Title: "The Hub" and the role of community service organisations in disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience.

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Abstract

The Creative, Community, Wellbeing and Resilience Hub (the Hub) project was a disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience initiative developed and run by Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre (BANC) in Blackheath, New South Wales. The Hub combined creative, practical, and psychosocial practices and developed an integrated, place-based, whole-of-community disaster recovery and preparedness model. The program was developed in response to recent adverse events, particularly the cumulative toll of numerous natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, and to prepare for future ones.

This paper presents an overview of the project and proposes the Hub as a model for effective community sector organisations disaster preparedness, recovery, and resilience work, drawing on reflections from the frontline CSO coordinator of the Hub as well as its evaluative report (Sidoti & Davies 2023). The paper shows that participants in the Hub program overwhelmingly benefited from their involvement in it with demonstrable improvements in community connectedness, experiences of belonging, participation in community events, and the capacities to cope and prepare. Further, the Hub is indicative of the work community sector organisations are already doing in emergency and disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience. As such, this paper argues for the effectiveness and the untapped potential of already-existing community sector organisations in all aspects of disaster work.

Conference Track

The Hub project describes a mechanism for building connectivity, wellbeing and resilience while preparing and recovering for bushfires and other disasters. As such, it successfully demonstrates an effective working model of how community and place-based organisations can creatively and collaboratively help to build stronger communities.

Introduction

The 'Creative, Community, Wellbeing and Resilience Hub' ("The Hub") project was a disaster preparation, recovery and resilience initiative delivered from January 2022 and June 2023 by Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre (BANC). It was developed in response to the '2019-2020 disaster season' (Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020: 19) of extreme bushfires and rain and storm events. In the course of project development and delivery, the Covid-19 pandemic emerged as another significant event and the Hub increasingly responded to the pandemic as well. The project was jointly funded by Commonwealth and NSW Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements through the 'Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund'.

The evaluation research of the project[1] revealed it was a successful project across all of its aims, delivering substantial improvements in Hub participants' experiences of connection, belonging, disaster preparation, and adaptive practices (Sidoti & Davies 2023). The report argued that the Hub was an effective model of community service organisations' (CSOs) potential role in disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience. This is a role that has, so far, been underutilised despite acknowledgement in research and policy documents of the importance of CSOs (Roberts et al 2021; Ingham and Redshaw 2017). This paper provides some information about the Hub project before elaborating in more depth about what the Hub project could mean for the role of CSOs in disaster preparation, recovery and resilience from the perspective of the Hub Coordinator and CSO frontline worker, Jo Davies.

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[1] Data were collected throughout the Hub program using a mixed methods methodology of surveys (n= 432) and interviews (n=15) with Hub participants. The research project received ethics approval from the Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District Ethics Committee. Participants undertook surveys before and after Hub activities. 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted, 13 with Hub participants and 2 with Hub facilitators.

Context

Academic and policy context

It is widely acknowledged that there will be increased disaster events as the result of a variable and changing climate (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience n.d., Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) 2020). There is an increasing need for disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience as a result. This need is particularly pressing for disaster-affected communities. As Gordon (2004) identifies, emergencies cause 'widespread social disruption' (p. 16), and the 'social fabric can be seen as the more important recovery resource' (p. 19). 'The unique characteristics of disasters is that they damage the community fabric', Gordon argues (2004: 19), causing what the author describes as 'debonding', a social disconnection that 'accompanies a profound disruption of the pre-existing continuity of physical, emotional, and social life' (Gordon 2004: 16). Disasters, Gordon writes, 'emphasise that communities function as wholes or systems in which the elements affect each other' (2004: 19) where 'emergencies, even those directly affecting only part of a community, initiate a series of functions activating the whole community to their consequences' (2004: 16).

