



# Community-led Responses to Climate Change: Discovering conditions for equity and social justice

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# Acknowledgements and Use

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands on which this project took place.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend this acknowledgement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who continue to care for Country, community, and culture across Australia.

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## MENZIES FOUNDATION

Inspired by the legacy of Sir Robert Menzies, the non-partisan Menzies Foundation was established in 1979 to create opportunities to support the next generation of Australian leaders. Sir Robert Menzies, Australia's longest serving Prime Minister, embodied many of the leadership qualities that remain important today. Integrity, purpose, strong values, a regard for all Australians and an abiding commitment to service and the community. In May 2018, in celebration of the 40-year Anniversary, the Foundation honored past achievements, unveiled a catalytic strategy to address the pressing leadership challenges of our time and reaffirmed our commitment to raising the profile and importance of 'outstanding' leadership. Today the Menzies Foundation acts as a catalyst change agent focusing on supporting a leadership movement that encourages Australians to reflect on their purpose, build their leadership capability and contribute to the 'greater good.'

## JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES

Jesuit Social Services has been working for more than 45 years delivering practical support and advocating for improved policies, legislation and resources to achieve strong, cohesive and vibrant communities where every individual can reach their full potential. We are a social change organisation working with some of the most marginalised individuals, families and communities, often experiencing multiple and complex challenges. Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference. Our services span Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. The Centre for Just Places was established by Jesuit Social Services in early 2021, with seed funding from Gandel Foundation and the Victorian Government to enable and support place-based approaches nationally through research, collaboration, engagement and knowledge exchange. The Centre works at the intersection of social justice and ecological justice issues. For example, we work to understand and respond to the compounding effects of locational disadvantage and climate change. We lead research and advocacy around key issues that matter to communities.

## COLLABORATION FOR IMPACT

Collaboration for Impact is a globally recognized field builder for collaborative systems change. Our vision is for an equitable and inclusive society where people, place and planet thrive. Our guiding belief is that the complex causes of inequality in Australia are most effectively addressed through collaboration across diverse stakeholders. Including government, business, community, research, philanthropy, and service providers and that this requires transformative practices of systemic leadership and deep collaboration between First Nations and other multicultural Australians.

Our purpose is to enable collaborations to work in more transformative ways. Ultimately, so that social change efforts result in more equitable and inclusive systems where all people thrive.

For ten years, Collaboration for Impact has centred its work as a pioneer and first-mover with partners globally and in Australia on two horizons:

- Demonstrating the case for collaborative place-based change in Australia.
- Building the ecosystem for systemic barriers to be addressed through deep collaboration, centring community leadership.

Over the next ten years we are harnessing our networks, knowledge platforms, practice expertise and trusted relationships to change how Australia is approaching critical challenges through strengthening the practices, mindsets, and social infrastructure of the social change ecosystem.

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# Executive Summary

The compounding impacts of climate change has called attention to the importance of community resilience (Australian Government, National Emergency Management Agency, 2023), requiring us to rethink how diverse communities are supported to respond. In this report we provide a snapshot of what community-led action on climate change looks like as it relates to issues of social justice and equity in Australia. This report is the culmination of desktop research and interviews, as part of the Climate Discovery Project.

The Climate Discovery Project purpose is threefold: (i) to explore how climate change perpetuates inequity by sharing insights from community leadership experiences; (ii) to identify and document the opportunities and conditions that strengthen community capacity and agency to respond effectively to the growing impacts of climate change, and (iii) to examine a range of systemic climate change interventions aimed at promoting increased equity, community leadership, and collective action. This report reveals the systemic barriers to local agency and autonomy while also showcasing the enabling conditions for community-led responses. It serves to uncover the links between social justice and climate change impacts in place-based contexts by learning from the experience of communities experiencing climate impacts.

The insights are the result of a rapid desktop review of 16 studies, and analysis of 15 interviews covering the areas of regional New South Wales (NSW), regional Victoria (VIC) and the urban and peri-urban context of the west of Melbourne. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review or an in-depth community consultation. Rather, it seeks to identify the patterns that hold conditions of inequity in place and provide a glimpse into enablers of community leadership to inform a second phase of work; a collaborative systemic intervention to address barriers and amplify enablers.

