Community Connector for Resilience cc4r

VCOSS
Victorian Council of Social Service

Collaboration for Disaster Resilience

Research report

APRIL 2025

Lived experience statement

VCOSS thanks all those who shared with us their personal stories, experiences and insights in the development of this work. Every person is shaped by their history and environment. Many people have endured trauma or hardship. For some, this trauma and its effects continue today. When somebody shares their experiences and insights with VCOSS, they enrich both our understanding of the issues and our recommendations for change. Thank you for your courage and generosity.

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders and ancestors. Our office is located on the sovereign, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation.

Contents

List of abbreviations used in this document

ACCO: Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

CALD: Culturally and linguistically diverse

EMV: Emergency Management Victoria

DRF: Disaster Ready Fund

DRFA: Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements

LGBTIQA+: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse people

MEMP: Municipal Emergency Management Plan

MEMPC: Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee

NEMA: National Emergency Management Agency

REMP: Regional Emergency Management Plan

REMPC: Regional Emergency Management Plan Committee

SEMP: State Emergency Management Plan
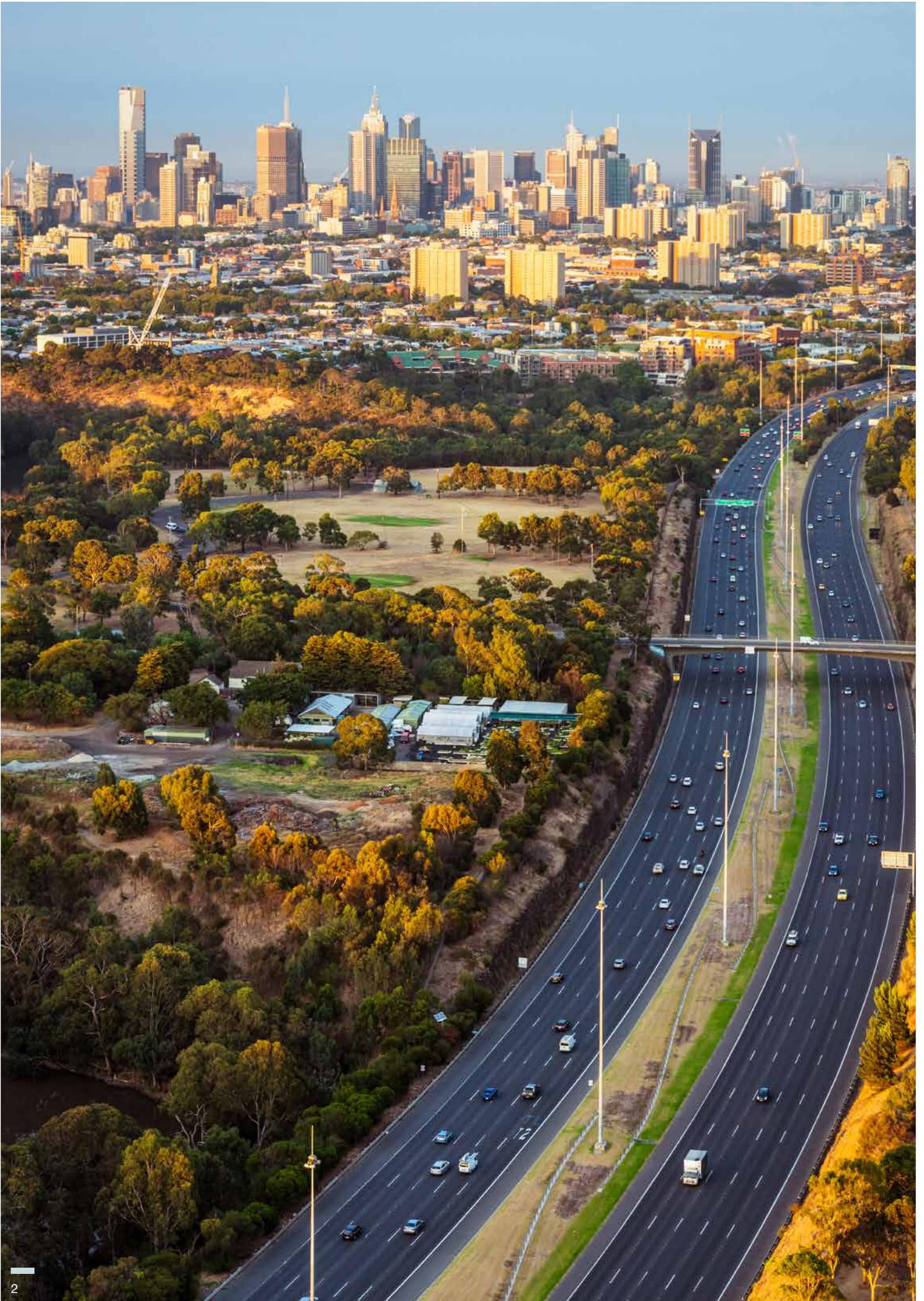
Executive summary

Over the past five years, Victoria has been hit by some of the most devastating disasters in our post-colonial history.

Building disaster resilience in Victorian communities has never been more important, and will be increasingly necessary as climate-driven disasters get worse in severity and frequency.

And while disasters can impact all Victorians, their impacts are not felt equally. For people at higher risk – who are often experiencing poverty and disadvantage – disaster impacts can be compounding and particularly devastating.

All systems and actors involved in disaster management are motivated by the goal of mitigating harm and building resilience.

But to build a more resilient society in which all Victorians can thrive, the way these systems work together matters.

Research tells us that a shared responsibility approach – in which individuals and communities share responsibility for disaster resilience with emergency management and government agencies – is foundational to effective emergency management policy.

This means moving beyond traditional 'command, control and coordination' approaches and adopting enablers of collaboration that empower communities.

Community organisations play a key role in collaborations for disaster resilience due to their trusted role in the community. The community sector provides supports that knit together to form a safety net for Victorians who are most impacted by emergencies.

This report highlights case studies of collaborative disaster resilience efforts across Victoria. Future collaborations can learn from and build on their achievements. Some of the positive outcomes of these case studies include:

- Supporting those at higher risk and with complex needs.
- Increased capability through peer learning and resource-sharing.
- Shaping emergency management and government policy.
- Building preparedness and long-term resilience.

Through analysis of these case studies, this report identifies four key enablers of successful collaboration for disaster resilience:

- Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions.
- Local, place-based leadership and governance.
- A focus on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness.
- A clear shared purpose created by and for the community.

All levels of government, emergency management agencies, and community organisations have a role to play in strengthening collaboration for disaster resilience.

Focusing on each of these enablers can ensure that future collaborations build on achievements and lessons learned from the case studies showcased in this report. For each of these four enablers, our analysis identifies actions that can be taken across sectors, including practices and policy recommendations.

With strong collaborations for disaster resilience, all Victorians can better prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters, and our communities can thrive.

Summary of actions to strengthen collaboration

Enabler: Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler:

- Providing dedicated convening capacity.
- Building inclusion and cultural safety.
- Investing in building trust and relationships amongst participants.
- Valuing relationships as an outcome of collaboration, rather than a means to an end.

Policy recommendations:

1. The Commonwealth and Victorian governments should co-fund an ongoing disaster resilience workforce within the community sector.

2. Government and philanthropic funders should ensure disaster risk reduction, preparedness and recovery funding programs adequately support and resource convening roles needed for collaborations to succeed.

3. All levels of government should embed collaborative approaches, such as participation in local resilience initiatives.

4. All levels of government, emergency management agencies, and the community sector should build inclusion and cultural safety within disaster resilience collaborations.

Enabler: Local, place-based leadership and governance

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler:

- Being highly responsive to local priorities and needs.
- Valuing and centring Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge.
- Facilitating involvement from a broad range of local actors, including those without paid organisational roles.
- Utilising a community development approach.

Policy recommendations:

5. Government and philanthropic funders should increase resourcing for key place-based organisations to recognise the ongoing work they already do in building community resilience, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community sector organisations.

6. Government and philanthropic funders should consider ways for smaller, grassroots organisations to access disaster risk reduction, preparedness and recovery funding programs.

7. Local and Victorian governments should seek to increase participation of local, place-based organisations in formal emergency management processes.

Enabler: A focus on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler:

- Use of scenario exercises.
- Peer-learning and sharing of resources.
- Designing collaborations to be fit-for-purpose through all phases of disaster resilience.
- Working with local emergency services on preparedness activities.

Policy recommendations:

8 In addition to supporting ongoing resilience workforce, the Commonwealth and Victorian governments should increase investment in risk reduction, preparedness and resilience initiatives.

Enabler: A clear, shared purpose developed by and for the community

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler:

- Ensuring clarity of purpose at the outset and during collaborations.
- Embedding co-design alongside local, place-based governance of collaborations.
- Securing buy-in from organisational leadership.
- Building accountability mechanisms with community.

Policy recommendations:

9 Government and philanthropic funders should provide long-term and flexible funding agreements that allow co-design and capability building to be embedded in collaborative projects.

10 All levels of government should embed co-design and collaborative approaches in the design of disaster resilience policy and programs.

Background

This aim of this report is to capture lessons from disaster resilience collaborations between the community sector, government and emergency management agencies in Victoria, and identify actions to strengthen collaboration. These include practices that can be utilised by organisations involved in collaborations, as well as recommendations to government.

This report is based on interviews with practitioners from 19 organisations, attendance at meetings and workshops held by collaborations, review of project documentation and reports, and a literature review. Analysis of this data has been used to identify key enablers of collaboration and actions that can be taken by all actors to strengthen collaboration.

This report presents a snapshot of collaborations that demonstrate a range of emerging practices, rather than a comprehensive overview of collaborative projects in Victoria. Beyond these case studies, participants in this research shared many additional examples of collaborative work, such as within neighbourhood house networks and community legal organisations.

This report is organised in three sections:

- **Understanding collaboration for disaster resilience**, including what is meant by disaster resilience; approaches to collaboration; and why collaboration matters.
- **Collaboration in practice in Victoria**, including the disaster resilience context; the role of the community sector; the regulatory and funding environment; outcomes of collaborations; and challenges encountered.
- **Enablers and actions to strengthen collaboration**, including four key enablers. For each enabler, supportive practices by organisations have been identified along with recommendations to government.