This requires a community-led approach to disaster preparation, recovery and resilience, including 'reorienting emergency management towards the reconstruction of the fabric of social life' (Gordon 2004: 21). Urgent foci in supporting community recovery include redressing recent emergencies' negative impacts on participants' lives, wellbeing, health, experiences of connectedness and feelings of belonging. Strategies can include rebonding, facilitating and resourcing groups who have had similar experiences, and promoting community-based cultural events of post-disaster life, and integrating services (Gordon 2004: 21).

The disaster preparation, recovery and resilience literature identifies place-based community organisations as effective actors in disasters, especially in the light of the above context (Coles & Buckle 2004; CSIRO 2020; Ingham & Redshaw 2017; Massola et al. 2022; Pascoe 2022). This approach utilises the organisations long-term connections with and knowledge of the community (Council of Australian Governments (COAG) 2011; Department of Home Affairs 2019) and 'can increase efficiencies through greater cross-learning, less duplication of effort through common solutions, shared platforms and tools, lower transaction costs, and better alignment of policies and plans' (CSIRO 2020: 25, see also Pascoe 2022).

There has also been a 'fundamental shift' (Chapple et al. 2017) in government policy at all levels towards "shared responsibility" across all sectors. This includes the community sector. As Massola et al. (2022) describe, 'shared responsibility in disasters requires governments, at all levels, and emergency management services to work in genuine partnership with local communities, including place-based CSOs (p. 4). The concept of "shared responsibility" in disaster response, recovery, and resilience stems from the international agreement of the Sendai Framework (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015). In the Australian context, this approach is reflected in the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (COAG 2011), which states,

> Many not-for-profit organisations have experience and expertise in areas including community engagement and education, and various facets of service provision. Importantly, their existing networks and structures reach far into communities, and can effect real change.
>
> (p. 9)

The National Strategy (COAG 2011) identifies several priority outcomes in relation to communities and CSOs which include a focus on utilising existing networks and structures and the need for cross-sector partnerships. The Strategy also reflects the ongoing and long-term needs of communities, including for future disasters, and recognises the role CSOs are likely to play in the immediate recovery phase of a disaster. The Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (Department of Home Affairs 2019) also includes the community sector as part of the framework.

Community context

Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre serves the Upper Blue Mountains within the local government area of the Blue Mountains. This area encompasses the towns of Blackheath, Mount Victoria, Medlow Bath, Megalong Valley, Bell, Mount Wilson, Mount Irvine, and Mount Tomah. There are approximately 5,918 residents across these towns. All of these towns are categorised as Inner Regional. The location is geographically challenging, with towns spread across relatively removed locations, limited public transport in some areas and non-existent public transport in others, and limited road access to some villages.

The Hub project was developed in response to the '2019-2020 disaster season' (Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements 2020: 19) of extreme bushfires and rain and storm events, which were closely followed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These are 'compound events' (Climate Council 2023: 32), where multiple events occur simultaneously or in quick succession and their 'impacts are compounded, resulting in greater

cumulative stress on communities and the environment and less time to recover between disasters' (Climate Council 2023: 32). Since August 2019, the Blue Mountains has been declared a Natural Disaster Area six times, been subject to the highest level of stay-at-home orders for a total of 146 days (almost 21 weeks) and navigated the ongoing implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the most significant effects of the cascading disasters experienced in the Upper Mountains was the community response to the 2019- 2020 disaster season, which brought people together. This was almost immediately interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which isolated people from one another and support systems at a time of great need.

The Hub project

The Hub project delivered a program of events, workshops, and activities focused on social connectedness, practical support, education (including property preparation before bushfire seasons), and psychosocial and physical wellbeing between January 2022 and June 2023. The project consisted of 217 workshops and events run over 18 months between January 2022 and June 2023. These workshops and events were attended by 2,586 people.

Select examples of programs and events included: art therapy, art play, the Inkblots Writing group, community resilience psychoeducation sessions; "Bright Ideas to Save on Household Energy Bills"; youth film-making workshops and graffiti workshops; family workshops such as bee workshops, "Learn More About Aboriginal Culture" workshops, community projects such as the Blackheath Mural, and financial contributions to volunteer-led community projects.