Recommendations are made for this second phase of work in the form of three broad opportunities to support community-led action on climate change while also addressing inequities. The first is **collective learning systems**; bringing together diverse actors across multiple scales and places to address systemic issues. The second is **finance**; new ways to fund place-based, community-led activities that are sustainable and community-controlled. The third is **collaborative governance**; establish structures that share decision-making within the community and throughout the emergency management cycle between community, service sector and government agencies.

# Introduction

## Background and Purpose

The need to build community resilience has taken centre stage in an era marked by the compounding and cascading impacts of climate change (National Emergency Management Agency, 2023). This is clear in the case of Australia — the 2022 eastern Australia floods and 2019 bushfires are examples of climate-related disasters that have exacerbated vulnerability and disadvantage amongst our communities (Longman, Braddon, Verlie, Schlosberg, Hampshire, Hawke, Noonan, & Saurman 2023)

These same communities, those most at-risk to climate and extreme weather events, also show leadership and strength in responding to these events. Compelling evidence (Helfgott 2022) suggests that community members, community sector organisations and community groups play a pivotal role in enhancing community resilience. Particularly in the context of climate change and related disasters, these entities are instrumental in safeguarding the well-being and safety of communities.

A justice-centred approach to climate change acknowledges that it will disproportionately affect those already facing disadvantage and marginalisation. Paradoxically, these same individuals often face barriers that hinder their participation in research efforts, resulting in a noticeable absence of their perspectives where they are needed most. This silence creates a knowledge gap concerning how intersectionality contributes to disparities in community-led responses to climate change. (Matthews, Longman Berry, Passey, Bennett-Levy, Morgan, Pit, Rolfe & Bailie 2019)

This report forms part of a larger discovery project situated in the context of inequity and justice in relation to climate change. To build insight into this emerging field, the Menzies Foundation, Collaboration for Impact and Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places have joined together to listen and learn from the experience of community-led responses to climate change.

This project serves a threefold purpose:

- To explore how climate change perpetuates, intensifies, and generates new forms of inequity by sharing insights from community leadership experiences,
- To identify and document the opportunities and conditions that strengthen community capacity and agency to respond effectively to the mounting impacts of climate change, and
- To examine a range of systemic climate change interventions aimed at promoting increased equity, community agency, and collective action.

This study primarily examines disaster-affected communities, exploring how equity, participation, and community-led responses can shape local approaches to climate and disaster resilience. Findings are situated within the Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery emergency management system. The sources reveal structural inequities that expose and worsen vulnerability and shed light on the preconditions for greater equity, community agency, and resilience in the context of growing climate change impacts.

The discovery project is grounded in insights from 2022 research funded by the Menzies Foundation titled Citizen Leadership and Community Resilience (Helfgott 2022). This earlier study, conducted in the aftermath of the 2019-2020 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, explored the firsthand experiences of community leaders in regions affected by these disasters in South Australia and Victoria. It laid the groundwork for further investigation, particularly in understanding climate justice issues directly from those affected. The report emphasises that community leaders are individuals who step up in times of crisis, driven by empathy and solidarity. They are part of the affected community, not outsiders seeking change (Menzies Foundation 2023).

## Approach and Scope

The research methods, scope of work and people we heard from have defined the boundaries of the work. The research was geographically concentrated in regional and remote areas in Victoria and New South Wales, and urban and peri-urban areas in the west of Melbourne. A small number of sources from the rapid review covered experiences in both regional and urban environments while only two were solely focused on experiences in urban settings. The research reflects experiences in post-bushfire, flood recovery and compounding hazard contexts as well as extreme weather events, like heat in urban contexts. The research also draws on Collaboration for Impact's 15 years' experience supporting community-led change in Australia.

The study is not comprehensive but a first phase of discovery to gain insight into the framing, lived experience, and understanding of community-led action and leadership for resolving structural inequities and bringing about meaningful change. This is important to acknowledge because the themes of climate justice, environmental justice, community autonomy, climate risk and adaptation, and climate resilience are diverse and fragmented areas of research and practice. This research project is one of discovery, learning and knowledge building.