This report is a project of the Community Connector for Resilience, supported by Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation.

Understanding collaboration for disaster resilience

What is disaster resilience?

Disaster resilience is the ability of communities, individuals, and organisations to reduce the impact of disasters, cope with them more effectively, and recover from them in a way that "builds back better."[1] At the core of building resilience is building a more equitable society that also builds back fairer.

Disasters impact everyone, but not equally. Some people are at higher risk during disasters, particularly those who face systemic barriers due to poverty and disadvantage.

Who experiences higher risk during specific disasters is contextual and based on individual circumstances and the nature of specific emergencies (see *People at Higher Risk* on page 9). Certain people and cohorts in the community may be at higher risk due to *disproportionate* impacts, such as people who are older or have certain medical conditions who are more impacted during extreme heat.[2] Some groups also face *distinct* impacts, for instance the cultural impacts that First Nations people may experience due to disasters.[3]

The impacts of disasters can widen inequality and entrench disadvantage. For example, people on low incomes are both more likely to be uninsured or underinsured before a disaster, and less likely to have financial means to rebuild following a disaster,[4] creating compounding vulnerability.

As climate-driven disasters become more frequent and severe, it is critical to build resilience in a way that reduces poverty and disadvantage over the long-term. This requires resilience to be led by those at higher risk. These communities have unique strengths and lived experience that can help build a more equitable and inclusive response to disasters, benefiting all Victorians.

People at higher risk during disasters

People who are at higher risk during disasters is highly contextual and depends on the nature of the disaster, individual circumstances, and the social or community fabric. Emergency management policy in Victoria encourages risk-based assessments that are specific to different types of emergencies and circumstances.[5]

Nonetheless, research has identified certain community cohorts that are more likely to experience higher risk during disasters due to systemic barriers or disadvantage. A few examples of cohorts that may experience higher risk include:

- First Nations people, who experience disproportionate and distinct impacts and culturally unsafe and racist emergency relief and recovery services.[6]

- People on low incomes who have less financial capacity to cope with disasters.[7]

- In the case of extreme heat, older people, babies and young children, pregnant people, people with acute and chronic conditions, and taking certain medications.[8]

- People with disabilities, who face increased mortality, injury and property loss as well as barriers to evacuation, and greater reliance on services during and after emergencies.[9]

- Multicultural communities, particularly those who are newly arrived or who don't speak English well, who are often excluded from sources of emergency information.[10]

- Women and their children, who face increased rates of violence after disasters.[11]

Research and practice – including the case studies featured in this report – consistently demonstrate the benefits in supporting those at higher risk to lead disaster resilience efforts for their communities.

Building resilience is part of all phases of a disaster, including risk reduction and prevention, preparedness, response, relief and recovery.

Examples of how collaborations support all phases of the disaster resilience cycle

Collaborative and long-term
adaptation and resilience projects

Prevention

Facilitating shared
responsibility through
community and
person-centred
planning

Coordination of
services to build back
better and fairer

Recovery

Preparedness

Relationship building
between agencies to
understand capabilities
and capacity

Community co-design
of recovery initiatives

Response
& Relief

Coordination of relief efforts

Sharing of local intelligence with EM

Sharing of EM information with communities

Investment in disaster risk reduction, including preparedness, provides significantly greater return on investment compared with spending on recovery alone[12] and allows communities to adapt to a changing climate. Despite this, risk reduction receives only a fraction of the resourcing allocated to emergency response and recovery, with an estimated 87% of Commonwealth disaster funding in Australia going towards recovery.[13]

Resilience is also central to the response and recovery phases, ensuring that recovery following an emergency builds resilience to future disasters. This is not limited to rebuilding economic and physical infrastructure, but also encompasses social recovery. Building social cohesion, connection, mental health and wellbeing are all critical components of a resilient recovery to disasters.

Collaborative approaches to disaster resilience

Policy at all levels calls for responsibility for disaster resilience to be shared across the community, the community sector, government, and emergency management agencies. To fully implement a shared-responsibility approach, it is necessary to move beyond command, control and coordination and towards collaboration.

The international *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030* (the Sendai Framework) guides Australia's approach to disasters and calls for states to support "shared responsibility" with local communities and the community sector.[14] This focus on shared responsibility works alongside efforts to empower local leadership.[15]

At the national level, NEMA's overarching policies, including the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience and National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, embed the principle of shared responsibility between governments, emergency management agencies, community members, and non-government actors.[16]

Within Victoria, an approach of "all communities, all emergencies" is a central pillar of emergency management and an objective of the *Emergency Management Act 2013*.[17] This legislation and its new approach that centred shared responsibility and community connection was part of significant reform to Victoria's emergency management arrangements following the devastating Black Saturday Fires of 2009.[18]

The Victorian State Emergency Management Plan (the SEMP) seeks to implement this approach by recognising the need to work together with individuals, communities, organisations, businesses, all levels of government and the not-for-profit sector.[19]

In practice, shared responsibility and local leadership requires collaboration between government, emergency management agencies, the community sector, and communities.

Collaborative ways of working contrasts with the historically hierarchical nature of the emergency management sector.[20] The traditional emergency management approach relies on command, control and coordination. Although the Victorian government now includes communication, consequence and community connection as core emergency management mechanisms,[21] more can be done to build truly collaborative models that allow for local and inclusive leadership for long-term resilience.

Collaboration has no single definition and is described in various frameworks across the disaster resilience and broader public policy literature. These frameworks include collaborative governance, place-based approaches, joined-up governance, and networked governance.

Frameworks describing collaborations

There are a range of frameworks used to describe collaborative approaches to disaster resilience and public policy more broadly. This report does not use a single definition or framework, but rather seeks to illustrate some of the commonalities across these frameworks.

Collaborative governance

Collaborative governance describes multi-stakeholder governance that seeks to address complex challenges such as climate change in the Pacific and disasters in the Northern Rivers of NSW.[22] It refers to "the processes and structures" that "engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished."[23]

Collective impact

Collective impact is a model for innovation that suggests five key elements for working collaboratively to address complex issues: a common agenda; a shared measurement framework; a shared plan of action; open communication; and a resourced backbone organisation.[24]

Place-based approaches

Place-based approaches are "ways of working that put communities at the centre,"[25] with a focus on collaborations within a specific geographic area. The Victorian Government has a place-based approach framework for working across a range of social and environmental issues.[26] Place-based approaches involve "partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts."[27]

Joined-up government and networked government

Joined-up government and networked government frameworks describe reform in liberal democracies, including Australia, over the past 20+ years aiming to connect up different policies and government agencies to tackle complex policy problems.[28] An example of this approach is the creation of Emergency Management Victoria as a coordinating body across all emergencies.[29]

Across these frameworks, some core elements set collaborative approaches apart from command, control and coordination. Systems of command and control rely on a hierarchy, and coordination may be less hierarchical, but does not necessarily involve lateral relationships, a common goal, or collective action.

Collaboration, on the other hand, involves multiple actors "working collectively towards a common goal using open and honest communication."[30] According to a community sector practitioner, "collaboration involves shared goals and shared action" towards those goals.[31]

Because emergency management systems often rely on command and control,[32] collaborative approaches to disaster resilience often requires a shift in ways of working and organisational cultures. Collaborations are held together not by directives, but instead by relationships, shared purpose, and shared commitment from those involved.

Command and control, coordination, and collaboration
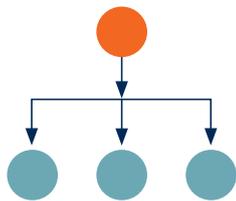
Command and control
Held together through directives
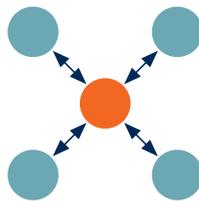
Coordination
Held together through relationships and shared interests
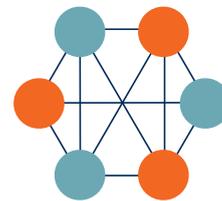
Collaboration
Held together through lateral relationships, shared purpose and theory of change, and commitment to collective action

Adapted from IGEM, *Review of connecting and collaborating with the private sector and community organisations*, 2019.

Why collaboration matters

A growing body of research tells us that collaboration for disaster resilience improves outcomes for those who are disproportionately impacted, supports local leadership, allocates resources efficiently, and builds innovation and continuous improvement.

Collaboration "is a way of achieving objectives we may not achieve on our own"[33] by harnessing the strengths of different actors and creating opportunities for innovation.[34]

Collaborative approaches to disaster resilience increase our capacity to address the needs of those at higher risk or those with more complex needs. Inclusive emergency management requires "teamwork"[35] between people who are at higher risk, community organisations that provide services to these communities, emergency management agencies, and governments.

> "There's no one person or sector that can address the challenges for people with a disability in disaster situations. Collaboration helps address implicit bias, discrimination and access issues. It promotes respect for human rights and facilitates equal participation."
> Emergency management research participant

Another benefit of collaboration is the ability to ensure local knowledge and community leadership is central to disaster resilience efforts. Local leadership and knowledge is "fundamental to continuous improvement in resilience,"[36] whilst emergency management requires a level of regional, statewide and national coordination and resourcing. This means that collaboration between local-level actors with state- and national-level actors is essential for embedding local knowledge and leadership in disaster resilience.

In practice, realising the benefit of local knowledge and leadership requires the involvement of community organisations in collaborations, as the community sector has "specific knowledge of their community"[37] and work most closely with those at higher risk.

Collaboration is also important in order to allocate resources efficiently and avoid duplication. More efficient use of resources is particularly important given the pressures created by more frequent and severe climate-driven disasters.[38]

Collaboration can utilise resources efficiently by facilitating sharing of tools and peer-learning across organisations. Some emergency management processes are easily transferrable, and collaboration can ensure there isn't "a new tool that's created every single time."[39] Collaboration also increases the capability and knowledge of individuals and organisations, allowing organisations to reach more people and learn from each others' experience and expertise.[40]

Effective and efficient use of resources benefits all actors involved in disaster resilience but may be particularly important for community organisations that play a critical role in disaster resilience but do not specialise in emergency management. Community organisations are often overstretched during disaster response and recovery periods,[41] and collaborative approaches are necessary to support their involvement.

