

FIRE to FLOURISH



Strength through community-led action



AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE:

Community-led disaster resilience

Executive Summary

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the lands on which we work and live across Australia. This report was created by people living on Bundjalung, Boon Wurrung, Cammeraygal, Gadigal, Gumbaynggirr, Jukembal, Ngoorabul, Peramangk, Wathaurong, Wurundjeri, Yaegl, Yuin and Yuin-Monaro Country.

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

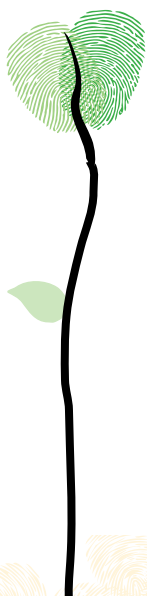
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2019/20 Summer bushfire season remains firmly etched in the recent memories of Australians. The impacts of these bushfires included tens of millions of hectares burned, thousands of properties destroyed, widespread environmental destruction and significant, long-term trauma for people who lived through them.

Among the most affected communities were those experiencing long-term disadvantage, who are therefore likely to experience barriers to preparing for, responding to and recovering from disaster. The psychological, social, economic, ecological and infrastructural impacts of the bushfires, and the challenging recovery journey, can further entrench the experience of disadvantage for communities.

Indigenous Australians were particularly and disproportionately affected by the bushfires. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences during and after disaster, including their engagement with institutional services, are influenced by their experience of historical, cultural and intergenerational trauma. Indigenous Australians are also at risk of being overlooked in many aspects of disaster response and recovery efforts without a seat at the table alongside other agencies or community members.

The 2019/20 Summer bushfires experience also saw Australian communities come together to lead local response and recovery efforts. This form of collective leadership and action is powerful



and demonstrates the untapped potential for communities to create and lead significant change. It holds particular promise to better support communities experiencing disadvantage before and after bushfire.

The Paul Ramsay Foundation, Monash University, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation and Metal Manufactures Pty Ltd have come together to explore the question: *How can community leadership and action shape bushfire recovery efforts and build long-term disaster resilience?* And in doing so, is it possible for the capabilities, social capital and agency of local communities to be strengthened in ways that can disrupt cycles of entrenched disadvantage and improve people's lives?

We have conducted systematic literature reviews, and examined Australian disaster resilience policy, practices and the numerous independent and commissioned Commonwealth and State Government reviews of the 2019/20 bushfires. We have also engaged with people and communities that lived through these bushfires. Through this work, it is clear that a shifting paradigm in disaster management is emerging. To contribute to this

“How can community leadership and action shape bushfire recovery efforts and build long-term disaster resilience?”

emerging paradigm, this report articulates **an agenda for community-led bushfire recovery processes that improve people's long-term resilience and wellbeing, particularly for communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage**. The philosophy of the new National Recovery and Resilience Agency reinforces the need for this agenda.

This agenda has four key themes.

1

First, there is an **emerging focus on disaster risk reduction**, moving from a reactive 'crisis response' to a more proactive 'disaster risk management' and 'mitigation'. Disaster risk is the combination of natural hazards, exposure and vulnerability to those hazards. Risk reduction strategies should therefore be multifactorial, focused on eliminating, reducing or mitigating (1) hazards, (2) exposure, and (3) reducing vulnerability and increasing capacity through the lens of resilience building and community development. These should be developed with an understanding of 'compound disasters', whereby disasters occur alongside other societal stressors that increase a community's vulnerability.

2

Second, **there is confirmation of a re-focus on resilience** through recovery processes, recognising the need to 'build back better' in local communities affected by disaster. This resilience focus would be strengthened by including social, relational and wellbeing considerations, broadening the typical agenda of rebuilding critical infrastructure and housing stock. Communities need to develop collective skills to cope, adapt, learn and transform, helping them to be better prepared for the next disaster or other collective challenge. Effectively prosecuting a resilience agenda relies on (1) recognising that bushfire and other disaster impacts are experienced and responded to in highly local ways, and (2) improving the resilience capacities of individuals, communities and institutions.