There were two distinct but interrelated phases to the research approach. The first phase involved conducting a rapid desktop review to gain insight into the broad characteristics and framing of community-led action and leadership as a means of addressing structural inequities and creating meaningful change. The second phase involved conducting semi-structured interviews with research participants to understand the issues in-depth. Following is a breakdown of each phase:

1. Rapid Desktop Review (rapid review): Led by Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places, this phase involved an examination of community-based leadership in the context of climate change and its connection to social (in)justice and inequities. The review identified current and future impacts of climate change on communities facing various forms of inequality, analysed existing leadership approaches, and provided a definition of climate justice (distinct from concepts such as resilience) to frame a community-led approach to identifying and addressing drivers of risk and vulnerability. This review is focused on initiatives 1. either led by or explicitly targeting diverse communities<sup>1</sup>; and 2. adhering to place-based, community-led, or collective impact principles within the Australian context over the past decade.
2. Qualitative Research: Following the desktop analysis, Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places and Collaboration for Impact conducted a series of virtual and face-to-face interviews with participants located in Melbourne's west, regional Victoria, and regional New South Wales. In these interviews, the findings of the rapid review were expanded upon. Twelve interviews were conducted with fifteen participants over May and June 2023. A small number of these interviews included multiple people. The same people have not been interviewed twice. Participants included community health and service providers, local government representatives, peak body representatives, volunteers, and funders focusing on climate change issues across communities.

Research participants were community-based organisations and groups recruited on the basis of their professional capacity as per our ethics (i.e., capacity to participate). Research participants were drawn from existing networks and relationships and were selected based on the organisation or group's frontline support, advocacy, and work to address the root drivers of inequities in their region.

The rapid review revealed that very few papers included the experiences of specific groups facing marginalisation. This report recognises that marginalised groups, such as those with low socioeconomic status, people living with disabilities, older people, people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and First Nations people, are often likely to experience the greatest barriers to engaging in research (Matthews et al. 2019). As a result, there is a gap in understanding how intersectionality relates to inequity in community-led responses.

The research team sought to bridge this gap by actively involving individuals with diverse experiences, specifically those working directly with marginalised groups. While the gap still exists, this research primarily explored issues of equity and justice through research participants and their perspectives, while also

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<sup>1</sup> Diverse communities are used here to distinguish individuals and groups distinct from the "able-bodied, Anglo-Celtic, heterosexual men" that have traditionally dominated emergency services and emergency management. See Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) (2016).



considering factors related to capacity and retraumatisation.<sup>2</sup>

Research participant identification has been removed for confidentiality purposes. Within the body of the report, direct quotations are placed in inverted commas. To offer context for quotes we've indicated the research participant's role, organisation type, and location. 'Senior Leader' refers to organisational leadership, 'Manager' to those overseeing projects/people, and 'Practitioner' to those directly involved in facilitating programs and services in community.

The project has been approved by Jesuit Social Services' Human Research Ethics Committee.

## Definitions

### Climate Justice

In this paper the definition of climate justice aligns with a growing body of literature calling for just adaptation responses that take a capabilities and justice-based approach. That is, both working towards the root drivers of vulnerability and creating processes that enable the participation of diverse groups in doing so (Newell, Taylor & Touni 2018; Schlosberg 2012). In the context of climate change and disaster resilience, this centres on working with organisations and communities navigating intersecting experiences of social and climate change inequities in recognition that these groups often have fewer resources to cope, adapt and recover (Dunn et al. 2022).<sup>3</sup>

This report focuses on specific dimensions of climate justice, relating to the exclusion of affected individuals from public responses, policymaking, and decision-making processes as well as the legacy of historical decision-making affecting the health and wellbeing outcomes of communities most affected by climate change.

### Community

Community is used to describe a population of people. We recognise that there is a breadth of experiences, cultures, languages, needs and interests within and between communities (Collaboration for Impact 2022).

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2 Other researchers in the field noted that community member's capacity to participate and risk of re-traumatisation meant it was not always appropriate to research directly with those with lived experience (Longman et al. 2023).