> "Internal processes and business continuity protocols can be quite easily transferred between organisations and then adapted to make sure that they're relevant – it doesn't need to be a new tool that's created every single time."
> Community sector research participant

Similarly, collaboration can ensure that lessons are learned over time and across regions, enabling continuous improvement and innovation in disaster resilience. This is important to overcoming the challenge of "too many examples of lived experiences that are not shared, lessons that are not learned, and pilots that are not scaled."[42] This includes identifying opportunities for systemic reform, addressing the gap that has been found in Australia in translating good practices into policies in the context of disasters.[43]

Collaboration in practice in Victoria
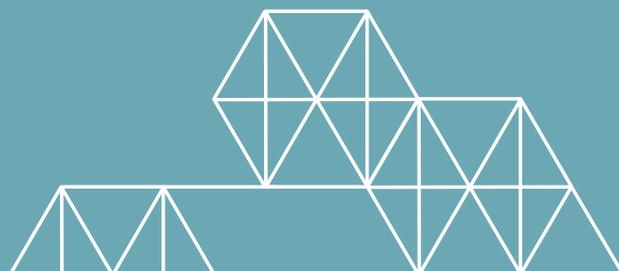
Victoria's disaster resilience context

Victoria has always been affected by disasters, but in the past five years the state has been impacted by some of the most devastating emergencies in our post-colonial history. Community organisations are working tirelessly to support their communities in the face of these disasters, and this has sparked new and innovative approaches to collaboration.

The bushfires of the Black Summer of 2019–20 destroyed livelihoods and homes and resulted in many communities and individuals experiencing trauma and mental distress. VCOSS research following the fires found that impacts were most felt by people on low incomes, experiencing homelessness, without insurance, in isolated areas without a car, or physically unable to prepare their properties.[44] The impacts from these fires are ongoing throughout East Gippsland and North-East Victoria, where community organisations continue to work with those most impacted as they rebuild and recover.

These fires were followed closely by the Covid-19 pandemic which began in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic caused devastating loss of life, illness, social isolation and loss of livelihoods across the state. People who were already vulnerable, including older people, people in aged care, people with chronic illness, Aboriginal people, those in public housing, and those in precarious work were disproportionately impacted.

Despite significant government intervention and necessary increases to benefits which temporarily reduced poverty rates for some, Victorians who missed out on support were thrust into poverty.[45]

In regions just impacted by bushfires, the pandemic compounded the challenges faced and slowed the recovery process.[46]

In 2022, Victoria experienced one of the worst flooding events in the state's post-colonial history. Communities along the Campaspe, Goulburn, Maribyrnong and Murray Rivers were inundated, with particularly devastating consequences for the western suburbs of Melbourne and regional towns in north and west Victoria.

Thousands of homes in these areas were damaged or uninhabitable following the floods, and many community members are still living in temporary accommodation and unable to return to their homes.[47] Unsuccessful or lengthy insurance claim processes have delayed rebuilding for many and added to the emotional distress caused by the flooding event.[48]

As is the case with all disasters, those experiencing poverty and disadvantage were particularly impacted by the floods. This included people experiencing homelessness, renters, and those who were under-insured or without insurance.[49] Some communities hit by the floods were still in recovery from bushfires, and the impacts of Covid-19 were still being felt.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, Victorian communities have been rocked by further significant storms, floods, and bushfires. Since 2022, those impacted by disasters have additionally faced the cost-of-living crisis that is affecting all Victorians, with increases to the cost of food, energy, and housing causing household inflation to rise to more than 8% by December 2022.[50]

Extreme heat, the deadliest of Victoria's natural hazards, is also worsening. Victoria has experienced overall warming of 1.4 degrees Celsius compared with pre-industrial levels,[51] and the number of extreme hot days has increased, particularly over the past decade.[52]

According to climate projections, Victoria is likely to see increases in heatwaves, drought, fire activity, and flood magnitude.[53] The severity of these impacts depends on emissions scenarios. Climate change mitigation, including reducing carbon emissions from energy, the built environment, and other sectors across the state, is critical. Many participants in this research spoke about how communities are increasingly joining the dots between disasters and climate change, and seeking to create collaborations that can respond to both.

This context of more severe and more frequent extreme weather events, combined with the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, has driven much of the innovation that underpins the collaboration case studies featured in this report. Participants in this research spoke of a sense of solidarity and shared purpose forged in the wake of disasters between community members, community organisations, emergency managers and government.

> **"That intense moment in time brought everyone together, and so there was a sense of solidarity."**
> Community sector research participant

Growing awareness and concern regarding the impacts of climate change is bringing new and varied organisations to collaborations focused on resilience. Similarly, the Covid-19 response brought together communities with government and community organisations in new ways, which have then sparked new initiatives focused on social cohesion, preparedness, heat health, and homelessness.

> **"A growing number of organisations are identifying climate change as a priority area or a strategic goal within their organisation."**
> Community sector research participant

Despite these successes, the impacts of these events are ongoing and disproportionately felt by Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage. It is imperative that the lessons from these collaborations are captured and actions taken by all actors to build greater resilience to future emergencies. It also underlines the need for collaborations to be inclusive, trauma-informed and responsive to the specific needs of communities across the state.

The community sector's role leading collaboration

Community organisations play a key role in leading collaborations for disaster resilience due to their trusted role in the community. The community sector provides supports that knit together to form a safety net for Victorians who are most impacted by emergencies.

This report highlights six case studies of collaborative projects, however these represent just a sample of the innovative and effective work being done with limited resources by community organisations across the state.

The Victorian community sector consists of over 4,000 organisations providing a range of services that support people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Community organisations provide immediate relief, food assistance, mental health support, legal advice, financial counselling, employment support, health services, family violence support, community development, housing, and many other services.[54] Community organisations range in size from a few volunteers or staff through to larger organisations with more than 6,000 employees.[55]

In the context of disasters, community services help build individual, household-level and community-level resilience to compounding disasters. During disasters, governments and emergency management agencies draw on the trusted relationships held by community services within their communities, as well as their specialist skills such as case work and psychosocial support.

A diverse range of community organisations lead and join collaborations for disaster resilience. This includes local grassroots organisations through to larger statewide organisations.

Some community organisations have specific roles delivering services to those impacted by emergencies, including statutory obligations under the *Emergency Management Act 2013*. Others have obligations to keep their clients safe.

Many community organisations are engaged in emergency management processes, such as Community Recovery Committees[56] or Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees[57], or regional and statewide committees.

In some cases, community organisations reported having to advocate to be included in these formal emergency management arrangements. For some organisations interviewed, collaborative projects have been important in raising awareness within government and emergency management agencies about the value of community sector involvement in collaborations for disaster resilience, and the range of supports available to the community members. This was particularly highlighted by the community legal sector, financial counsellors, and neighbourhood houses.

Many community organisations also step up and form collaborations outside formal emergency management arrangements. This includes collaborations convened by community organisations, resourced through a combination of grants and in-kind contributions, as well as networks convened by local councils.

Community organisations involved in disaster resilience in Victoria

When faced by disasters, many community organisations play a role supporting their clients and the broader community. Some of the key organisations and services most involved in building disaster resilience across Victoria include:

- Organisations with roles under the SEMP, including the Australian Red Cross, Victorian Council of Churches and Emergencies Ministries, and the Salvation Army. These organisations provide material aid, psychosocial support, and many other services.
- Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations, who are critical for providing culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal people, and informing emergency management agencies and government.
- Community health organisations, who often provide case management, social work support, and awareness raising regarding hazards.
- Disability rights and advocacy organisations, who work towards disability-inclusive emergency management that addresses structural barriers faced by people with a disability during disasters.
- Multicultural community organisations, who work with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities and advocate for the needs to these communities to be addressed and raise awareness of hazards within communities.
- Family violence services, who give vital support given the increase in family violence that often accompanies disasters.
- Women's health organisations, who can address the disproportionate impacts on women.
- Youth and family services, who can address the unique impacts for children, young people, and their families.
- Community legal organisations, who support clients to be legally prepared and support those with legal issues that are caused by or compounded by disasters.
- Financial counsellors, who can support clients with the often devastating financial impacts of a disaster, such as insurance issues, housing costs, and loss of livelihood.
- Neighbourhood houses, who are often the location of official or unofficial recovery hubs, and whose programs and networks and community development approach is critical for reaching those most at risk prior to disasters and most impacted following disasters. Many neighbourhood houses also provide material aid following disasters.
- Housing and housing crisis organisations, who support renters and those experiencing homelessness or housing crisis.
- Cohort-specific organisations that advocate and support their communities, such as LGBTIQA+, carers, and older people's organisations.
- Many more grassroots and locally-specific organisations, depending on the local context. This could include Men's Sheds, Rotary Clubs, and many more.

Participants in this research emphasised the important role of "bridging" organisations in enabling collaborations for disaster resilience. These are organisations that are connected to community cohorts who are at higher risk as well as other community service organisations, and have the capacity and networks to bring key actors together as part of collaborations.

Neighbourhood houses play a particularly important role as local, place-based bridging organisations and this role was highlighted by a number of those interviewed.

"Neighbourhood houses were well positioned to be able to both provide a safe location for community to come and get information, but also to connect with agencies, and for agencies to connect with the communities. And so you would have legal services and financial counsellors and outreach workers using the neighbourhood house as a launching point for their work in that community."
Victorian government research participant

"The [neighbourhood house-based] women's group, the playgroup – all these groups played such a crucial role in the recovery and community resilience."
Community sector research participant

"In disaster situations, what we are seeing is that people are going to the neighbourhood house because they know the organisation, they are there all the time. They are a trusted part of the community."
Community sector research participant

The regulatory environment

Victoria's regulatory environment for disaster resilience supports collaboration with the community sector in a number of ways. There are also opportunities to strengthen the regulatory environment to better support this collaboration. Specific recommendations are explored further in the next section outlining enablers and actions to strengthen collaboration.

