



Collaboration for Disaster Resilience

Research summary

APRIL 2025

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.



Contributors to this research

VCOSS acknowledges the tireless work being done by community organisations across Victoria to build resilience in collaboration with communities, governments and emergency management agencies.

VCOSS would like to thank the many community sector leaders who shared their knowledge, experiences and ideas in contributing to this project. We would particularly like to thank participants from the following organisations:

Anglicare Victoria; ARC Justice; Carers Victoria; Country Fire Authority; Consumer Action Law Centre; Eastern Community Legal Centre; Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria; Enliven Victoria (a service of Each); Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Ovens Murray Area, East Division (COPL); Gippsland Lakes Complete Health; Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places; Loch Sport Community House; Mornington Peninsula Shire; Mount Alexander Shire Council; Mount Alexander Shire Disability Advocacy Group; Upper Murray Regional Neighbourhood House Network; Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service; Wimmera West Grampians Neighbourhood House Network; and Yarram Neighbourhood House.

Background to the research

In 2024, VCOSS conducted research to capture lessons from disaster resilience collaborations between the community sector, government and emergency management agencies in Victoria, and identify actions to strengthen collaboration.

The full report, *Collaboration for Resilience*, is based on interviews with practitioners from 19 organisations, attendance at meetings and workshops held by collaborations, and a literature review. The full report showcases six case studies of collaborations across a diversity of geographies, emergencies, and project aims:

- **Climate Partnerships Project** – a partnership between Jesuit Social Services’ Centre for Just Places, ARC Justice, Eastern Community Legal Centre, and the Federation of Community Legal Centres.
- **Emergency Planning Advice Service** – a collaboration between CFA, Australian Red Cross and the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry.
- Gippsland Lakes Complete Health’s **recovery casework**
- **Mornington Peninsula Resilience, Relief and Recovery Network** – convened by Mornington Peninsula Shire Council.
- **Mount Alexander Connectors program** – convened by Mount Alexander Shire Council.
- **Multicultural Community Engagement Network** – supported by enliven Victoria (part of Each).

This summary document outlines the key findings from this research, including the positive outcomes of collaborations, challenges encountered, four enablers of collaboration, and actions that can be taken to strengthen collaboration.

“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

Positive outcomes of collaborations

- **Supporting those at higher risk and with complex needs.** A key achievement of collaborations led by the community sector is demonstrated better outcomes for those at higher risk and with more complex needs during disasters.
- **Increased capability through peer learning and resource-sharing.** Participants in the research 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.
- **Shaping 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.
- **Building preparedness and long-term resilience.** Many of the participants in the research reported both community and community sector preparedness and long-term resilience increasing as a result of collaborations.

Challenges encountered

- **Barriers in the funding and regulatory environment.** These include a lack of accessibility of grant programs to smaller organisations, and in some cases, a lack of meaningful participation of community organisations in formal emergency management arrangements.
- **Staff turnover within organisations involved in collaborations.** This is particularly due to short-term funding agreements.
- **Unequal power dynamics.** Of particular significance is the racism and “distorted relations” experienced by Aboriginal peoples and organisations involved in disaster resilience.¹
- **The increasing severity and frequency of disasters.** This stretches the capacity of community organisations and creates a near-constant cycle of response and recovery.

¹ B. Williamson and J. Weir, “Indigenous peoples and natural hazard research, policy and practice in southern temperate Australia: an agenda for change”, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, October 2021, p. 63.

Enablers of disaster resilience collaboration

The research identifies four key enablers of successful collaboration for disaster resilience:



Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions

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



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. Local, place-based leadership for resilience goes beyond participation of local actors in formal and informal emergency management arrangements. It requires “shifting power downwards” such that governance and decision-making is devolved to the most local level practical.



A focus on the whole cycle of resilience, including preparedness

The importance of focusing on preparedness is well established in the disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation literature. The most effective way to increase preparedness efforts is for collaborations to integrate this 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.



A clear shared purpose created 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. This can help overcome the time and resource constraints faced by participating organisations and community members by providing clarity and a clear mission to work towards.

Actions to strengthen collaboration

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 the four identified 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.



Enabler: Strong, ongoing relationships that span sectors and jurisdictions

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler:

- **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 strength 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.** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities, and women are often excluded from emergency management collaborations, and successful collaborations ensure inclusive practices that enable leadership from members of these communities.
- **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 include 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.

Policy recommendations:

- 1 The Commonwealth and Victorian governments should co-fund an ongoing disaster resilience workforce within the community sector. A permanent resilience workforce is the best way to address staff turnover 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, 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 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and other Indigenous-led initiatives to be able to participate in both First Peoples-led spaces and regional and government networks.



Enabler: Local, place-based leadership and governance

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler:

- **Being highly responsive to local priorities and needs.** Successful collaborations are highly responsive to network members, often working together on initiatives raised by members but may not have been identified as part of the initial project design.
- **Valuing and centring Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge.** 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 from 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.
- **Utilising a community development approach.** The community sector's strength based community development approach contrasts with traditional emergency management, 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.
- 6 Government and philanthropic funders should consider ways for smaller, grassroots organisations to access disaster risk reduction, preparedness and recovery funding programs. This could include translations, outreach, and simplification of application processes and acquittal requirements.
- 7 Local and Victorian governments should seek to increase participation of local, place-based organisations in formal emergency management processes. This could include linking resilience initiatives to formal emergency management arrangements and increased participation of community groups on Municipal Emergency Management Planning committees.



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

Practices by collaborations that support this enabler:

- **Use of scenario exercises.** Scenario exercises are a powerful tool used by collaborations for disaster resilience.
- **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.
- **Designing collaborations to be fit-for-purpose through all phases of disaster resilience.** 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.
- **Working with local emergency services on preparedness activities.** This is mutually beneficial for emergency services, who can better tailor programs the local context, and organisations and community members, who are able to build capacity.

Policy recommendations:

- 8 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.



Enabler: A clear shared purpose created 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.
- **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.
- **Securing buy-in from organisational leadership.** Practitioners involved in collaborations spoke about the benefit of having organisational leadership involved setting the purpose, goals, and theory of change of collaborations to build long-term commitment.
- **Building accountability mechanisms with community.** 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.
- 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.

Further information

To access this full research report, visit
<https://vcoss.org.au/projects/disaster-resilience/>



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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.