3 International norms align with climate justice as a social justice issue: the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has increasingly highlighted that climate extremes, such as floods, fires and extreme heat, serve as a "threat multiplier"; disproportionately exacerbating the social, economic and health inequities already experienced by certain communities (IPCC, 2018, p. 55). This inequity can be applied both within nations and among the international community, which is why two of the most vulnerable groups, Pacific nations and Pacific youth groups, have been able to successfully convince the UN General Assembly to request the International Court of Justice to provide an advisory opinion on a country's climate obligations; this has been hailed as a "turning point in climate justice" (Peel and Nay, 2023).

## Community-led

For the purpose of this project community-led refers to an approach taken to shift inequities in systems that is grounded in community knowledge, expertise and priorities. This is distinct from ‘community leadership’ which refers to an individuals’ role. The below definitions demonstrate just two of the different perspectives, one emphasising community being empowered and the other community making decisions.

*A Community-Led approach uses the practices of empowerment, mutual learning and consensus building to create bottom-up, citizen-driven change (Kolosy 2020).*

*Community change is considered to be Community-Led when: 1. The community holds the power and makes key decisions 2. A large and diverse number of community members are involved in supporting, taking action, and decision-making for the work conducted by the community (Wessells 2018).*

Drawing on the work of Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, the below table notes the spectrum of community voice and decision-making between community informed and community-led approaches (Collaboration for Impact 2022).

| Community-informed   | Community-shaped   | Community-led  |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Vision for change, program, policy or initiative is informed by community perspectives, and adapted to suit the context, through consultation.</p> <p>Decisions and parameters controlled by government</p> | <p>The vision for change, program, policy or initiative is created in partnership with community.</p> <p>Government, community and diverse and inclusive set of actors collaborate to make decisions, within broad parameters set by government.</p> | <p>The vision for change is defined by the community.</p> <p>The community has inclusive local leadership and control over operational aspects of the program, policy or initiative and shares decision making over resources and parameters with government and others.</p> |


  
**Degree of community voice and decision-making**

(Collaboration for Impact 2022)

This definition does not place the ownership of leading systems change efforts on community, rather, various stakeholders across the ecosystem must take up a role in supporting change efforts grounded in community vision and needs.

## Community Leadership

Multiple studies surveyed highlight the critical role of individuals taking informal leadership roles within their communities as they prepare for and respond to climate change impacts. In this project community leadership refers to the actions of individuals taking up a leadership role within or outside of traditional emergency management processes.

Interview participants expressed that in the context of disasters community members are “always first responders.” Leaders were not always pre-existing before disaster, nor those who might be ‘expected’ to take action, nor those who self-identify as leaders (Moreton 2018). Community leaders varied widely by background and motivation. But core to their leadership and response efforts are the need to step up where existing systems were failing, and where power imbalances continued to marginalise certain groups.

**“For many people it is informal leadership. They are in full time volunteering, often in addition to full time working. They volunteer every evening every weekend on this because there’s a sense that we’re going to face more droughts, heat waves, bush fires.”**

Practitioner, community organisation, regional NSW

## Community Agency

In this report community agency refers to the extent to which community members are represented and involved in decision-making and action within traditional emergency management responses (Målqvist 2018).

# Insights

This section explores insights that emerged from the rapid review and interviews that informs how the enablers and barriers are interpreted.

## Experiences of Climate Justice

The concept of climate justice can be summarised as understanding climate change as a systemic, social justice challenge. The rapid review found several common characteristics that defined climate injustice, influenced by the focus on disasters (particularly bushfires) including:

- The effects of climate change and disasters further entrench and compound the socioeconomic disadvantage
- Existing exposure to hazards such as air pollution and hazardous materials
- Frequent confrontation with the threat of disasters (e.g. bushfires), including extreme weather events (seasonal cycle between heatwaves and extreme cold)
- Poorly connected and under-resourced community sector organisations unable to meet existing, let alone projected demands for support
- Stigma and shame around requiring more support than others in their community, including experiences of interpersonal racism and discrimination from services
- Deficiencies in urban planning and transport networks creating social isolation and the inability to access services and supports
- Lack of access to information to help envision the potential scale and ferocity of the event, and therefore prepare for its likely impacts
- Lack of centralised, accessible, and relevant information to the circumstances and communities impacted, including relevant grants and funding
- Assumed understandings of key emergency and climate change concepts that are Western- centric, poorly defined, and lack meaning in different languages
- Fear and trauma from prior interactions with uniformed emergency and government agencies, particularly for First Nations communities and those newly arrived to Australia
- Ongoing decision-making fatigue and overwhelm from the intersecting, cascading and compounding nature of disasters (e.g. pandemic, cost-of-living pressures and bushfires)
- Reliance on industries characterised by seasonal income and employment (tourism, agriculture)