As previously discussed, global, national and state-level policy highlights the importance of shared responsibility for disaster resilience with the community sector and communities.

Objectives of the *Emergency Management Act 2013* include the need to facilitate cooperation between agencies and implement an "all communities – all emergencies" approach. The legislation includes collaboration, community planning, community resilience and flexibility to meet local needs as underlying principles for the preparation and implementation of emergency management plans.

The "all communities, all emergencies" approach is incorporated primarily at the level of principles and objectives within the SEMP and Regional Emergency Management Plans (REMPs).

At the municipal level, community sector involvement is required, with MEMPCs required to include at least one community representative and one additional representative that can come from the community

sector. MEMPCs must also consider relevant community-level emergency management plans in preparation of the MEMP. According to a recent cross-jurisdictional analysis, this model represents one of the best examples of collaboration between government agencies and local groups when compared with other states and territories.[58]

In practice, some MEMPCs have multiple community services and community member representatives, while others have only the required sole community sector representative. Community sector and community representatives are also often involved in sub-committees and development of sub-plans, although this is not required by the legislation.

There are opportunities to strengthen collaboration for disaster resilience through strengthening community sector involvement in MEMPCs and the development of MEMPs and subplans, involving community members with lived experience of being at higher risk, and extending this involvement to regional and state-level committees.

Emergency management planning in at a state, regional and municipal level in Victoria

State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP)
Approved by the State Crisis and Resilience Council
Prepared and reviewed by the Emergency Management Commissioner

Sharing of information and guidance

Regional Emergency Management Plans (REMPs)
Approved by the Emergency Management Commissioner
Prepared and reviewed by the Regional Emergency Management Planning Committees

Sharing of information and reporting

Municipal Emergency Management Plans (MEMPs)
Approved by the Regional Emergency Management Planning Committees
Prepared and reviewed by the Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committee

Adapted from Minister for Police and Emergency Services, *Guidelines for preparing State, Regional and Municipal Emergency Management Plans*, Nov 2020, p. 19.

The funding environment

Commonwealth, state and local government funding programs for disaster resilience have enabled many successful collaborations between the community sector, emergency management agencies and government. Despite these success stories, funding arrangements often constrain community sector involvement in collaborations for disaster resilience.

Funding for disaster preparedness, response and recovery activities is primarily through programs that are co-funded through the Commonwealth and Victorian government. This includes programs such as the Disaster Ready Fund (DRF) and the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), which community organisations are eligible to apply for, in addition to payments targeting individuals and families. Other sources of funding include philanthropic funding, local government grants, and other Commonwealth and Victorian Government funding programs.

The DRF, funding for community-level Covid-19 responses, and recovery funding for specific disasters including the 2019–20 bushfires and 2022 floods has provided the initial funding for many of the case studies featured in this report. Participants in this research particularly highlighted flexible approaches from funders as important for collaboration.

"Our Network was very fortunate to have been funded through Victorian Government Bushfire Mental Health funding. We applied for funding without being very specific about what we were going to use it for, other than it would be distributed to the six participating neighbourhood houses to work with their local community to co-design and develop their own projects. The degree of flexibility and trust that was demonstrated by the funder made a huge difference to what we were able to achieve in very difficult circumstances."
Community sector research participant

Participants in this research also identified a number of challenges to collaboration posed by the funding environment. Key issues include the complexity of funding applications, short timeframes for grant applications and implementation, and the often intangible nature of collaborative work, particularly when focused on social recovery.

These challenges are not unique to the community sector. In 2024, an Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding by Andrew Colvin (the Colvin Review) found that current funding arrangements for disasters are complex, expenditure on disasters is increasing, and the need for funding is likely to increase due to climate change.[59]

The Colvin Review made recommendations to substantially reform funding arrangements, including introducing overarching frameworks, and reforming specific programs such as the DRF and DRFA.[60]

The recommendations included improving involvement of the non-government sector and First Nations communities in disaster management arrangements, increase funding for social recovery in addition to infrastructure and economic recovery, and an increased focus on building resilience and disaster risk reduction. Currently 87% of Commonwealth spending is on recovery programs rather than resilience building.[61]

The complexity of grant application processes, combined with short timeframes for submitting applications, was identified as a key barrier to collaborative projects by interviewees. These factors tend to constrain the ability of smaller organisations to submit applications, especially with the added complexity of coordinating an application with multiple organisations involved. According to Volunteering Victoria, measures such as providing translations of grant information, local forums explaining grants, and a simplified and streamlined application process is needed to allow smaller volunteer-based organisations to access grants.[62]

Participatory grant making, as modelled by the Fire to Flourish program, provides one such model for how grant making could better support collaborations with smaller organisations.[63]

Interviewees also identified that short-term funding arrangements were a barrier to collaboration, as true collaboration requires sufficient time for building relationships and co-design as well as project implementation. Short-term funding also contributes to turnover of staff within key roles, making ongoing relationships more difficult to maintain.

Another issue related to funding arrangements is the delineation between funding for disaster risk reduction and funding for recovery work, which makes it challenging to fund ongoing collaborations that span preparedness, response and recovery.

A final challenge encountered is the often "intangible" nature of outcomes from collaborative work that focuses on social recovery, which is often the focus of community organisations. Analysis by the Colvin Review showed that 88% of DRFA funding since 2018 has gone on built and economic recovery, and only 11% on social recovery, despite social domain costs being much greater.[64]

Outcomes of collaborations

Collaborative projects for disaster resilience in Victoria are demonstrating significant benefits. Key positive outcomes include supporting those at higher risk and with complex needs; increased capability through peer-learning, and resource-sharing; informing emergency management approaches; and building preparedness.

The achievements of these collaborations underline the unique role of the community sector not just in emergency response and recovery, but in building a more equitable society that is resilient to future disasters.

Supporting those at higher risk and with complex needs

A key achievement of collaborations led by the community sector is enabling better outcomes for those at higher risk and with more complex needs during disasters.

For example, in the wake of Covid-19, collaboration between multicultural community leaders, community organisations, and local councils addressed the disproportionate impacts of Covid-19 on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. By building an active network of bicultural workers and community leaders, the Multicultural Community Engagement Network in the southeast of Melbourne was able to reach tens of thousands of community members with vaccine information, food relief, and emergency kits.

Similarly, the Mornington Peninsula Resilience, Relief and Recovery Network has enabled rapid deployment of multiple services to support community members with more complex needs, including older residents and people experiencing family violence. Prior to the Network being formed, this process may have taken several days to organise.

"If there are community members that their organisation isn't able to respond to, we now know other agencies or services in the network that could respond to those specific needs. That's the benefit of the network: we all know who we are and what we do."
Local government research participant

As explained by a community health practitioner, "everybody's needs are different. Everybody's journey is different", and as such there is a need to collaborate with a range of local services in order to be responsive to the needs of those most impacted by disasters.

"It could be AOD services, it could be mental health, it could be family violence, because we all know that increases after a disaster. It just depends on what the needs are of the client…We were supporting the clients, but it was also making clients become so much more aware of what was available to support them, what they might have been entitled to for support."
Community sector research participant

CASE STUDY

Collaboration for disability-inclusive disaster resilience

People with disabilities often face systemic barriers during disasters, and disability advocacy groups, people with lived experience of disability, researchers, and emergency management agencies are working collaboratively to address this.

One example of this work is the Emergency Preparedness Advice Service (EPAS) which is a collaboration between CFA, Australian Red Cross and the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry (VCCEM), working closely with local government.

EPAS utilises the Person Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) framework developed by the Collaborating 4 Inclusion project at the Centre for Disability, Research and Policy at the University of Sydney. P-CEP has been co-designed by people with a disability and takes a strengths-based and human-rights based approach.

EPAS is available to individuals with a disability, who are older, or who have a chronic medical condition to develop a plan for emergencies. After a resident is referred by a local council or service provider to the program, they receive a first home visit by a CFA member and a Red Cross or VCCEM volunteer to explore strengths and support needs, and build rapport between facilitators and participants. A second home visit then addresses any remaining gaps in support needs, and then a preparedness plan is written up and communicated to whoever is involved in enacting it.

Some of the key benefits of the collaboration include:

- Being able to draw on the different strengths of the agencies involved, including the emergency management expertise of CFA volunteers and the psychosocial skills of Red Cross and VCCEM volunteers.
- Being able to reach more people by only needing to recruit one volunteer from each organisation for each home visit.
- Providing the opportunity for learning and capacity building within the volunteer base of each organisation.

Beyond the delivery of the EPAS project, the People at Higher Risk from Fire Statewide Reference Group convened by the CFA continues to bring together key stakeholders across community organisations and emergency management to build sector capability for inclusive emergency management.

The People at Higher Risk from Fire Statewide Reference Group meets quarterly, and has enabled new collaborations to emerge, such as an online learning module and resources for carers in collaboration with Carers Victoria.

According to CFA, collaboration is critical to addressing the systemic barriers faced by people with a disability and those at higher risk during disasters. It is particularly important to work with people with lived experience to address implicit bias, discrimination and accessibility issues that may otherwise limit the effectiveness of resilience programs.

Increased capability through mentoring, peer-learning, and resource-sharing

The collaborations that informed this report included projects that focused on collaboration between similar organisations across regions and jurisdictions, particularly within community health organisations and the community legal sector.

Participants in these collaborations reported increased capability resulting from mentoring and peer-learning, and more efficient use of resources and reduced duplication by having key roles and responsibilities shared between local, regional and statewide organisations.

Within community health organisations, collaboration across regions has allowed more experienced case support workers to mentor new case workers when a disaster occurs. This is an important way of avoiding the persistent issue of starting from scratch following each disaster.

"Disaster work is very different from other aspects of community health. It's really important to have leaders in that space. You need those people that have experience in disaster work because they know what to look for, they know where to go, or what services they need to find in those communities."
Community sector research participant

In addition to providing mentoring and peer-learning opportunities, these collaborations also allow sharing of resources amongst similar organisations, making disaster resilience work more efficient.