The Hub model expanded dominant approaches to disaster preparation, recovery and resilience hubs' focus on practical supports by combining practical support with a focus on psychosocial support through four "streams" of activities: creative activities, community activities, wellbeing activities, and resilience activities. Some of the program was offered in partnership with other community organisations, which delivered additional benefits including: building on and extending existing relationships; creating new partnerships with the longer potential for ongoing collaboration; preventing the duplication of programs that may incur reduced participant attendance and/ or competition by providers; ensuring that funding is utilised to the utmost extent; providing an opportunity for more dynamic program creation; connecting people to other services and networks in the community.

The project was grounded in a commitment to a consultative program that delivered community-driven events as requested by the local community to meet their specific needs. The Hub was developed using a strengths-based and consultative framework to engage the community, maximising their experiences, knowledge, and capacities in order to strengthen and support the existing networks and resources. Of particular importance was a responsiveness to the specific needs of the Upper Mountains community. This responsiveness includes responding to the barriers to community connectedness and resilience due to vulnerabilities associated with age, challenging economic circumstances and/or mental health issues and understanding entrenched disadvantage, geographical isolation, and vulnerability. As such, the project was developed in consultation with the community to ensure the Hub was fit-for-purpose and accessible. A survey was distributed to community members to ascertain the preferred content, delivery model, location, times, and days, what barriers potential participants may be experiencing and how the Hub could support people to mitigate those barriers.

Outcomes of the Hub project

Research into the Hub revealed two important insights:

1. There is a need for community support around disasters

2. The Hub is an effective model in providing that support.

The project's data clearly indicated the need for support for communities affected by natural disasters and the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants described experiences of disconnection from the community and other people, isolation, and decreased wellbeing due to the cumulative disasters and Covid-19 pandemic. As Gordon (2004) identifies, emergencies cause 'widespread social disruption' (p. 16), and redressing that disruption through improving the 'social fabric can be seen as the more important recovery resource' (p. 19). This social disruption was clearly reflected in the data.