3

Third, there is an **emerging focus on community-centred and community-led responses** that are tailored to the needs

and priorities of local communities to improve disaster recovery and build long-term resilience. Importantly, disaster event and subsequent recovery processes are part of ongoing community development trajectories. New models and methods for understanding, aligning and strengthening community development trajectories through disaster recovery must respond to the particular needs and priorities of communities affected by bushfire and other disasters.

4

There remains a need to **give greater attention to disadvantage and vulnerability**. While there is recognition

that the relative vulnerability or resilience of individuals or communities depends on access to a range of resources (material and otherwise), Australia's disaster management sector has had little systematic engagement with the diverse situations and needs of communities experiencing disadvantage. As a nation, we need to better understand how to enable and build resilience in communities facing structural disadvantage such that future disasters do not serve to further embed and increase inequities for communities or groups of individuals within them.

With crisis comes the seeds of opportunity. Just as the Banksia requires the heat of fire to germinate and flower, can we reimagine disaster recovery to be transformative in ways that help communities flourish?

Can we use the significant disruption caused by a disaster as an opportunity to reconfigure the systems that influence community development trajectories so they can be steered towards improving people's wellbeing and disaster resilience over the long term? And for people suffering long-term hardship and adversity, can this reconfiguration actually serve to break cycles of structural disadvantage?

While these questions remain untested, the key may be in an empowerment-based approach, whereby individuals and groups increase their capacity and relational power to meet their own goals, leading to emergent, transformative change within and across communities.

A community-led and strengths-based approach to disaster recovery offers a promising pathway for shifting individuals and groups from a state of vulnerability toward one of increased resilience, and potentially out of disadvantage. We refer to this as **transformative resilience** — a holistic approach to community resilience that seeks to coordinate community resources and build capacities for coping and adapting to disaster in ways that improve outcomes in the next disaster event and facilitate larger scale shifts that serve to improve community wellbeing more broadly. It represents a paradigmatic shift away from the dominant model of disaster recovery and support, which typically focuses on what individuals, groups or entire communities are lacking and is largely driven from the top down.

Evidence suggests a number of future directions are important for implementing a transformative approach to community disaster recovery and resilience:

- **Understand communities as place-based systems.** A community's resilience is the result of a community system that both shapes and is shaped by interconnected social, institutional, physical and environmental processes and structures. This broader context shapes flows of resources and power dynamics, and influences opportunities and barriers for individuals, groups and wider communities to participate in disaster recovery and resilience building processes.
- **Connect to Country.** Traditional wisdom held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities offers invaluable ways of thinking and knowing about place-based community systems. Indigenous people's understanding of Place is predicated on the relationality of all things — Place is a living thing, whether it is geographically located or located as an event in time, and fundamentally informs who we are. Documents such as the Australian and International Indigenous Design Charters outline valuable frameworks for incorporating Indigenous cultural knowledge to strengthen disaster recovery and resilience building for all Australian communities.
- **Increase communities' transformative capacities.** Coping, adaptive and transformative capacities all help to build community resilience. Coping capacities help a community in their immediate response and recovery following a disaster event. Adaptive capacities help a community to regroup and respond through experimentation and 'learning by doing' for recovery and future planning. Transformative capacities help communities drive proactive, creative and systemic change over a longer time period. They can also help address the root causes of vulnerability in communities experiencing disadvantage.

- **Strengthen local leadership and social capital.** Building authentic partnerships with community in disaster recovery efforts is essential to fostering trust, ensuring that activities address local needs and reflect community values, promoting a sense of ownership and collective leadership, and improving the likelihood of successful recovery. Significant and sustained investment in building the social capital of communities recovering from bushfire will empower them to lead their own recovery and increase their long-term wellbeing and resilience.

This report articulates **a way of thinking** about the intersections between disaster, resilience, community and entrenched disadvantage. It highlights a range of opportunities for place-based, mission-driven and research-supported policy and practice to take the next steps in Australia's ongoing collaborative efforts to improve community resilience and steer positive community development trajectories in the aftermath of bushfire and other disasters.





Strength through community-led action

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

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