## Community-led Change

This research has also drawn on learnings of community-led change across the field in Australia as it attempts to address the structural inequities exacerbating vulnerability. In the paper 'Exploring the Language and Practice of Place-based and Community-led Change in Australia,' Collaboration for Impact (2022) proposed the key elements, in the form of 7 principles, to guide development of new ways of working that are community-led:

- Overarching parameters and **objectives jointly set** by governments and community (often with service providers/Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and business, philanthropy, corporate sectors, etc.)
- An **agenda** or priorities are developed by the whole-of-community, for example through generative processes and ensuring equal access to data and information.
- **Governance structures** create equity, draw on local knowledge and are representative of the community. These structures enable strategic decisions about use of resources, governance mechanisms and reporting and measurement to be shared between government, community and others.
- **Community leadership** structures drive day-to-day operational decisions, including the primary language of communication with partners.
- **Consciously building ways to work collaboratively** across diverse sectors, government, community, and people. This includes understanding and working with formal and informal roles, power dynamics, mindsets and assumptions.
- Commitment to, and action towards, **aligning funding to community priorities**, set out in a community agenda
- **Accountability** for change, early instances of impact and outcomes are shared between community and governments (and ideally service providers).

In this Climate Discovery report understandings of community-led approaches are overlaid as they intersect with climate justice to identify innovative opportunities for intervention.

## Climate Change Mindsets

Recognising the variety of worldviews and cultures in the discussion of climate change is crucial. This is particularly important because much of the understanding of climate science has been shaped by Western scientific models and language. The concept of hermeneutics justice<sup>4</sup> acknowledges the unequal distribution of interpretive resources (i.e., education, professional experience, cultural background) may prevent many people affected by climate change from understanding climate change as a social issue (Fricker 2007). Importantly, this doesn't mean that those most affected don't feel the injustices of climate change, just that they may not express these experiences using the same concepts or terms.

**"There's still resistance to face climate change essentially. And then I think there's some people who don't really have the time or the knowledge to really look into it in much depth or beyond the news headlines."**

Senior Leader, community organisation, regional NSW

**"For us here in it is really hard to talk about [climate change]. They [community members] think about bushfires or emergencies like that, and can't relate it to their lives here in an urban setting."**

Manager, community organisation, metro Victoria

Climate change is a complex challenge that, as the research revealed, cannot be understood or described at the local level in one specific way. Abstract scientific projections are often not meaningful to people living their daily lives until there is a disaster or personal experience of the climate change impacts.

A variety of response positions were identified among research participants: from activist (change the system) to action-focused (act where I have control), and from paralysis (collapse of cognitive and emotional capacity) to denial (wilful ignorance as a coping mechanism).

**"I see people trying to connect their lives with this big global story. They're not always getting a lot of help to do that. I don't necessarily think institutions are great at translating that information.... With the community more than with the institutions, there is the sense of how people are struggling to really place themselves within a global context of this issue. We talk about parts per million, we talk about 1.5 degrees, but what is 1.5 or two degrees practically mean, in your house, in your suburb in your city?"**

Senior Leader, community organisation, metro Victoria

<sup>4</sup> Hermeneutics injustice describes injustices that occur "when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (Fricker 2007)

## Language

While climate change is a commonly used term, its interpretation can vary significantly depending on an individuals' or groups' past experiences. For instance, multicultural communities may interpret terms like 'emergency' and 'disaster' differently. Past experiences shape whether 'emergency' is associated with violence rather than a natural disaster such as a fire or flood (Steenhoven et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of considering context, history, and culture when addressing the impacts of climate change and disasters.