The Hub was a successful model in redressing this social disruption, with benefits to individuals and an overall improvement in the social fabric Gordon (2004). There were demonstrable positive impacts in every evaluative category. Data revealed significant improvements in participants' experiences of community connectedness, belonging, community participation, ability to cope, and adaptivity (see Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). Overwhelmingly (over 97% of responses), participants in the Hub enjoyed the experience and found it very or extremely useful, and said they would recommend it to others. 89% agreed they had learnt or developed a skill. The success of the Hub offers an insight into the effectiveness of an integrated approach to disaster preparation, recovery and resilience.
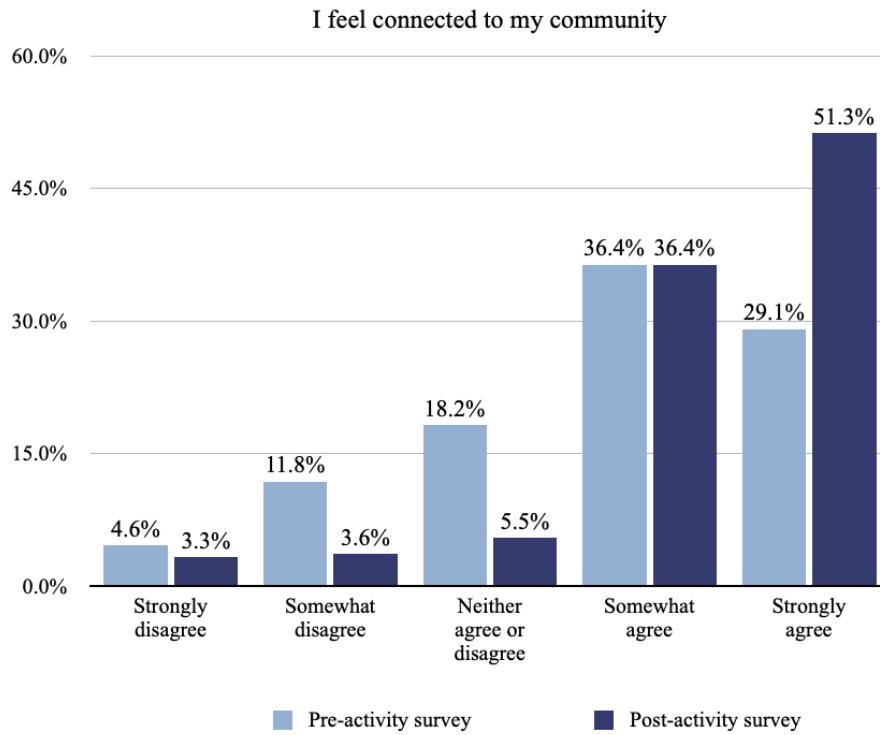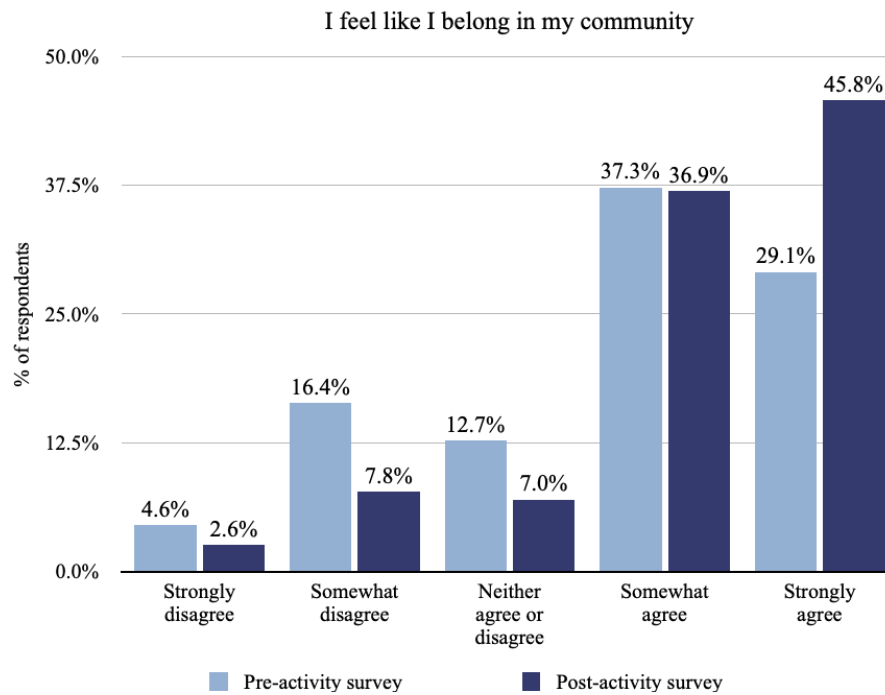
Figure 1 Before and after: community connectedness

