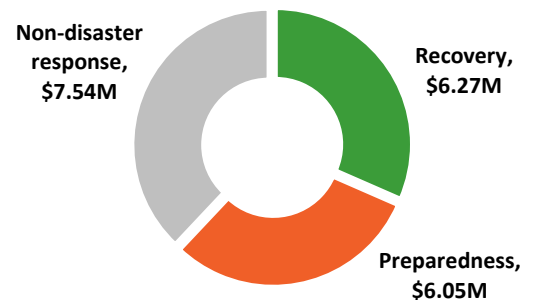
FRRR strongly believes that grassroots community organisations play a vital and often under-appreciated, and under-funded role in both preparedness for, and recovery from natural disasters.

On a day-to-day level, community organisations play an amplified role in remote, rural and regional settings where they are often service providers in lieu of local or state Government, or the private sector. This can range from general community services (many supporting vulnerable populations such as people living with disability or older people), to local tourism and economic development, healthcare, education, environmental or cultural activities.

We also know that remote, rural and regional communities are disproportionately impacted by disasters. Recent research demonstrates they are "significantly more likely to have experienced flooding at least once since 2019 (61%) than people living in urban areas (38%). Similarly, country residents were more likely to have been affected by a bushfire at least once (49%) than people in urban areas (36%)."²

Because of relative isolation, community organisations in remote, rural and regional Australia are often the first called upon in a disaster effort – for immediate relief – and remain supporting the community in its long-term recovery. They undertake diverse roles such as providing information, support, access to services or advocacy, as well as deeply practical things such as providing volunteer 'people-power' to activate local resources, maintain local community assets, fundraise on behalf of other groups and host

Figure 1: FRRR grant distributions across FY2021/22 by disaster response type



¹ [FRRR Annual Review 2021/22](#) (2022); FRRR; p12

² [Summary of results from national study of the impact of climate-fuelled disasters on the mental health of Australians](#) (2023); Climate Council; p2



local events^{3,4,5,6}. This means that an incredibly wide range of groups and organisations at a community level are part of the recovery / preparedness cycle – from informal unincorporated associations to larger not-for-profits. Each requires financial and in-kind support, and general recognition of the savings they create for government, reduction in personal harm to individuals in a disaster event, and increased community capacity to recover more effectively from disasters over the longer term.

The impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on volunteer and community organisations' ongoing capacity and capability

FRRR is in contact with community groups across Australia every day through phone, email, grant projects and workshops. We hear regularly from these groups about the strain that natural disasters place on them and their communities. The common impacts that we hear about are:

- Fatigue and burnout for volunteers and community leaders, and higher turnover for volunteers as people move in and out of communities;
- Loss of financial income, decreased ability to fundraise; combined with
- Increased demand and need for services;
- Need to draw on very limited financial reserves to respond effectively, that is not met by or compensated for by government;
- Complexity of accessing government funds.

"We have been unable to hold our regular monthly event... which was our main fundraising event which helped to pay most of our monthly mortgage payment. So our group has turned to other means of raising funds... We are currently scraping through each month, but our volunteers are now affected by fatigue, and we are reaching out for more volunteers to help keep our organisation afloat. Our Men's Shed is also assisting with volunteering to assist with our fundraising efforts, and conducting maintenance on our buildings and grounds. We are so grateful to our volunteers for their help in keeping us afloat. Without our volunteers we would not be able to pay our mortgage payments." - Rural Vic, 2021

"So many grants now are dropped on us unexpectedly... [They] have extremely short timeframes before applications close, have increasingly complex and long applications to submit, extended waiting periods to find out the successful applicants, and very short periods in which to exercise the grant if received. This puts massive pressure on our capacity to apply for assistance to achieve our goals." - Regional Vic, 2021⁷

In the face of increasing and overlaid disaster frequency, as well as stressors such as COVID and drought, these impacts are exacerbated. The services provided by community groups rely heavily on local fundraising, which is often not readily available in disaster-affected areas, limiting their ability to maintain, let alone grow, their services to cope with demand. The people involved in these groups also

³ [Festival revives East Gippsland | FRRR](#)

⁴ [Rebuilding community through fire management | FRRR](#)

⁵ [Building back better in Rathdowney | FRRR](#)

⁶ [Creative bushfire recovery in the Scenic Rim | FRRR](#)

⁷ [FRRR Heartbeat of Rural Australia study, 2021](#)



often wear multiple hats across a number of organisations further stretching their capacity, while also often being impacted personally. These factors combined mean that many NFPs are struggling to undertake their normal tasks, let alone be proactively involved in preparedness planning. Yet they step up, time and again, largely without recompense for their time and insights. This needs to be addressed.