Despite widespread recognition that climate change impacts are unevenly experienced, both the rapid desktop review and qualitative research have shown that the concepts and terminology of 'justice' or 'climate justice' are relatively uncommon. Among the reviewed papers, only one explicitly used the language of climate justice in the context of community-led action (Hilder & Collin, 2022).

**"With the flood recovery, it is absolutely a social justice issue, but generally not recognised as one either. The notion of justice is not a part of the lexicon that's employed particularly well."**

Manager, local council, regional NSW

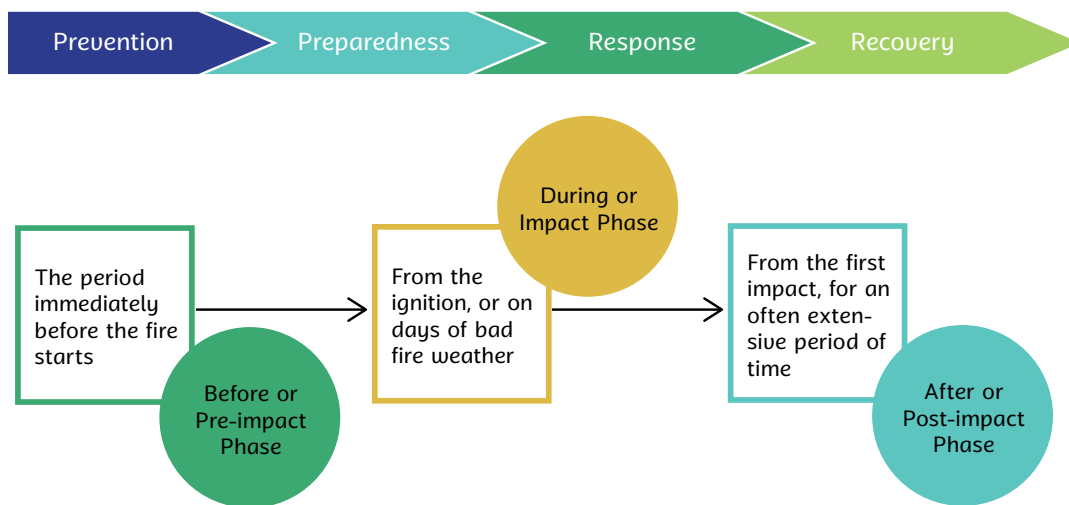
**"To be honest, when I came into this [role], I don't even know if I'd heard the term climate justice. Because of my social justice lens, it does resonate with me. But it feels like it's that same [individualistic framing around] resilience, right? Like, it's their fault. It's not just impacting; it's doing more harm. Climate change harms some communities more than others."**

Manager, community organisation, metro Victoria

## Emergency and Disaster Management

In Australia, we rely on the Australian Emergency Management Arrangements (AEMA) to guide our response to emergencies, including climate events (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2023). The AEMA outlines national principles and practices for disaster resilience, covering four key phases of emergency management: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery (PPRR). Given the research project's focus on climate affected communities in the context of bushfires and floods, it's essential to examine how our community-led responses have been shaped by the PPRR emergency management approach.

The intention of this research is not to focus on improvements to the PPRR framework, but rather to outline opportunities to strengthen community capacity and agency to lead local responses to climate justice.



Graphic informed by Australian Emergency Management Arrangements (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2023)

It is important to note that the experiences of climate justice cannot be exclusively considered within the context of the PPRR emergency management framework. While it is necessary to make strategic investments in the short-term and address immediate priorities following a climate event, responses must consider how to address the underlying structural causes of inequity in the long-term. The opportunities presented in this report lend themselves both response and recovery, as well as preparedness, adaptation, and resilience building efforts.

## Dimensions of Lived Experience

An underlying assumption of this PPRR approach is the importance of restoring conditions to how they were before a disaster (i.e., seeking to achieve 'recovery' to pre-disaster conditions). The notion of recovery is structurally limited in effectively responding to the compounding and cascading nature of climate change impacts individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage..