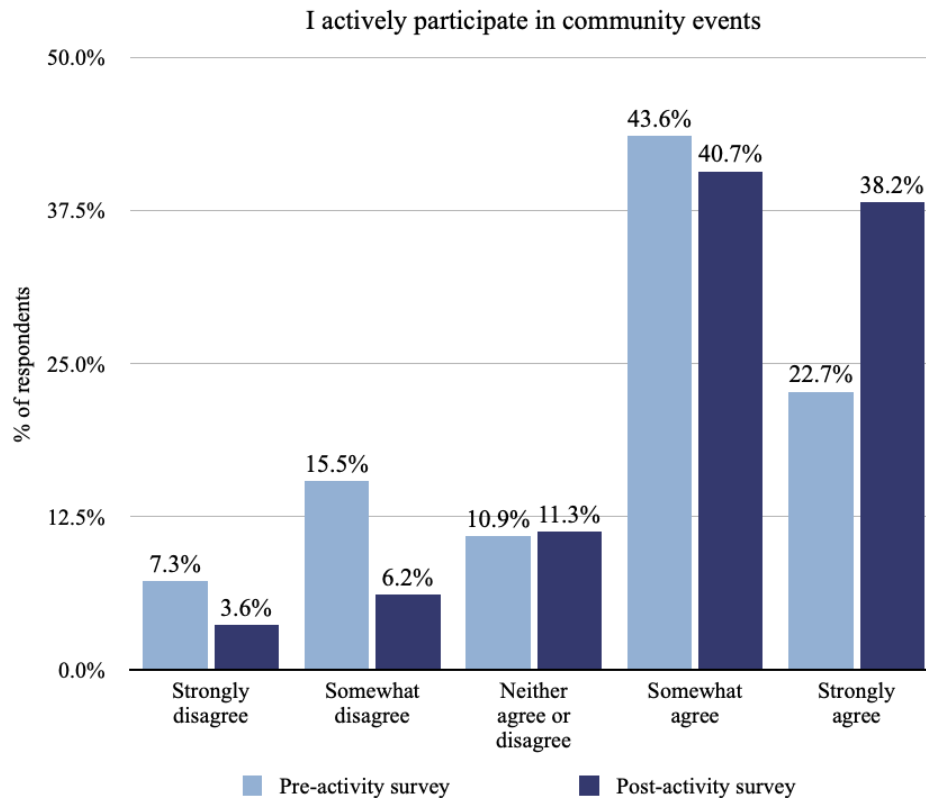*Figure 2 Before and after: belonging*

I actively participate in community events

Figure 3 Before and after: community participation

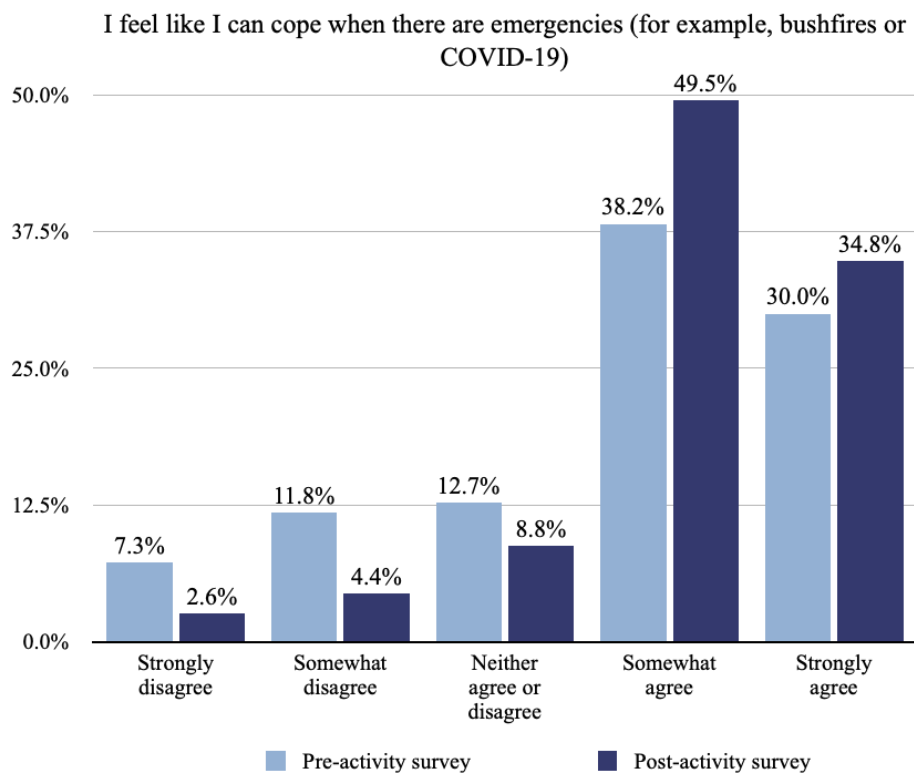## I feel like I can cope when there are emergencies (for example, bushfires or COVID-19)