Community needs evolve over time

In recovering from natural disasters, the needs of communities evolve through their recovery – from the immediacy of emergency relief (food, water, shelter, medicines, social connection and access to timely and accurate information), to early recovery (temporary accommodation, geographic dislocation, children returning to school, complex insurance processes, and adaptation to a ‘new normal’), to medium-to-long-term recovery and preparedness over years (rebuilding of permanent physical structures, renewed opportunities to improve individual livelihoods, mental health and wellbeing focus, resumption of community life, restart local economies, and preparedness activities to be better informed about, and prepared for, future climate-related events). In this context, it is important that community organisations have access to flexible, tangible and accessible support as their needs evolve.

FRRR’s focus on supporting the medium-long term recovery needs of disaster-impacted communities

FRRR focuses on medium to long-term recovery, typically providing funds 12-18 months after a disaster event, and in an ongoing fashion for a number of years. For instance, FRRR is continuing to make grants out to support 2019-20 Black Summer affected communities (\$11.8 million distributed to date) and is also providing ongoing support to communities impacted by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria.

This is a deliberate approach, as we have found that this stage of support is typically under-funded. It is often when the immediate emergency response has finished, government-led assistance wanes, and the media has moved on – despite significant community need remaining.

Specific FRRR programs supporting recovery and preparedness over recent years have included examples such as [Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund](#) (\$5 million since the 2009 event), Strengthening Rural Communities [Prepare and Recover](#) (approx. \$800,000 per quarter), [Tackling Tough Times Together](#) (drought) \$15 million over three years, Future Drought Fund’s [Networks to Build Drought Resilience](#) (\$4.5 million over 2 years), Future Drought Fund’s [Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought](#) (currently being delivered), [Volunteer Emergency Services](#) Grants (\$1 million), Suncorp [Rebuilding Futures](#) (\$1 million), [Visy Bushfire Recovery](#) (\$1 million), and the [Disaster Resilient Future Ready Initiative](#) (\$3.5 million). You can find all FRRR’s [current disaster related grants here](#), or read our recent [Annual report here](#)

Through these programs, FRRR provides funding, enabling each community to invest in what they identify is important for their recovery. FRRR is able to distribute grants to a wide range of organisations



due to its specific tax listing⁸ – enabling it to support the not-for-profit organisations who often miss out on philanthropic support. But FRRR can only do this with support. FRRR connects the good will of government, business and philanthropy to the good purposes in remote, rural and regional communities in an efficient manner, being a partner of choice to many⁹, including State and Federal governments. FRRR was initiated with a \$10 million grant from the Federal Government, a corpus that it has retained (by agreement), the earnings of which have supported FRRR’s work – making it a cost-effective partner of philanthropy, enabling over \$155 million of grant support to be distributed across remote, rural and regional communities. If FRRR is to continue to grow the support it is able to attract for remote, rural and regional communities, in addition to being able to scale up support in response to disasters, it needs further core investment from Government and philanthropy.

The need to invest further in community-led preparedness

With natural disasters currently costing the Australian economy \$38 billion per year, and predicted to increase to at least \$73 billion per year by 2060¹⁰, the widespread physical and emotional impact of compounding disasters, increasing awareness of climatic changes, international agendas such as the adoption of the Sendai Framework¹¹, and increasing number of research findings, a paradigm shift to preparedness and general resilience is becoming a more prominent part of how the emergency management, business and community sectors are seeking to mitigate the human, financial and ecological cost and impact of disasters.

At a community-level, we know that a community with high levels of skills, knowledge, capacity, capability, relationships and interconnectedness is better able to provide an ‘elastic’ response to disaster; not slow, disjointed or broken. It is this ‘elasticity’ that requires a deeper understanding and recognition of, and greater investment in the future.

Traditional models of working with communities on preparedness and recovery efforts that are very top-down and rigid in nature, can remove decision-making power from local actors and make the time and resources used less efficient. In community development broadly, and also in disaster preparedness and recovery, there has been a longer-term trend toward community-led efforts as achieving better local development outcomes. While recent government research has indicated a community-led approach is a sound way to respond¹², there remains much room for improvement in establishing a consistent

⁸ FRRR is endorsed as an organisation able to receive deductible gifts at Item 13.2.2 of s30-105 of the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 (Cth)*.

⁹ <https://frrr.org.au/giving/partner-with-us/#Thankyou>

¹⁰ [Factsheet - Special Report: Update to economic cost of Natural Disasters in Australia](#) (2021); Deloitte Access Economics

¹¹ [Sendai framework for disaster risk reduction 2015-2030](#) (2015); United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

¹² [Understanding the Black Summer bushfires through research](#) (2023); Natural Hazards Research Australia; pp2-3



approach, and mechanisms through which to distribute support that builds genuine agency and self-determination at a community level¹³.