This observation is similarly stressed in a recent opinion piece published by Longman et al. (2023) stating that:

“...there is an expectation within the notion of 'recovery' that an end point will be reached when individuals and communities have 'recovered'. This characteristic encapsulates the notion of returning to 'life as we know it', which is not always possible or indeed desirable given its lack of attention to inequalities and inequities. Even the more carefully nuanced approaches to recovery still infer an end point.” (pp.3)

The Australian Disaster Recovery Framework (ADRF) recognises that disaster impacts are often interconnected and can compound over time. These impacts,



experienced as both primary and secondary stressors, are considered indirect consequences. Moreover, the Framework acknowledges that disasters can introduce new challenges into the lives of affected individuals and exacerbate existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, as outlined in our understanding of climate justice (Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee, 2022).

The lived experience of climate change and related injustices are experienced beyond traditional approaches to emergency and disaster management.

*“It’s the new normal. Communities don’t typically recover from one natural disaster before they’re impacted by another ... there’s a recognition that climate change is resulting in more intense and more frequent, natural disasters. Our community is at the boundaries of the very first fire that started in that crazy year and a half of bushfire seasons... That followed on from drought and then cascaded into COVID. Then we went straight into the flood. So, like many communities now, it’s just overlapping, natural climate-related disasters that just cascade into each other. And there’s very little room to breathe between them.”*

Senior Leadership, community organisation, regional NSW

PPRR provides a framework to situate the work of different agencies and authorities within emergency management phases (Holley & McArthur 2022). The Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook for Emergency Management Arrangements outlines roles and responsibilities of various actors in an emergency from Government through to community-level (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2023). While there is a broad aspiration to be community-led in response efforts, the research suggests that community organisations, groups and members were often under-resourced to meet community needs. Interviewees noted that approaches to emergency and disaster management do not reflect the complexity, time, and cost of recovery and development after these events.

*“A significant portion of New South Wales has been affected by the floods last year, the government has limited resources and that’s why they can’t support it [long-term recovery and climate adaptation], but we also know that recovery is a multi-level and multi-year journey. It [recovery] isn’t 1 year or 18 months. No, it’s like 3 to 5 to 10 years.”*

Practitioner, local council, regional NSW

# Enabling Conditions

The rapid review and interviews revealed key enablers to place-based and community-led responses to climate impacts include: strong social capital and infrastructure; community governance and voice; direct investment into community; and appropriate and timely communications. These enablers are aligned with Collaboration for Impact's experience supporting community-led change in social justice contexts in other contexts. These will be discussed in the following section.

## Strong Social Infrastructure

Across all the studies and interviews, the key enabler for community-led action on climate justice was strong social infrastructure. That is, the social and community capital to support community members in an ongoing capacity, regardless of the occurrence of a disaster or singular event. In part, this was supported through connections to place (environmental, cultural, historical, and social significance of the area) and motivation to respond (Moreton 2018).

**"Love for community! To recognise that, if we don't do it, no-one else is going to do it. To give back to this community. We've always had one or two people step up every generation or every decade. It's our role. We've got to be there to give back to the community."**

Senior Leader, community organisation, regional NSW

Social infrastructure describes the community and individual support services and resources that meet community needs, for example early childhood education or health services. Social infrastructure enables the liveability and wellbeing of the community, which in turn supports social mobility, social trust and social capital to grow. Social infrastructure can be understood as a precondition for healthy and connected communities to build resilience, better preparing people for climate events (Baum & Ziersch 2003).

Maintaining strong social infrastructure through and post climate and weather events is a vital consideration. As Fünfgeld et al. (2013) consultation with community and health groups in metropolitan Melbourne shows, when climate change impacts health services, the indirect effect of impairing people's access to health services compounds the disadvantage. And on the contrary, when social infrastructure is maintained through disasters, the health, education, and support services provide a stable support service and access to critical information for those with the least capacity to do so. These local services are a vital part of a strong community.

This research also identified the important role that social justice organisations play in linking communities, servicing disadvantaged groups, or providing backbone infrastructure to help coordinate community activity. The rapid review

identified that there also exist place-based organisations and networks, such as national non-profit organisations working on social justice, who are part of the social infrastructure. Importantly, these organisations are also working to address the root drivers of inequities in their region (Fünfgeld et al. 2013; Ingham & Redshaw 2017).