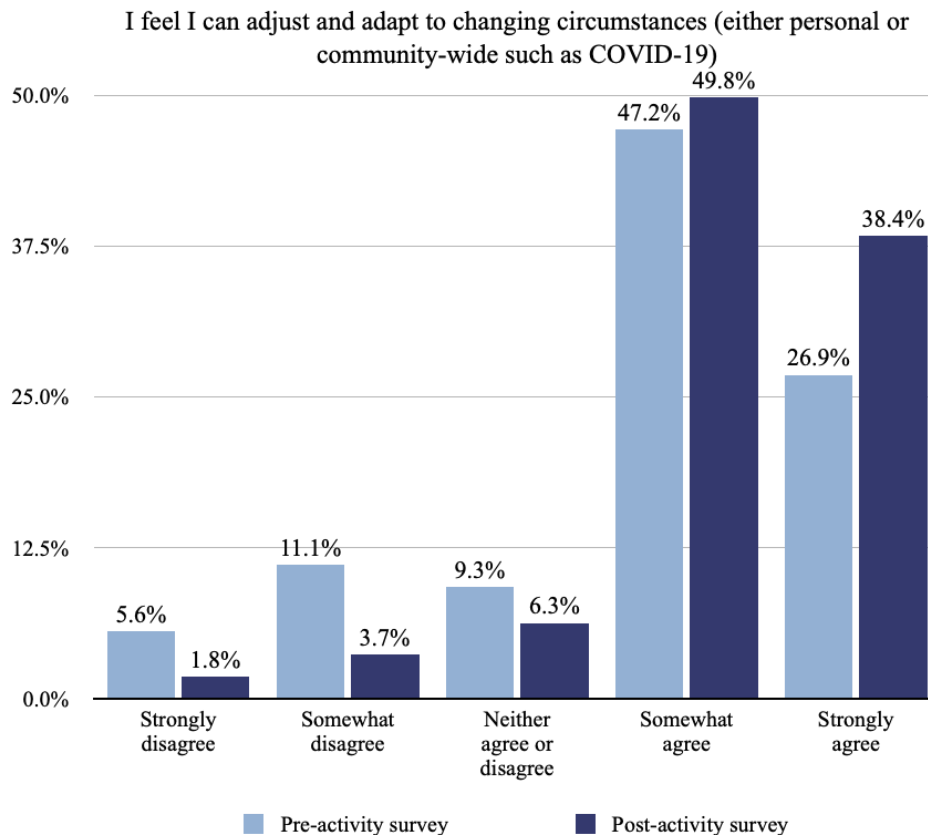

Figure 4 Before and after: coping

Figure 5 Before and after: adaptivity

The Hub offered a new model for disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience hubs in bringing together psychosocial approaches with practical supports. This model proved effective in producing positive outcomes for participants. Specifically, the Hub combined approaches from three intersecting areas: disaster preparation, resilience, and recovery; arts, health, environment, and wellbeing; and creativity hubs. The Hub was framed around the four pillars of creativity, community, wellbeing, and resilience and understanding these pillars as interrelated and interdependent. In doing so, the Hub extends the "everyday" mode of resilience hubs (Urban Sustainability Directors Network n.d., Ciriaco & Wong 2022), which primarily focus on practical supports, to encompass the complexity of the experiences of communities in preparing for and recovering from disasters.

The Hub was also indicative of what a successful model of community-led disaster preparation, recovery and resilience can look like. The success of the Hub revealed in the data shows the effectiveness of CSOs as practitioners in disaster preparation, recovery and resilience work. The measurable increases in community connection, belonging, preparation, and resilience show the positive outcomes of a model that stems from a place-based, consultative, strengths-based framework and is delivered by a CSO. The remainder of the paper will focus on this insight.

Frontline reflections: What could the Hub mean for the role of CSOS in disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience?

The above discussion of the Hub showcases the results from this project. The following section explores what this could mean for the role of CSOs in disaster preparation, recovery, and resilience from the perspective of a frontline worker and the coordinator of the Hub project. The opinions expressed below are the co-ordinators own, and do not express the views or opinions of their employer.