A community legal practitioner explained that "effective collaboration within the legal sector allows us to be both local first and coordinated where it is required."[65] This connection to regional and statewide organisations is particularly important in a situation where local community sector staff are impacted by a disaster and can then draw on others for surge capacity.

Informing emergency management and government policy

One of the most important achievements of collaborations has been how these projects have informed and influenced emergency management approaches and government policy.

This has been possible due to the non-hierarchical nature of collaborations that involve government and emergency management professionals as equal partners and contributors alongside community members and grassroots and local community organisations.

Examples include the development of new local government programs and resources targeting rough sleepers. Council officers interviewed as part of this research also reported that local resilience networks allowed mechanisms for other departments within the council to engage the community more meaningfully in developing strategy across a range of resilience projects.

Other networks have been successful in influencing local councils to recognise the role of neighbourhood houses in disaster resilience, and begin including neighbourhood houses in municipal emergency management processes.

The Multicultural Community Engagement Network in the Southeast of Melbourne informed the approach of key agencies to Covid-19, including local government, state government, and Monash Health.

"The network contributed to supporting communities advocating for their needs and speaking out when messages weren't appropriate or getting out."
Community sector research participant

Building long-term resilience and preparedness through capacity building

Many of the participants in this research reported both community and community sector preparedness and long-term resilience increasing as a result of collaborations.

"We were supporting the clients, but it was also making clients become so much more aware of what was available to support them, what they might have been entitled to for support."
Community sector research participant

In the case of Gippsland Lakes Complete Health's recovery casework, by connecting with other place-based local services, clients were able to not only recover from the disaster itself, but also access services such as the NDIS and My Aged Care for the first time, providing additional support in the event of future disasters.

"The principles that drive neighbourhood houses are community development principles, so they are working in that frame with everything that they do. And to me, that's how you build community resilience. So you're not just providing services, you're actually trying to build the capacity of people within the community."
Community sector research participant

An increase in preparedness has also occurred at the organisational level. Many of the organisations interviewed as part of this project spoke of feeling more connected to other community services, emergency management agencies, and government as a result of being involved in collaborations. This in turn has led to a greater sense of resilience and preparedness. After a Yarra Ranges workshop focused on scenario-planning, 87% of participants reported a better understanding of potential risks to their organisations and having more capacity to plan and respond to future impacts.

CASE STUDY

Connecting services locally and statewide to support disaster recovery for those most impacted

In the past five years, Gippsland – along with several rural and regional areas across Victoria – has been impacted by severe bushfires, floods and storms. This has meant that many community members and community sector organisations have experienced a state of near-constant recovery.

Throughout this period, collaboration has strengthened the recovery and resilience work being led by the community sector. This has included collaboration between local community services, as well as collaboration across regions.

Gippsland Lakes Complete Health (GLCH) has been leading an emergency recovery support program in close collaboration with other local services including financial counselling and community legal services. This collaboration with local services has enabled GLCH case support workers to focus on providing clients with ongoing psychosocial support through a trauma-informed approach, whilst providing connections to the specialist advice to support recovery. Financial counselling and community legal support is particularly important for rural and regional communities, where navigating insurance claims is often central to the recovery process.

GLCH has also found that by working with a broader range of community services, case support workers have been able to link disaster-affected clients to ongoing support through the NDIS and My Aged Care. This collaboration with the broader community sector enables the disaster recovery process to build long-term strength and resilience for community members with more complex needs.

GLCH has also been actively collaborating across Victoria with other organisations delivering recovery case management. One of the most valuable aspects of this collaboration has been offering mentoring to support workers in other communities, such as Shepparton, Rochester, and Echuca.

Case support contracts during disaster recovery are generally only funded to be short-term, however the work requires specialist expertise and experience, with recovery efforts often taking many years. In addition to the creation of an ongoing disaster resilience workforce, enabling experienced case workers across regions to share lessons and provide mentoring can support more newly established recovery teams.

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Challenges encountered

The many achievements of collaborations for resilience in Victoria have required community, government and emergency management organisations to overcome a number of challenges. Addressing these challenges can support collaborations to thrive into the future.

As described previously, elements of the regulatory and funding environment pose challenges to collaborations. Inconsistent levels of inclusion of community organisations in formal emergency management arrangements and the complexity and short-term nature of funding are especially important to address.

In addition to these challenges, participants raised staff turnover as an issue, particularly within government and community organisations. This is partly due to short-term funding which leads to short-term contracts, as well as staff burnout, particularly when many community organisation staff are themselves impacted by disasters.

> **"That churn of people through different roles, it's quite problematic when you're trying to build relationships."**
> Community sector research participant

Another significant challenge to successful collaborations is unequal power dynamics. This can include different levels of funding, power differentials between funders and funded organisations, and a diversity of ways of working across collaboration members, as well as systemic marginalisation and structural disadvantage.

The impacts of ongoing colonisation, including "distorted relations" and power imbalances, has led to an absence of Indigenous peoples in mainstream disaster research and policy.[66] Research has found that interpersonal racism during disaster response and recovery has been experienced by Aboriginal people in Victoria.[67] Research has also demonstrated the disproportionate and distinct Aboriginal experience of disasters such as during the Black Summer bushfires.[68] This systemic racism poses a challenge to centring Indigenous knowledges to build disaster resilience.

> **"Discrimination compounds the trauma of the disaster itself and can act as a barrier preventing people and communities from seeking assistance."**
> Community sector research participant

A final challenge is the increasing frequency and severity of disasters, which is stretching the resources of all actors working in disaster resilience. In particular, some organisations shared that being in a state of near-constant response and recovery was a challenge in rolling out collaborative projects focused on community preparedness.

The successes of the collaborations featured in this report demonstrate the depth of commitment by the community sector to work to build greater disaster resilience in the face of these challenges. All actors – from community organisations to government – have a role to play in addressing these challenges and building on the achievements of collaborations in practice.
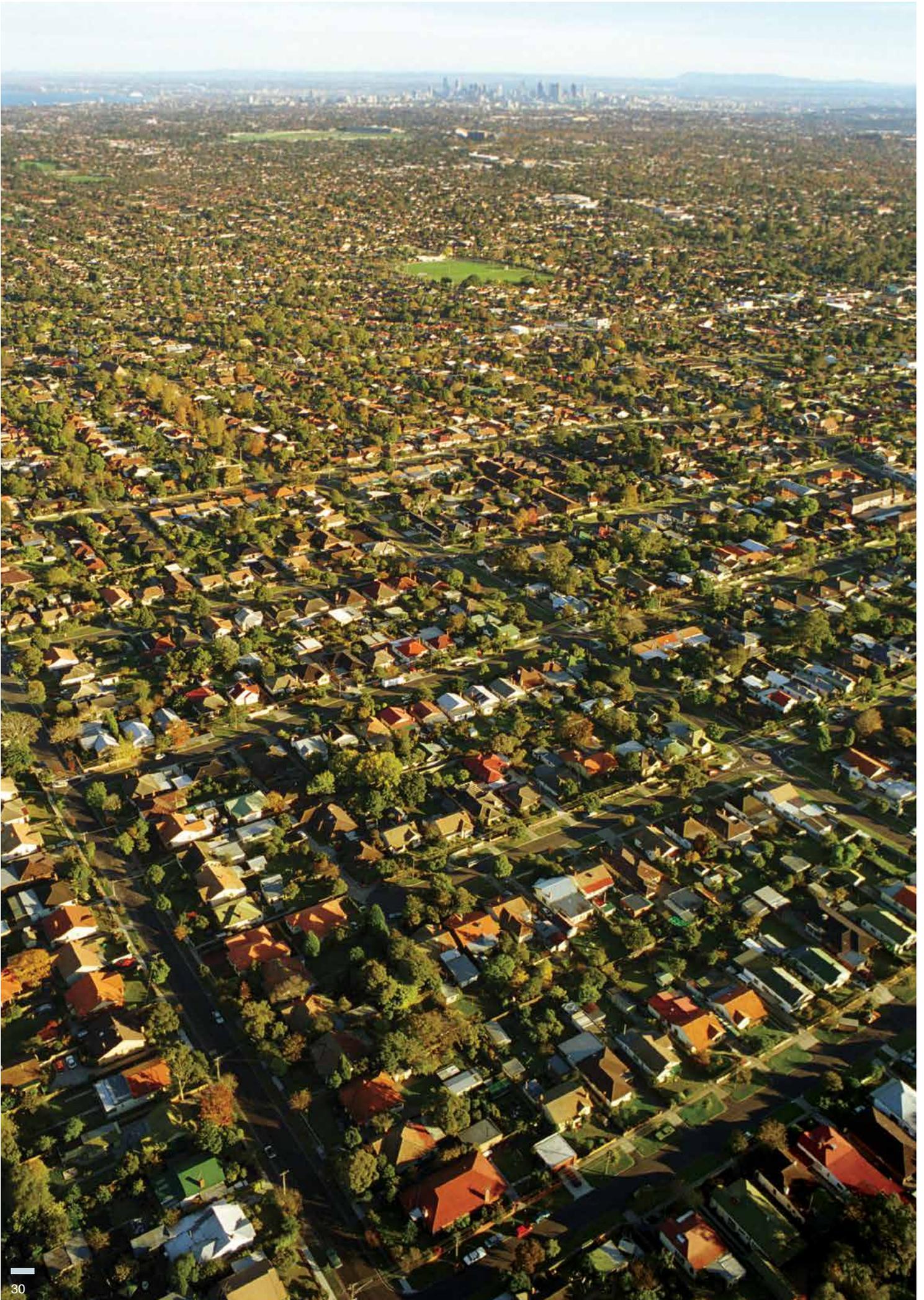
Enablers and actions to strengthen collaboration
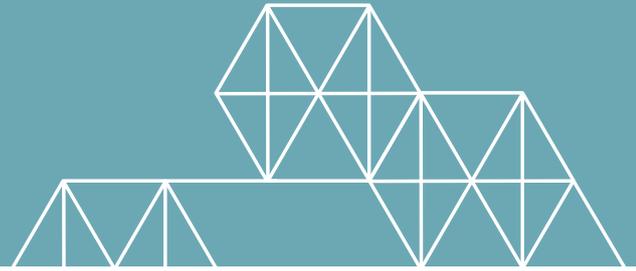
This research has identified four key enablers of successful collaborations for disaster resilience:

Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions

Local, place-based leadership and governance

A focus on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness

A clear shared purpose created by and for the community

All levels of government, emergency services, and community sector organisations have a role to play in strengthening collaboration for disaster resilience. Focusing on each of these enablers can ensure that future collaborations build on achievements and lessons learned from the case studies showcased in this report.

