



Supporting community led approaches to disaster preparedness

Summary Research Report

(Evaluation of the Get Ready
Disaster Resilient: Future Ready pilots)



FRRR
Foundation for Rural
Regional Renewal

This research was commissioned by FRRR and Resilience NSW to capture the learnings from a place-based approach to community-led resilience and is part of the FRRR's broader strategy of supporting communities to build their adaptive capacity and resilience to natural disasters and general disruptions.

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The Get Ready Disaster Resilient: Future Ready pilot project in NSW was delivered by the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal, in partnership with Resilience NSW and the University of Sydney.

Funding for the action research component of the pilot project was provided through the Joint State and Commonwealth Natural Disaster Resilience Program.



We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands where this project took place, and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

Foreword

The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters, including drought, is placing enormous pressure on Australia's social, economic, environmental, and policy systems. This affects every Australian and calls for approaches that strengthen social capital and create room for innovation and ground-up solutions, especially in remote, rural and regional communities.

In 2012, the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) committed to increased investment in community-led approaches to disaster preparedness and resilience. This followed almost a decade of assisting rural communities in their recovery from natural disasters. FRRR observed that communities with strong social capital, high levels of inclusion and diversity of leadership, and positive engagement with the emergency management system, were better placed in their recovery.

The Disaster Resilient: Future Ready (DR:FR) initiative was subsequently developed as FRRR wanted to build an evidence base for increasing the level of funding investment in community led preparedness and, ultimately, to improve disaster resilience of communities across Australia from the ground up.

Building an evidence base for this work required a high degree of collaboration and coordination, and a willingness to work differently. FRRR is especially grateful to the Prince's Trust Australia for being the first partner, and to the other philanthropic foundations who joined the project with faith in its intention and potential.

An alignment between FRRR's DR:FR program and the Resilience NSW's Get Ready program enabled the project to be piloted and

researched in three NSW communities. The project was developed and delivered through this partnership between FRRR and Resilience NSW. A core element of this partnership was establishing the action research process alongside the community engagement and development work undertaken by FRRR. The University of Sydney conducted this research, and the summary research report presented here is the result.

The research has helped to identify community engagement approaches that enable community-led process to rise to the top, alongside important insights into how stakeholders involved in emergency management and disaster resilience work can adjust their own approaches to enable greater community agency, capability, and importantly, inform policy and investment priorities. There is still much to learn, and this report highlights an opportunity for continued exploration and co-design to build disaster resilience.

In closing, our appreciation goes to the project research partners, the project's funding partners, and most importantly, the community members, traditional owners, local agencies, and organisations in the pilot communities for their commitment to the project and their own journey to build their disaster resilience. Their innate wisdom, patience, progressiveness, and tenacity have been inspiring and deeply humbling.

Natalie Egleton

CEO, Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal

On Dja Dja Wurrung country

This summary report outlines the research findings and recommendations for the Get Ready-Disaster Resilient: Future Ready pilots project, which aimed to better understand community-led approaches to resilience building.

Community-led approaches to disaster preparedness move the focus for planning, decision-making and action from a top-down to a more collaborative approach. Community-led resilience building sees communities as active partners in building their capacity and capability to adapt and respond to the impacts of natural disasters.

The project

The project was designed to work with three pilot communities to investigate, understand and measure activities, processes and structures that enable or hinder individuals and communities in disaster resilience building. Particular attention was focused on measuring how community energy and momentum was sustained or blocked.

Researchers drew on existing disaster resilience and community development research to develop a framework founded on seven key areas shown to be critically important in community-led disaster resilience. These are:



The communities

Three very different communities in NSW took part in the project. Each community was potentially (and actually) impacted by multiple disaster risks, chose to be part of the project through an expression of interest process, and had its own specific context, history and character bringing diverse perspectives and experiences.

Community 1

Coastal, suburban, neighbouring major tourist & regional centres.

Long-term older residents alongside increasing numbers of young families.

Disaster risks: storm, flood, bushfire.



Community 2

Small, rural, agricultural, closest regional centre is half an hour drive away.

Strong and active arts & culture connecting Aboriginal (16.9%) and non Aboriginal residents.

Disaster risks: flood, drought, heatwave.