As described above, the fires of 2019-20 were closely followed by flooding rains and a global pandemic. This series of cascading disasters significantly impacted communities all over Australia. As the likelihood of disasters increases due to climate change, with predictions of more severe storms, flooding, hotter summers, fires, and cyclones, so too does our need to improve our capacity for community connections and resilience building.

So, how can we prepare our communities better?

Ten years ago, the Productivity Commission estimated that Australia was spending 97% of its disaster funding on clean-up and recovery efforts and just 3% on preparation and resilience

building (Productivity Commission 2014). To address this issue, the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience has developed the Australian Emergency Management Arrangements Handbook (2023) alongside other policies and legislations such as the National Disaster Risk Reduction (Department of Home Affairs 2018a) and the Australian Disaster Preparedness (Department of Home Affairs 2018b) frameworks with the aim of establishing 'disaster resilient' communities.

The Select Committee's report on Australia's disaster resilience (Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience 2024) acknowledges the impact of disasters on communities, and how the experience of back to-back disasters is becoming a more plausible reality due to the current impact of climate variability. They also acknowledge the importance of preparing and supporting communities to overcome these challenges in the years to come (p. 1). Additionally, it is recognised that the community and not-for-profit sectors are often the first ones to pick up the pieces after disasters impact a community.

Australia's national strategy for disaster resilience (COAG 2011) states that the characteristics of disaster resilience communities, individuals and organisations are that they function well under stress, are adaptable, self-reliant and have social capital. In addition, people in this community understand the risks that may affect them, are aware of the vulnerable people in the community, are pro-active in preparation for disasters, well resourced and able to work together to prepare for and deal with disasters.

While I acknowledge these facts, I wonder how this will happen without significant funding allocated to the local place-based organisations to undertake the efforts of community preparation, which needs to be an ongoing concern. At present, the reports appear to assume

that volunteers and charities, such as those in the Blue Mountains, have sufficient resourcing,

skills, and capacity to handle building said resiliency. As a frontline worker in a small non-

government organisation (NGO), I hold concerns that we, and therefore our communities, are

not being sufficiently financed on a longer-term basis, to deliver what will be needed for

futureproofing our communities in this area. Below I outline some history and some of the

issues that need addressing in the event of a disaster, and as a plan for ongoing preparation.

Front line, place-based organisations, and their staff:

Speaking generally, front-line, place-based non-government organisations (NGOs) are known

in their communities and have existing and trusted relationships with local people and groups.

Proximity and familiarity with the staff of the centre means that people in a community often

turn to them first when they need practical or emotional support, advice, or referrals. The

organisations that have been on the front-line of disasters before, have pre-existing

connections with other community groups and essential/ emergency services, and understand

what needs to be done and immediately link up, talking, meeting, and making plans. In my

experience, the broader community is generally good at rallying around and supporting each

other, once the initial disaster shocks have settled.

Where are the current challenges to small, place-based organisations when disasters

occur?

Adjustments to program delivery:

It is often not possible for an NGO to pivot from the existing contracted agreements that they

made with their funding bodies. This means that local, place-based organisations end up

having to maintain their contracted work while experiencing a surge in demand for support from the local community.

Additional funding arrangements:

At some point there is a wider roll out of plans and grants from local and state governments. For small NGO's, applying for grants after a disaster can be time-consuming, stressful and often futile. Evidence from bushfire grants investigations has indicated that their allocation and distribution was impacted by the political system.

Supporting the organisations who do get funding:

Community workers employed by other organisations that usually operate in other geographic areas often end up working on the front-line in other districts after a disaster. While they are highly skilled and competent, it takes time for them to get to know the community, make connections and to work out how they can best assist. Acknowledging that place-based organisations hold much of the local knowledge, these additional workers often want to partner with existing services. While this is a best practice model, the local organisation is again often picking up the extra work of the partnership without any additional funding.