Unfortunately, funding for preparedness is still significantly lower than for relief. Recently released research points to the fact that both Government and philanthropy are overwhelmingly funding relief and response. Twenty-four billion dollars of Australian Commonwealth expenditure since 2005 has gone to disaster relief, compared to only \$500 million to resilience over that same time¹⁴. The Center for Disaster Philanthropy in their latest *Measuring the state of disaster philanthropy 2022*¹⁵ reports that 90% of philanthropic funding since 2020 has gone to relief and response, noting that they include COVID-19 funding in this figure. There is also broad acceptance that every dollar spent on preparedness saves a larger sum in recovery. While the statistic can vary, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction puts the figure at \$15 saved for every dollar spent¹⁶. It is therefore imperative that Government increases its funding of preparedness and risk reduction initiatives, and FRRR encourages a spread of investment, enabling community organisations across Australia to play a greater role in supporting their communities' preparedness.

FRRR investment in preparedness

FRRR has sought to invest in preparedness, in addition to supporting current recovery. In FY2021/22 alone, we saw a dramatic shift in the balance of our funding, with preparedness making up 50.5% of all disaster-related funding (compared to an average of 14% in the three prior financial years).

Longitudinal FRRR data indicates an increasing but pleasing proportion of FRRR's disaster-related funding has been going toward preparedness projects, with an increasing body of international research indicating return on preparedness investment returns £2.84 for every pound spent¹⁷.

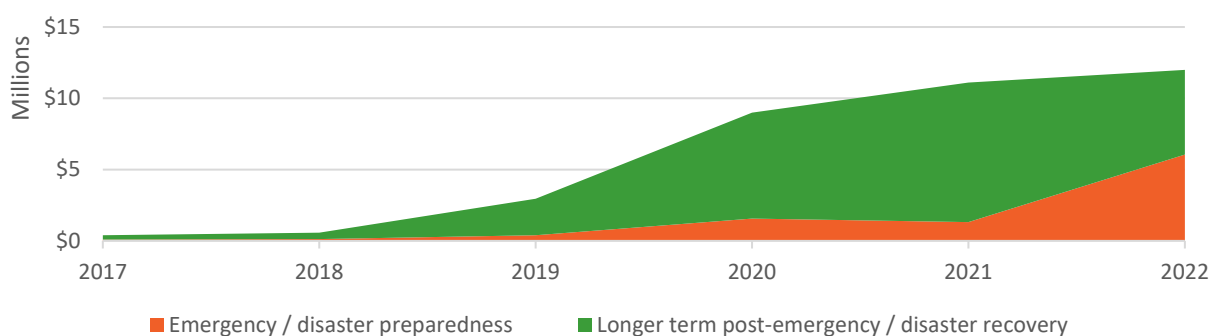


Figure 2: Preparedness and Recovery funding by Financial Year (source: FRRR grants database)

¹³ ['Top down' disaster resilience doesn't work. The National Recovery and Resilience Agency must have community at its heart \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/top-down-disaster-resilience-doesnt-work-the-national-recovery-and-resilience-agency-must-have-community-at-its-heart-141134)

¹⁴ [New research shows every Australian pays for extreme weather - Insurance Council of Australia](https://www.insurancecouncil.gov.au/insurancematters/new-research-shows-every-australian-pays-for-extreme-weather)

¹⁵ [41134.pdf \(issuelab.org\)](https://www.issuelab.org/41134.pdf)

¹⁶ [UNDRR - Our impact](https://www.undrr.org/our-impact)

¹⁷ [DEPP Return on Investment Study](https://www.depp.gov.au/research-and-evidence/return-on-investment-study) (2018); Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme



This is a sign of a paradigm shift in both our funders and the communities we work with. This shift is positive and can be further encouraged by greater Government investment, which will in turn, encourage more communities and community organisations to seek to invest in their preparedness.

Current preparedness models – working with community organisations

In a proactive effort to strengthen local capability, skills and knowledge within communities, FRRR has spent a number of years developing a new, place-based model for working with communities and exploring effective approaches, methods and tools that support community resilience - Disaster Resilient: Future Ready.

The first iteration of the program was piloted in three communities across NSW between 2017-20 and, in response to the learnings from the pilot, the program is now in a national expansion phase with iterations in Victoria and Queensland currently active. As part of the ongoing development of the program, a Participatory Action Research method for evaluation has been used. One of the products of this has been the development of the framework of the Critical Dimensions for Community-Led Resilience Building, which can be seen in the diagram on the right – with a summary of the different dimensions [available here](#).