In each pilot location, three workshops were held with communities to develop resilience building initiatives or projects based on local priorities and needs. Each community had access to grant funding through FRRR to support community led initiatives which emerged from the project.

Community 3

Peri-urban and close to major city, rapid change from farming to suburban population.

Long term residents and increasing new population in new housing.

Disaster risks: flood, bushfire, storm, heatwave.

The project was implemented between 2017 and 2020, with research taking place in communities over a two-year period, starting in 2018.

Engagement with each community included community workshops, conversations with key stakeholders and support in community project development and resourcing.

The findings of the research will inform the ongoing work of all stakeholders in developing and sustaining disaster preparedness.

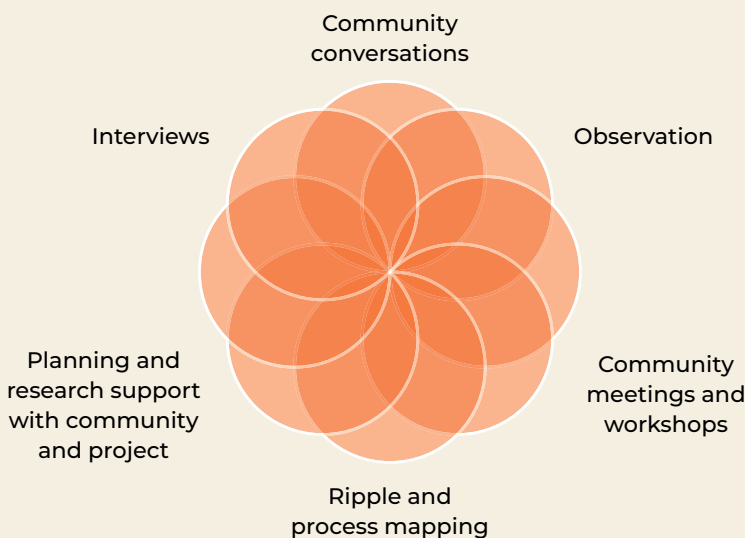
The research

The research was informed by the overarching question: **how and to what extent do community-led approaches enable local communities to be better prepared for disasters?** An action research design was developed to capture real time action and outcomes. In addition, this approach allowed data to be fed back into the project in a direct and timely way to further refine project activities and improve outcomes.

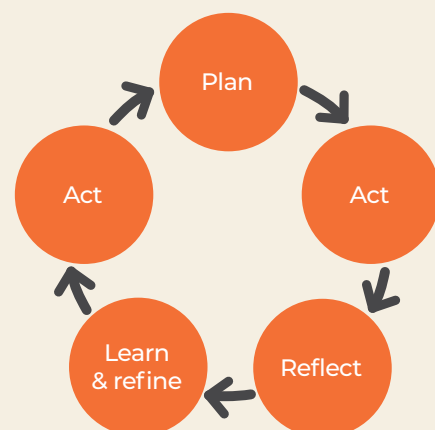
It was important that researchers worked **alongside communities** to support co-design with relevant data as the project unfolded. New learning was fed into the project and it was able to adapt and improve over the two years. Action research was an ideal approach in tracking community resilience building as it generates a rich data set of everyday processes needed to understand the nuances of community-led approaches.

The researchers followed communities through ongoing learning cycles as they developed and implemented ideas to support community led resilience building. Each community focused their initiatives in different areas – from working to connect neighbours and engage with children as leaders, to celebrating and valuing local culture and knowledge through the development of arts communities and cultural trails, through to local mapping and leadership development with young people. Across these activities, **the research was focused on key elements in resilience building and how they work together.** These were communication, networks, self-organising systems, decision-making, information, resources, tools and support and inclusion. Research activities are shown below alongside the action research framework.

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Research Activities



Research Framework

Research Findings

1. Resilience is not something that individuals or communities can achieve on their own.

It is achieved through the combined and intersecting structures, processes, formal and informal networks and supports in communities working together. What we see as individual or community resilience is part of and supported by a collective effort by agencies, organisations, community groups, business and community members. It is evident that communities are not engaged with formal decision-making, planning and leading disaster resilience building. This means, in the context of increasing extreme weather events and disasters, there is a vital resource not being utilised when every available resource is needed.