This section explains each of the four enablers and identifies the practices being used by collaborations that support each of these enablers. Local, state and federal governments all play a role in supporting collaborations by aligning policy with each of these enablers, and recommendations for reform are also included where relevant.

Summary of enablers, practices, and recommendations

Enabler: Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions

Practices by collaborations	Policy recommendations
• Providing dedicated convening capacity. • Building inclusion and cultural safety. • Investing in building trust and relationships amongst participants. • Valuing relationships as an outcome of collaboration, rather than a means to an end.	**1** The Victorian and Commonwealth Government should co-fund an ongoing disaster resilience workforce within the community sector. **2** Government and philanthropic funders should ensure disaster risk reduction, preparedness and recovery funding programs adequately support and resource convening roles needed for collaborations to succeed. **3** All levels of government should embed collaborative approaches, such as participation in local resilience initiatives. **4** All levels of government, emergency management agencies, and the community sector should build inclusion and cultural safety within disaster resilience collaborations.

Enabler: Local, place-based leadership and governance

Practices by collaborations	Policy recommendations
• Being highly responsive to local priorities and needs. • Valuing and centring Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge. • Facilitating involvement from a broad range of local actors, including those without paid organisational roles. • Utilising a community development approach.	**5** Government and philanthropic funders should increase resourcing for key place-based organisations to recognise the ongoing work they already do in building community resilience, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and community sector organisations. **6** Government and philanthropic funders should consider ways for smaller, grassroots organisations to access disaster preparedness and recovery funding programs. **7** All levels of government should seek to increase participation of local, place-based organisations in formal emergency management processes.

Enabler: A focus on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness

Practices by collaborations	Policy recommendations
• Use of scenario exercises. • Peer-learning and sharing of resources. • Designing collaborations to be fit-for-purpose through all phases of disaster resilience. • Working with local emergency services on preparedness activities.	**8** In addition to supporting ongoing resilience workforce (Recommendation 1), the Commonwealth and Victorian governments should increase investment in risk reduction, preparedness and resilience initiatives.

Enabler: A clear, shared purpose developed by and for the community

Practices by collaborations	Policy recommendations
• Ensuring clarity of purpose at the outset and during collaborations. • Embedding co-design alongside local, place-based governance of collaborations. • Securing buy-in from organisational leadership. • Building accountability mechanisms with community.	**9** Government and philanthropic funders should provide long-term and flexible funding agreements that allow co-design and capability building to be embedded in collaborative projects. **10** All levels of government should embed co-design and collaborative approaches in the design of disaster resilience policy and programs.

Enabler: Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions

> "Relationships are what we do very well. If you've got that from the start, then you can achieve anything that you want."
> Local government research participant

> "If it wasn't for that continual relationship, there wouldn't necessarily be those opportunities to be able to continue that work and preparedness."
> Community sector research participant.

Genuine, personal relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions are the foundation of successful collaborations for disaster resilience. This includes relationships between the community, community organisations of all sizes, emergency management agencies, local government, and state government.

Each of these stakeholders has a critical role to play in building disaster resilience, but each operates differently and brings diverse resources, skills and constraints. Strong relationships allow the unique strengths of these different stakeholders to be utilised. Fostering understanding and connection can help overcome barriers to collaboration that may arise from differing organisational approaches and contexts.[69]

Building strong relationships is important due to the non-hierarchical nature of collaborations for disaster resilience. In a more hierarchical model, participation may be directed from above, whereas in a collaboration participation is voluntary and reliant on trust, collective accountability, and all members feeling valued.[70]

Fostering strong relationships allows informal collaborative work to emerge alongside more formal aspects of a collaboration. One significant benefit that often emerges organically from these relationships is the ability to rapidly reach out to colleagues in other organisations during an emergency.

The interviews highlighted the importance of these relationships being personal and long-term to allow trust to grow over time, provide continuity to community members, and ensure lessons are being built upon as collaborations develop. Changes in personnel,[71] and short-term funding models, are common challenges to building these ongoing relationships.[72]

In order to build trusted relationships, it's necessary to address power imbalances that pose a challenge to collaborations. As previously outlined, these imbalances can be institutional – such as differing levels of resourcing, and funders working with funded agencies – or they can reflect systemic power imbalances related to gender, race and privilege.[73] Addressing these imbalances is a "starting condition" of collaborative governance models,[74] necessary to engaging a diversity of actors that is representative of the community and community sector.

In addition to the importance of building local relationships across sectors, the interviews highlighted the value of building relationships within the community sector across jurisdictions. Community legal and community health organisations, for example, maintain relationships with equivalent organisations across regions and with statewide organisations. This provides mentoring and peer learning opportunities, as well as the ability to access support when place-based organisations experience reduced capacity during emergency response and recovery.

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler

"Organisations have to value collaboration. And I think the way organisations demonstrate that value is in supporting staff to build relationships. The outcomes are less tangible than some of the other things that you do."
Community sector practitioner

Convenors of collaborations interviewed stressed the importance of spending time building genuine, trusted relationships amongst the members of a collaboration. Participants also shared strategies to address challenges presented by inevitable turnover of membership, and power imbalances that result from involvement of a diversity of participants.

Providing dedicated convening capacity:
Employing dedicated convenors with sufficient skills and resources is a key practice of successful collaborations for disaster resilience. The role of the convenor includes taking time to understand the strengths and motivations of each member of the network, onboarding new members, regular and consistent communication, conflict resolution, and building trust through demonstrating accountability.

Building inclusion and cultural safety: To address power imbalances that will exist in all collaborations for disaster resilience, it's essential to embed anti-oppressive practices within collaborations.[75] As previously discussed, research has identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability, CALD communities, and women are often excluded from emergency management collaborations. Successful collaborations ensure inclusive practices that enable members of these communities to adopt leadership roles.

Investing in building trust and relationships amongst participants: Successful collaborations actively build trust and relationships amongst participants through a range of methods including face-to-face meetings that allow for informal networking time; open communication channels such as email groups; and sufficient time dedicated to understanding each participant and the unique strengths they bring to the collaboration.

Valuing relationships as an outcome of collaboration, rather than a means to an end:
One practical way that collaborations have done this is by including measures of connectedness as an outcome in funding proposals and as part of evaluations.

Enabler: Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions

Policy recommendations

Government, funders and emergency management agencies all have a key role to play in supporting the strong relationships needed for disaster resilience within local communities. This involves embracing the intangible, long-term and complex nature of relationship-building.

1 The Commonwealth and Victorian governments should co-fund an ongoing disaster resilience workforce within the community sector. The community sector plays a vital convening and connecting role in collaborations for disaster resilience; however, funding for these roles is generally project-based, meaning that relationships often have to be rebuilt after each disaster strikes. A permanent resilience workforce is the best way to address this challenge and ensure relationships are ongoing. This should include a First Nations ongoing resilience workforce with self-determination.

2 Government and philanthropic funders should ensure that disaster risk reduction, preparedness and recovery funding programs adequately support and resource convening roles needed for collaborations to succeed, and recognise relationship-building and the more "intangible" work of collaborations as an outcome.

3 All levels of government should embed collaborative approaches within government, such as participation in local resilience initiatives. This is already being done in many instances, but could be expanded.

4 All levels of government, emergency management agencies, and the community sector should build inclusion and cultural safety within government agencies involved in disaster resilience collaborations. This includes resourcing ACCOs and other Indigenous-led initiatives to be able to participate in both First Peoples-led spaces and regional and government networks.

CASE STUDY

Building relationships between government, emergency services, community services and grassroots organisations

The Mornington Peninsula Resilience, Relief and Recovery Network (MPRRR Network) was established in 2023 by the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council as part of its commitment to a collaborative and community-led approach to resilience, relief and recovery.

The MPRRR Network has grown to 90 members, which includes council, emergency relief agencies, community service organisations, and local grassroots groups such as the Men's Shed and local seniors' groups. Both the MPRRR Network and the Council's MEMPC are chaired by the Municipal Recovery Manager, which allows for connection and sharing between the two entities.

The MPRRR Network has fostered strong engagement across council, emergency management, the community sector and grassroots groups. A focus on building relationships has been central to this success.

The MPRRR Network is convened by council officers with longstanding relationships in the community and a background in inclusion and community partnerships. A key practice of the convenors is allowing sufficient time for building relationships, including capacity to engage individually with leaders of organisations who are new to the network or experience leadership change.

Additional practices by the Network's conveners include:
- Being clear with organisations on what they can offer the network, and what the network can provide to them. This is particularly important for grassroots community groups that aren't focused on emergencies in their day-to-day.
- Focusing on preparedness and resilience-building, not just response and recovery.
- Being "always on". The Network does this by fostering and encouraging sharing amongst members and regular communication in between quarterly meetings.
- A culture of celebration and continuous learning, with reflections on the collaborative work that has emerged as a key part of the quarterly network meeting agendas.

The MPRRR Network has already provided significant value to community, community groups, and council. Some of the successes include:
- Collaborative responses to emergency incidents within the local area that would not have been possible without the Network. This has included grassroots groups stepping in to support community members where council and other services are not available, and rapid deployment of multiple services to support community members where previously this may have taken several days to organise.
- Guiding and informing the development of Council's resources and program rollout within the local area. For instance, Council developed resources and heat relief packs for rough sleepers following conversations with the local information support centres.
- High engagement with preparedness programs led by emergency service agencies amongst a broad range of community groups.