Duplication of services:

Something that was evident after the post 2019/2020 bushfires, was that service delivery/ programs offered by local and specifically funded disaster-recovery organisations were often duplicated, meaning that the same activity was run by two different organisations in the same area. Lack of existing relationships and communication channels impact the capacity for

streamlining service delivery. A permanently funded place-based organisation that specialised in preparation and disaster recovery could mitigate this issue.

Other impacts:

As most of the grant funded disaster-recovery roles are short-term, contracted workers often leave before the end of their tenure as naturally they need to find alternative work as contracts come to an end. In the meantime, workers in the local organisations continue to do more work and support more people with limited resources while applying for grants and acting as an auspice agent for individuals and groups volunteering in the community.

Volunteers:

Many of the people who support the community do so by volunteering and/ or applying for grants. While the opportunity to do something helpful in their community post disaster is often highly desirable, the skill levels and experience of these volunteers can vary. Local organisations need additional funding to be able to offer adequate support to these supporters who are providing their time and skills in service to their community.

Grants:

At times, the reporting requirements from disaster-related grants can be considerable and onerous. NGO's that offer to be an auspice to volunteers in the community are responsible to manage the additional work in administering and reporting on grants to the funding body, often with minimal financial support for the extra time that this work incurs.

The impacts of the current mechanisms of post-disaster implementation are potentially costly in all ways: financially, socially, and psychologically.

What needs to change:

We know that socially connected communities do better when experiencing adversity, and that fostering a connected community facilitates recovery from disasters. A connected community means that there is more trust and more confidence in people, information, and the services around them. As a result of this, people are more likely to know who best to contact and therefore reach out and get the most appropriate support, advice, or referral earlier.

As described above, the Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre's (BANC) Creative, Community, Wellbeing and Resilience Hub (The Hub) was a highly successful, place-based, grant-funded project, run by a trusted, local, place-based NGO. The funding for the Hub ceased at the end of June 2023. Recognising the importance and value of this concept to the community from the feedback obtained during the research engagement process, BANC have subsequently applied for many grants to try to keep some of these programs running.

Other programs run by BANC:

These workshops complemented other existing activities currently run by BANC including the HUFF program (Heads Up for Fires and Other Emergencies), support writing bushfire preparation plans with individuals and small groups using the Person-Centered Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) program and connecting with the local RFS community office to offer practical preparation advice. HUFF is a project that connects people to their neighbours in their own street, sharing information and advice to support people prepare for disasters (mostly bushfires, but has also supported the community through windstorms, power cuts and heavy snow falls). The P-CEP program is a toolkit that emphasises the capacities of people living with disabilities or other vulnerabilities, to support them to reduce their disaster risk. Both programs are currently administered at BANC by volunteers.

How can the benefits of The Hub, and other existing projects be extended and funded?

The Australian Local Government's Association report "Stronger Community Resilience" stated that "resilient communities promote individual and community wellbeing and cohesiveness to strengthen their communities for every day, as well extreme, challenges" (Australian Local Government Association 2024). The full cycle of preparedness, response, recovery and building of community resilience needs to be factored into our place-based community sectors to reduce our exposure to vulnerability (Stone 2022).

Conclusion: The Hub – a model for the future:

It is possible that a program like The Hub could be utilised more thoroughly to demonstrate how local, place-based organisations can deliver appropriate resilience building programs *all the time*, with the capacity to pivot to disaster recovery when an adverse event occurs. This would enable the staff in these organisations to be well-prepared and trained in both preparation and resilience building, and able to move into the recovery space immediately after a disaster, while being adequately financially resourced to do so. It would also mean that any additional support from external operators would have an existing base to work from, and an existing placed-based organisation to partner with. This will in turn, better enable the community to improve their capacity to be adaptive, self-reliant and function well under stress. As a better-connected community with increased social capital, they will have more awareness of those who are vulnerable, be more collectively pro-active preparing for disasters, be better resourced and be able to work together more effectively in times of need. In the longer term, it will most likely be the most cost-efficient option as well.

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