2. Communities were very willing and able to participate as equal collaborators in resilience building efforts.

This requires new opportunities to be supported by state and local government and emergency service organisations ensuring communities are included in formal networks and decision-making, resourcing and informal community initiatives to build resilience, along with developing processes for shared planning, dialogue and collaboration with community organisations, groups and members.

3. Emergency management agencies have an opportunity to engage with communities to build trust and collaboration, which is essential in resilience building efforts.

This requires shifting from a crisis orientation and reframing disaster resilience work to recognise communities as active, decision-making partners rather than passive recipients of direction. Emergency Services organisations stand to gain considerably in terms of human and social capital, good will and capacity at a local level by making this shift, but it will require a different approach to community engagement which needs to be supported by training. We found that where shared responsibility also included shared dialogue and shared decision-making, communities were significantly more engaged and prepared for disasters.

This research further highlights the need for community organisations to be resourced and included as key local players at all phases of the emergency management cycle. Inclusion of community organisations on formal committees and networks is urgent and will provide a valuable conduit between communities and emergency management processes.

4. Local government is ideally placed to support ongoing resilience building work, alongside local communities.

Already fulfilling a key role in emergency management at a local level and engaged in community development work, Councils have an opportunity to shift their approach to one of collaboration with communities. Community led resilience building has the potential to deliver a range of disaster preparedness and community development outcomes where local government works in support of and alongside community led initiatives.

5. Community sector organisations (particularly local and locally based organisations including neighbourhood and community centres) already have a strong track record in activating and mobilising through their local relationships in disaster response and recovery.

They are also critically important in resilience building because of their ongoing knowledge of and work in communities, particularly with those most impacted by disasters and

least able to recover. To date, community organisations have not been included in formal disaster management networks. This research further highlights the need for community organisations to be resourced and included as key local players at all phases of the emergency management cycle. Inclusion of community organisations on formal committees and networks is urgent and will provide a valuable conduit between communities and emergency management processes.

6. State government has a central strategic role to play in supporting community led disaster resilience initiatives through work with emergency management agencies and other government departments involved in emergency management.

This role includes support for staff and volunteer training, policy and practice initiatives which facilitate community led approaches, research and development of resources and communication to increase knowledge and adoption of these approaches in resilience work.



Recommendations

- 1. Community led approaches** to resilience building must be moved from the periphery of emergency management to the centre. Recognition of the diversity of ways in which community members contribute to resilience building is critical. Communities already make significant contributions, some of which are recognised and linked effectively, many of which still need to be.
- 2. New structures and processes for collaboration and decision-making** that locate community members, emergency management agencies, local government, community services organisations, local groups and businesses as equal contributors should be established. This is an exciting opportunity to mobilise the full range of available resources in disaster resilience building that will be needed with increasing significant disaster events. Building trust is at the centre: within communities, between communities and emergency management stakeholders (agencies, local government), and between funders and communities.
- 3. Shared responsibility** must translate into **increased and shared support** for sustained community led resilience building. Irregular support and one-off funding do not support this work. **Communities need ongoing support to build and maintain momentum and continue to expand inclusion of those at the margins. Place-based, long term work on the ground in communities is required for change and impact.**
- 4. Disaster resilience building needs to reflect the experience of communities** where preparedness, response and recovery are fluid and sometimes simultaneous. Crisis thinking, and command and control structures and processes are ineffective in ongoing community led resilience building. Communities already prepare for, respond to, and recover from disaster in adaptive, agile and flexible ways. Emergency management agencies, government and organisations will benefit from engaging with community knowledge and practices to contain crises and mobilise local resources more effectively.
- 5. The time between disasters is an ideal opportunity to engage communities** in complex discussions and hear their ideas. **Dialogue with communities about disaster communication and information increases community ownership, engagement, dissemination and action.** One-way information and communication provision is less effective than multi-way approaches. This approach to engagement requires a skill set which includes community development, listening, facilitation, collaboration and making space for community ideas.
- 6. To support resilience building,** meaningful locally generated information and communication (beyond alerts and warnings) provides more robust protections against misinformation than generic and reductive messages framing communities as passive recipients. This work must be community led rather than agency led. This means communities need to contextualise the information to local needs building trust and ownership of information and communication. Communities contribute to, rather than only receive information. Information and communication strategies must be developed in collaboration with communities to respond affectively to local community context.