Enabler: Local, place-based leadership and governance

Place-based and local leadership is essential to successful collaborations for disaster resilience because local actors are best placed to plan and prepare effectively for their local community.[76]

Local, place-based leadership for resilience goes beyond participation of local actors in formal and informal emergency management arrangements. It requires "shifting power downwards"[77] such that governance and decision-making is devolved to the most local level practical.[78] Local and place-based leadership must centre Indigenous knowledges that have the capacity to "broaden and deepen understanding the lands and seas in relation to disaster management practices."[79]

In practice, this can look like local governance groups composed of a range of place-based organisations that have decision-making power over disaster resilience initiatives implemented by government. It can also involve project collaborations or networks that are less formal but linked to emergency management processes, such as a local resilience network with representatives who also participate on the MEMPC.

A local-first approach is important in reaching key cohorts. Speaking about supporting carers to build disaster resilience, one practitioner explained that, because "carers and the person they care for are often connected to their community in unique ways, we need to support them through those existing connections."[80] This generally involves working "in local areas with existing services and programs, for example, neighbourhood houses, council programs, and local community services."[81]

The importance of leadership by local communities in emergency management and resilience-building is well established in the literature[82] and is a focus of policy frameworks at the international, Commonwealth, Victorian and local levels.

International frameworks such as the Sendai framework, Paris Agreement, and Sustainable Development Goals emphasise the importance of local-level leadership to reduce disaster risk and ensure effective climate adaptation.[83] Local, place-based leadership is also consistent with the principle of shared responsibility and the "all emergencies, all communities" approach that guides national and Victorian-level policy.

The Victorian Government has also created a framework for place-based approaches beyond emergency management and climate policy, given that these approaches can tackle entrenched and systemic challenges.[84]

The case studies highlighted in this report demonstrate that local leadership and governance is often operationalised in practice through place-based collaborations between community sector, emergency services and government actors.

Place-based community sector organisations have a critical role to play as these organisations have the capacity to harness the strengths, needs and priorities of the communities they work with to inform resilience initiatives.

> "The beautiful thing about having such broad community representation is that there are so many things that we can do to problem solve and work together."
> Local government research participant

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Traditional Owner organisations, Neighbourhood Houses, multicultural community organisations, community health, community legal organisations, disability advocacy and rights organisations, financial counsellors, women's organisations, and many others play a particularly important role in facilitating local community leadership of collaborations for disaster resilience.

These organisations are uniquely placed due to their existing and trusted relationships with the communities they work with, and generally work in ways that are agile and responsive to local needs.[85]

Centring Indigenous knowledges and self-determination for Aboriginal communities

Indigenous knowledges are globally recognised as critical to building disaster resilience.[86] As identified by researchers at the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience program, "Indigenous healing knowledges forms part of a distinctly Indigenous resilience" and "understanding healing-informed approaches should be a clear priority for the disaster recovery sector."[87]

The impacts of ongoing colonisation, including "distorted relations" or power, has led to an absence of Indigenous peoples in mainstream disaster research and policy.[88] Research conducted by First Nations researchers has found that Aboriginal people in Victoria have experienced systemic racism and culturally unsafe practices during disaster response and recovery.[89] Research has also demonstrated the disproportionate and distinct Aboriginal experience of disasters such as the Black Summer bushfires.[90]

"There have been reports of a lack of cultural safety and cultural considerations in the way that emergency management services have gone about clean up after disasters. There has been insufficient consultation and collaboration in preparation, response and recovery."[91]

Aboriginal organisations "know their communities and Country best."[92] To support Aboriginal communities' existing healing knowledges and resilience, and to address the disproportionate impacts of disasters on Aboriginal people, it is critical that all actors in the disaste resilience landscape work to address culturally unsafe and racist practices. In addition, it is critical to provide self-determination and sufficient resourcing for Aboriginal communities and organisations in the context of disasters.

Enabler: Local, place-based leadership and governance

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler

Being highly responsive to local priorities and needs: Successful collaborations such as the MCEN and Mount Alexander Connectors programs are highly responsive to network members, often working together on initiatives related to social connection or public health that are raised by members but may not have been identified as part of the initial project design. This requires flexibility, and is essential to ensuring collaborations are effective, make best use of local knowledge, and remain relevant to members.

Valuing and centring Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge: This remains a gap for many non-First Nations-led collaborations. Building cultural competence and relationships at a local level is an important first step, and there is also a need to properly resource Aboriginal organisations for their role leading disaster resilience. Partnerships should not be extractive but rather support self-determination and sovereignty for First Nations-led resilience.

Facilitating involvement by a broad range of local actors, including those without paid organisational roles: Engaging with existing local leaders outside of the community and emergency management sector workforce is essential for building genuine local leadership, and models for doing this have been developed by several collaborations working with CALD communities. This includes using existing networks to identify leaders within specific multicultural communities, then supporting involvement by these leaders through an honorarium model.

Utilising a community development approach: Local, place-based community sector organisations such as Neighbourhood Houses are able to bring a strengths-based community development approach to collaborations for disaster resilience. This approach contrasts with a more traditional emergency management approach, and has the potential to create more effective long-term community resilience if built into the design of collaborations.

Policy recommendations

5 Government and philanthropic funders should increase resourcing for key place-based organisations to recognise the ongoing work they already do in building community resilience, including Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations and community sector organisations. Funding for Aboriginal-led approaches could be allocated through the Self-Determination Fund for the benefit of the First Peoples of Victoria.

6 Government and philanthropic funders should consider ways for smaller, grassroots organisations to access disaster risk reduction, preparedness and recovery funding programs. Often small, place-based organisations are volunteer-run and have the potential to deliver highly effective resilience programs, but may find meeting funding application timelines and requirements challenging, particularly during the recovery phase of a disaster. Strategies to assist could include targeted capacity-building support for smaller organisations, simplification of grant applications, translation of grant information, and outreach to community groups regarding grant opportunities.

7 Local and Victorian governments should seek to increase participation of local, place-based organisations in formal emergency management processes. At the local government level, this could include increased representation of place-based organisations on MEMPCs. At the state, regional and local level, this also includes linking formal emergency management arrangements to informal local resilience initiatives through participation, regular forums, or other appropriate mechanisms.

Tapping into existing community leadership for resilience through the Multicultural Community Engagement Network

The Multicultural Community Engagement Network (MCEN) is an active network of more than 160 Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community leaders and bicultural workers, alongside more than 60 organisations, in the South East of Melbourne.

The MCEN began as a place-based response to Covid-19 and its disproportionate impacts on CALD communities. It has since grown to encompass additional projects focused on health, the economy, the environment, and extreme heat.

The Network formed through a partnership in November 2020 between the City of Casey, the City of Greater Dandenong and enliven Victoria, with Cardinia Shire joining in 2021. enliven Victoria provides backbone support for the MCEN.

The MCEN is reaching a diverse and growing number of communities. The network has represented 36 ethno-specific communities, speaking 62 diverse languages. Some of the key achievements of the MCEN include:

- Reaching 18,168 people at 431 Covid-19 vaccine information sessions;
- Publishing over 14,000 communication initiatives in multiple languages;
- Providing over 17,000 food relief packages;
- Distributing isolation and emergency kits to over 5,900 people;
- Informing the approach of key agencies to Covid-19 including local government, state government, and Monash Health;
- Contributing to the South East Alcohol and Drug Catchment Plan;
- Providing a cultural perspective for the establishment of mental health support services in Cranbourne; and
- Involvement in the Heat Heroes in Action project that has enabled community leaders to deliver culturally-relevant and appropriate extreme heat information sessions.

These successes have been enabled through innovative practices of the MCEN, combined with the opportunities created through state and local government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. These include:

- The MCEN's grassroots approach, including membership within the network of both bicultural workers in established organisations, such as Neighbourhood Houses, and community champions, who are volunteer leaders and receive an honorarium or payment when project funding allows.
- Community leadership of the network, including being highly responsive to the issues raised by members to guide direction and activities.
- Operating as a flat hierarchy, with all contributions valued equally. This has allowed participating government representatives to hear directly from the community.
- Willingness by local councils to pool resources and work together, recognising that multicultural communities are not bounded by LGA boundaries.
- Offering multiple ways to engage beyond the MCEN's fortnightly meetings, including an email list, WhatsApp group, and trainings.

Enabler: A focus on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness

The importance of focusing on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness, was highlighted through several of the case studies in this report. Collaborations that began in the acute phase of responding to Covid-19, such as the Mount Alexander Connectors program and Multicultural Community Engagement Network, were able to continue beyond the recovery phase by pivoting to a focus on broader resilience and preparedness work within the community.

> "We saw this opportunity once those LGA-based recovery groups wound up, which they did because the funding ran out...we wanted to keep the impetus of those groups going, keep those connections between people."
> Community sector research participant

In other instances, such as the MPRRR Network, risk reduction and preparedness is the driving purpose of the collaboration, but the collaborations are designed to become spaces to support relief and recovery in the event of emergencies.

Across these collaborations, interviewees highlighted a number of benefits of focusing efforts of collaborations on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness:

- Investment in preparedness and resilience mitigates the impact of emergencies on communities, community services, and emergency services in the long run.
- Focusing on preparedness allows for collaborations to be "always on", retaining impetus beyond response and recovery periods, and staying relevant to local needs.

- Forging relationships outside of emergency periods means that, in the event of an emergency or disaster, collaboration can work more smoothly because existing trust and relationships exist. This also allows organic collaborations between local actors to emerge beyond formal emergency response and recovery arrangements.
- Collaborations outside of emergency periods generally have more capacity to focus on building the capability of individual collaboration members through peer learning and sharing resources, which also reduces duplication.
- Collective preparedness projects build a culture of celebration and sense of progress that can help sustain collaborations through emergency response and recovery phases.

The importance of focusing on preparedness is well established in the disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation literature, with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction estimating that every USD1 spent on prevention and risk reduction can save up to USD15 in post-disaster recovery.[93] The Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding conducted modelling that demonstrated economic benefits if more investment is focused on risk reduction and resilience.[94]

The most effective way to increase preparedness efforts is to integrate them into ongoing resilience activities that can address recovery, relief, risk reduction, and preparedness in a locally responsive and flexible way. This recognises that resilience is a continual process, and with increasing disasters due to climate change, many communities are involved in recovering and preparedness simultaneously, and there is a need to build back better and fairer to increase future resilience.