In brief, the dimensions offer check-in points over time and across different aspects of community life (environment, cultural, social and economic) for anyone interested in effectively working on, and investing in local resilience building such as ensuring inclusion, building strong networks, having effective communication, ensuring access to information, supporting self-organising systems, having access to and being a part of decision making, and having the right resources, tools and support on hand when needed.

In 2021 an evaluation of the NSW pilot was released – a summary of the lessons learned against the objectives in the program logic is provided below.

While seemingly very broad, all of these lessons reflect the fact that to achieve better local outcomes in any disaster-related programming or campaign, it is necessary to work closely with communities, resource them effectively, and ideally allow them to lead and therefore drive the efforts.

Program Logic Objective	Summary of findings
Local communities have a voice and decision-making power to determine what is needed regarding emergency planning and	1. Community priorities must lead the process. Where pilot communities acted together to build generalised community resilience, disaster resilience was enhanced.



Program Logic Objective	Summary of findings
resilience. This is critical to ensure stakeholder buy in.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Response or incident focused didactic approaches based on agency priorities were largely ineffective in building general or disaster specific resilience. 3. Where communities were excluded from formal decision-making such as Local Emergency Management Committees, community engagement with and take up of preparedness activities declined. Communities took on a more passive role and were reluctant to engage in ongoing resilience building, as they lacked agency in the process. 4. When community members worked on projects and activities co-designed by them, adaptive local resilience building was in evidence. 5. Community members who were effectively included in decision-making played a vital role in spanning boundaries between community groups and networks to share information and increase community engagement.
Local knowledge, participation and decision-making is connected and integrated with formal regional, State and national preparedness, response and recovery approaches.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where formal systems worked alongside communities over time, preparedness and resilience were more sustainable and responsive. Where formal systems led the process or engaged in sporadic activities, community engagement in resilience building was minimal. 2. Where community members worked alongside agencies to collaborate on problem solving, more sustainable solutions developed. 3. Conflict resolution was significantly more effective, and long-lasting when community members and agencies were able to communicate as equal contributors. 4. Communities were willing and able to engage in ongoing resilience building where they had access to ongoing resources including paid time, skill and knowledge building, communication and engagement, and collaborative planning.
Existing community strengths and capacities are recognised, supported and mobilised.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where space, support and recognition for informal networks was provided, communities were able to mobilise in agile and fluid resilience building, drawing on relationships, creativity and practical local knowledge to develop and implement ideas. 2. When included comprehensively in local resilience building, recognition of different strengths offered by community members and agencies led to practical examples of shared responsibility. 3. When communities were framed by their deficits rather than their strengths and capabilities, in relation to disaster resilience, they became quickly disengaged and unsure of the community's role in disaster preparedness. 4. Community-led approaches were much more effectively supported when community conversations went beyond known networks. Including those at the margins was vital but required an intentional process.



Program Logic Objective	Summary of findings
Planning is based on an alliance of agencies, community organisations and community members.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Information shared in a dialogue of equals between community members, Emergency Management (EM) agencies and other organisations delivered improved community buy-in and more flexible and inclusive disaster preparedness outcomes.2. Where EM staff and volunteers or local government acted as allies and collaborators rather than as experts, community members were significantly more engaged and community-led approaches developed.3. Due to power differences, effective alliance building between communities and EM agencies / local government took place only when community decision-making and contributions shifted from the margins to the centre of disaster resilience building.4. Alliances of agencies, organisations and community members were most effectively supported by individuals and groups with ongoing relationship-based presence in communities. This is key to supporting sustainable planning and shared responsibility on the ground.

Opportunities to invest in community-led recovery and preparedness

Taking all of this evidence into account, FRRR encourages the Committee to consider a focus on:

- Systemic recognition of the informal community knowledge, networks, systems, resources and support that are required to respond to and prepare for disasters in an effective way;
- Increased focus on, and investment in preparedness efforts that simultaneously build the resilience of community organisations to future disruptions;
- Simple access to financial resourcing for community organisations that is agile, flexible, and while framed in broad national policy parameters, is locally determined. Such funding should recognise the unique role community organisations play in both preparedness and recovery, as needs evolve;
- Specific consideration and investment for remote, rural and regional communities where geographic isolation amplifies the complexity of disasters;
- A long-term approach to disaster response, recovery, mitigation and preparedness.

Should you require additional detail regarding our submission, we would welcome the opportunity for further discussion. Please contact us on 03 5430 2399 or email ceo@frrr.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Matthee
Acting Chief Executive Officer