7. Cross-sector and cross-community

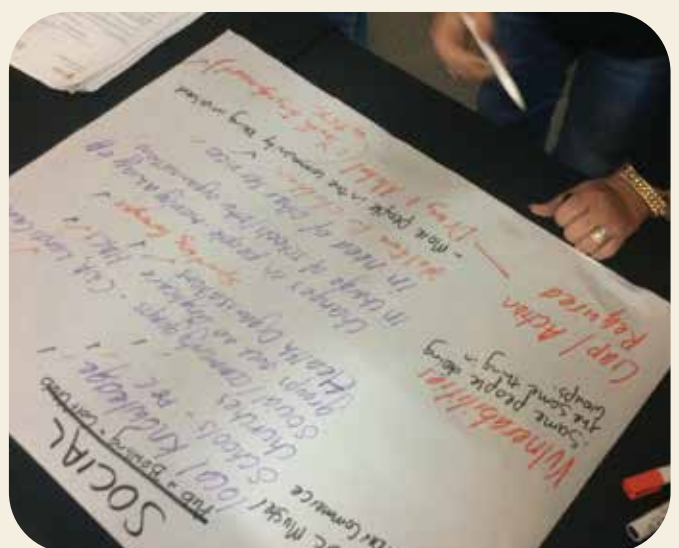
agreement that community led approaches are valuable must be matched with **cross-sector and cross-community investment**. Under-investment, piecemeal investment and an over-reliance on community social and human capital, without commensurate ongoing investment, poses a significant risk to emergency management into the future. This needs to be addressed in a way which links government, philanthropic organisations and communities in practical local contexts. One example might be philanthropic organisations partnering with communities to seed, test and support new initiatives.

8. Community-led disaster resilience building occurs within complex systems.

It thrives when an array of networks, relationships, partnerships and alliances work together in lateral rather than hierarchical ways. Support for this requires time and attention by all involved. Resilience building programs and projects, to be successful, must be designed and implemented within a systems framework and acknowledging the complex array of relationships involved. For example, intersections between economic disadvantage, isolation and local community conflict significantly increase disaster risk. Rather than dealing with each factor separately, resilience building must encompass the ways on which these factors amplify each other within local community systems.

9. This research points to enormous potential in supporting negotiated partnerships

between self-organising systems in local communities and community-based organisations in disaster resilience building. **It is recommended that further work be undertaken in supporting practical links between local community organisations and self-organising networks and groups in supporting sustained resilience building in local communities.**



FRRR and The Disaster Resilient: Future Ready Program



The Disaster Resilient: Future Ready (DR:FR) program is a national initiative that aims to support and strengthen the capacity and capability of remote, rural & regional communities to thrive and be resilient to the impacts of climate, natural disasters and other disruptions.

The multi-year place-based program takes a community-led approach to build knowledge of climate risks, encourage collaboration and facilitate collective action to strengthen social capital and build community resilience.

The first iteration of the DR:FR program was piloted in three communities in NSW from 2017-2020 and a summary of the research findings are included in this report. In response to learnings from the pilot project and new research and practices in disaster recovery and community led resilience, the model has been reviewed and adapted for the Victorian iteration in 2021-23. It will continue to be iterated and adapted based on new knowledge and evidence gained through the DR:FR action research processes and the context in which it is being implemented at the time.

FRRR is the only national foundation specifically focused on ensuring social and economic strength in remote, rural and regional & areas of Australia, aligning government, philanthropic and community purposes and investments. FRRR provides leadership towards a national resilience agenda that is driven by remote, regional and rural Australia to build vibrant, resilient and revitalised communities.

The DR:FR program is informed by FRRR's extensive experience in community-led recovery and work with rural, regional and remote communities around Australia. It is one of many FRRR initiatives and forms of support that aim to build disaster resilience and climate solutions that are relevant, practical, and sustainable for local people and the communities where they live.

Learn more about the Disaster Resilient: Future Ready national program at: www.frrr.org.au/DRFR

To discuss the program or partner with us, please email info@frrr.org.au or call 03 5430 2399.

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