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler

Use of scenario exercises: Many collaborations talked about the effectiveness of using scenarios as a core tool for building preparedness. In some cases, a single scenario exercise resulted in collaborative partnerships forged between participants.

Peer-learning and sharing of resources: One of the most valuable aspects of collaboration outside of emergency periods is the capacity of collaborations to reduce duplication through the sharing of resources and peer learning. Many organisations interviewed felt that duplication is a major challenge for organisations looking to build disaster resilience, and reducing this duplication should be an outcome of collaborations.

Designing collaborations to be fit-for-purpose through all phases of the disaster resilience cycle: Successful collaborations that began in the recovery phase of disasters found ways to pivot to preparedness work, often in response to feedback from grassroots leaders. Collaborations that were designed to focus on preparedness have also designed ways to pivot to response and recovery when needed, such as linking to local council emergency management officers or having a subcommittee structure for relevant network members during a disaster.

Working with local emergency services on preparedness activities: Many of the collaboration case studies worked closely with emergency service agencies on preparedness initiatives. This is mutually beneficial for emergency services, who can better tailor programs to local context, and organisations and community members, who are able to build capacity.

Policy recommendations

8 In addition to supporting an ongoing resilience workforce, the Commonwealth and Victorian governments should increase investment in risk reduction, preparedness and resilience initiatives. Increased investment in risk reduction and preparedness reduces the impacts of disasters on our communities and offers much greater return on investment compared with recovery funding. This should include increased focus on social infrastructure, and ensuring that recovery programs allow communities to harness resources to build back better and fairer.

CASE STUDY

Building local resilience and preparedness through the Climate Partnerships project

The Climate Partnerships project is coordinated by Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places and involves two place-based collaborations: one in Campaspe, convened by ARC Justice, and the other in Yarra Ranges, convened by the Eastern Community Legal Centre. The project is supported by the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

The Climate Partnerships project began in 2024 and is funded by the Australian Government through the Disaster Ready Fund. It supports community organisations to increase their resilience to the local impacts of climate change and disasters through coalition building, collaborative planning and collective action.

The project aims to:

• Build an understanding of how climate change and disasters can create and perpetuate social inequities.

• Recognise the value of diverse organisational knowledge in identifying local priorities and need.

• Create awareness of the vulnerabilities of community service organisations to disaster and climate risks.

• Design and implement a 'Collaborative Action Plan', which will articulate a shared vision and guide for strategic, place-based action on disaster and climate change resilience.

Both regional collaborations – in Campaspe and the Yarra Ranges – have shared processes that are tailored to respond to their local context and needs. The project highlights the importance of collaboration and social capital in building local disaster resilience. This is supported through the Climate Partnerships project through collective activities such as scenario thinking, group model building and collaborative action planning. The project builds on lessons developed through the Mobilising Climate Just and Resilient Communities in Melbourne's West project, led by Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places.

One of the first activities within the project involved a workshop with local organisations where they were taken through a range of guided exercises, exploring the potential impacts of disasters on local community and service delivery infrastructure. At this workshop the local organisations were asked to identify actions that could be taken to strengthen organisational responses to disasters and build community resilience. In the evaluation of this scenario-based workshop, 100% of organisations in Yarra Ranges felt the workshop had provided opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

The project also shows the importance of place-based leadership in the design and implementation of resilience collaborations. While each region follows similar methodologies, they are tailored to local context and needs and led by local organisations. The project recognises the multiple and diverse climate change impacts felt at a local level. While the project in Melbourne's west focused on heat, climate resilience, and health equity. In Campaspe the focus includes, riverine and flash flooding, storm events and heat waves, in a predominantly rural environment whilst in Yarra Ranges it includes, but is not limited to, bush fire, storms, flash flooding, landslips and heatwave events in both urban and rural settings and their challenging interface.

Enabler: A clear, shared purpose developed by and for the community

A clear, shared purpose is required to ensure that momentum and commitment to collaborations are sustained and can move beyond coordination to collective action. The time and resource constraints faced by participating organisations and community members means that "without some kind of central organising mission, people stop prioritising it."[95]

Shared purpose, goals and theory of change have been identified as a key enabler of collaborations for disaster resilience[96] and place-based collaborations more broadly.[97] Previous VCOSS research has identified the need for shared outcomes to be "mutually beneficial" to support sustained investment of partners in a collaboration.[98]

> "[Organisations need to] understand why you're reaching out to them, what they can bring to the table, and what they can gain."
> Community sector research participant

The interviews identified that this development of a shared purpose is particularly important when building collaborations for preparedness, outside of response and recovery efforts, when "it's not quite so clear what you're collaborating about".[99]

The purpose of shared collaborations must be responsive to specific local contexts and needs of the community. Developing a shared purpose and theory of change for collaborations for disaster resilience must therefore work together with developing local, place-based leadership and governance.

> "Whatever is happening in the community, whatever is important, and the things that community organisations are seeing on the ground – that's what we talk about."
> Local government research participant

Interviews also highlighted the importance of co-designing the purpose and goals of collaborations with particular community cohorts who are at higher risk or with lived experience of emergencies. Co-design and valuing lived experience is needed to "address implicit bias, discrimination and accessibility issues that may otherwise limit the effectiveness of resilience programs."[100]

Co-design is also important to build a sense of shared responsibility and ownership within collaborations, which can support long-term commitment and accountability, enhancing the outcomes of collaborative projects. Co-design of initiatives must occur in tandem with local leadership and governance of initiatives, such that those involved in designing collaborations have ongoing involvement and decision-making during implementation and evaluation.[101]

CASE STUDY

A shared purpose building social connection through the Mount Alexander Connectors program

The Mount Alexander Connectors (MAC) program was established by Mount Alexander Shire Council in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.

MAC is a network of more than 30 local community organisations who collaborate to help people maintain important connections with family, friends and community and to build new social connections and networks of support in their local communities. MAC works to build resilience and preparedness, and in the event of emergencies can transition to a community relief and recovery committee. MAC is chaired by the Mount Alexander Shire Council Community Projects Officer.

The focus on social connectedness and combatting social isolation is a unique feature of the program that addresses a gap in Australia's approach to disaster resilience. While studies have found that social capital and connection build resilience,[102] in Australia the vast majority of funding goes towards the economic and built environment domains.[103] Within the broad focus area of social connection, MAC priorities and projects emerge from the network based on what is happening within the community at a grassroots level.

Through regular in-person and online meetings, MAC has resulted in local organisations sharing knowledge about what is happening in the community, collaborating on projects to deliver better outcomes, and building their knowledge about the supports and services available in the shire. MAC has also informed the Council's approach on local issues such as homelessness and rough sleeping.

Some of the achievements of MAC include:

- Delivery of the Mount Alexander Community Pantry and coordination and promotion of an efficient and accessible food relief process.
- Coordination of supports during Covid-19, including brokerage, medical assistance, provision of food, clothing, bedding, accommodation, and psychosocial support, resulting in better outcomes for community members with more complex needs. MAC also managed social connectedness and healthy living activities like the walking tracks project and online activities.
- Established local partnerships to plan for and deliver a drive-through Covid-19 vaccinations facility.
- Coordination of efforts to address homelessness and rough sleeping in Mount Alexander Shire, resulting in new collaborative projects such as the Help at Hand info map, an upcoming Hygiene Station, and securing a new 12-month position within council to work on this issue.
- Building relationships with the local Solomon Islands community through a collaboratively organised welcome event, donations drive, connections to local services, and bike donation program with Victoria Police.
- Subcommittees of members, including one focused on mental health and working with Council to provide Lifeline mental health services in the Shire, and another focused on local cool and hot weather health.
- Enhancing emergency readiness by providing members with information on current emergency events and planning for upcoming weather conditions, warnings, alerts and advice.
- Many additional new partnerships, with three-quarters of MAC members forming new partnerships through the network in 2023.

The Mount Alexander Connectors program has succeeded due to the strength of relationships between members, held together by a chair with longstanding relationships and trust in the area. This has enabled the network to be responsive to local needs and facilitate open and honest conversations. Mount Alexander Shire Council's investment in this convening capacity for the network, and recognition of the importance of supporting disaster risk reduction and preparedness, has been a critical enabler of its success.

Enabler: A clear, shared purpose developed by and for the community

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler

Ensuring clarity of purpose at the outset and during collaborations: Convenors of collaborations spoke about the need to provide clarity of purpose at the outset of collaborations, and regularly review this with collaboration participants. This needs to be balanced with remaining responsive to local priorities and needs.

Embedding co-design alongside local, place-based governance of collaborations: Co-design with community members – particularly those with lived experience of emergencies or who experience higher risks during specific emergencies – works in tandem with local, place-based governance of collaborations. This requires building breadth and diversity of participants in collaborations, including grassroots organisations and leaders without formal roles.

Securing buy-in from organisational leadership: Practitioners involved in collaborations spoke about the benefit of having organisational leadership involved in setting the purpose, goals, and theory of change of collaborations to build long-term commitment.

Building accountability mechanisms with community: Some interviewees spoke about the need for accountability to local community groups and individuals who may not be part of collaborations, to ensure relevance to local priorities. This can include ensuring that feedback from service delivery programs is used to inform collaborative projects.

Policy recommendations

9 Government and philanthropic funders should provide long-term and flexible funding agreements that allow co-design and capability building to be embedded in collaborative projects. This typically requires multi-year funding agreements as well as flexibility to shift project outcomes and activities throughout the funding period. There is also a need for increased funding to build capability for collaborative strategic planning, implementation and evaluation. The Victorian Government's Empowerment Fund provides one such model that could be built upon.

10 All levels of government should embed co-design and collaborative approaches in the design of disaster resilience policy and programs. It is particularly important to include co-design by people at higher risk during different emergencies, people with lived experience of disasters, and those who experience poverty and disadvantage.

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