**“That early intervention lens, we need to apply the same thinking across climate change and natural disasters. And an organisation to act as that backbone to work in with Council and other key partners to activate and show what’s possible... I think dedicated resourcing to an organisation, whatever it looks like, is a key gap within our community.”**

Manager, local council, regional NSW

## Social Capital

Owning their community knowledge and experience was a quality of many community leaders as revealed in our rapid review and interviews. This enabled them to tap into their shared identities, groups, and understandings to support those in need despite their own challenging experiences. Being able to call on this local capacity was of particular importance in disaster response and recovery.

**“But the strength of what we’ve been able to do as an organisation is harness the goodwill and the high social capital.”**

Senior Leader, community organisation, regional Victoria

**“What enables communities that are self-activated is trust. And trust is fundamental to allowing people to access any kind of information... everybody turns up because we’ve created a space that’s safe and trustworthy for people to engage with.”**

Practitioner, emergency management and disaster resilience organisation, regional and metro Victoria

In bushfire-affected regions, often these leaders were themselves experiencing the disaster but were cognisant of their personal skills and abilities, and how this might serve their community (Helfgott 2022; Leadbeater 2013; Moreton 2018). At the resilience and planning end of the spectrum, knowing how to draw on past challenges – both disaster, but also experiences of conflict and hardship – was key to leaders’ self-confidence and self-efficacy (Chandonnet 2021; Forino, Von Meding & Brewer 2019).

As the rapid review revealed, community members and leaders in disaster-affected areas are more able to understand the strengths and assets of their communities and, in turn, improve their ability to develop appropriate actions and activities (Dare & Schirmer 2021; Redshaw et al. 2017). In the Blue Mountains, community events that brought together community organisations, community members and emergency services agencies, using a strength-based approach, led to an increase in household emergency preparedness and neighbourhood conversations (Redshaw et al. 2017).

Helfgott (2022) and Leadbeater (2013) highlight the action orientation of community-based leaders, noting both their willingness to mobilise in relation to changing community needs (from communications to food relief) and the existing trust and relationships for them to do so. Often this was informed by a long-held sense of autonomy and self-reliance due to the perceived slowness and ineffectiveness of agency responses (largely government) based on prior experiences. Previous experiences of disasters were key to this proactive approach, in being able to pre-empt where gaps and deficiencies might exist.

**“Community will always be first responders. The [flood] event proved it... They [emergency services/ authorities], can’t always respond and community members will always be there and it’s great.”**

Practitioner, local council, regional NSW

Across the research, there were a range of other common characteristics and qualities of leaders including:

- Recognition as a leader by others before internalisation within self
- Expectation and trust that others too will help when the need arises (sense of reciprocity)
- Flexibility and receptivity to emerging needs rather than the imposition of ideas
- Integrating inequality and intersectionality in their actions, e.g. learning from and standing in solidarity with First Nations peoples and others neglected in decision-making
- Community endorsement as a trusted, reliable messenger in acting as a conduit between their communities and services
- Ongoing action to support and advocate for community needs beyond a single event, such as providing bicultural support for newly-arrived migrant communities
- Ongoing attempts to find and support those under-represented and overlooked in mainstream responses and planning
- Harnessing common values and motivations (e.g. social and cultural connections) to building enduring relationships and collective action
- Relatable ways of communication and engagement (i.e. understanding key modes and means of communication, such as preferences for certain media channels)
- Looking for opportunities for community representation in participatory mechanisms around response, recovery and planning, e.g. becoming a member of Local Emergency Management Committees

**“So, what enables people like me to do what I do? It’s that relationship building. It’s definitely the old saying of leading by example. For a lot of community leaders, you demonstrate those behaviours and people trust you, so they will follow you. They’re in the trenches with you, I suppose.”**

Practitioner, community leadership, regional Victoria

Multiple studies highlighted the critical role of individual and group identity in responding to communities’ needs. For multicultural communities, this group identity includes recognising the strong ‘intra-group’ bonding capital (similar cultural backgrounds and language groups) that enable newly arrived community members to benefit from practical assistance and information from those well-established (Chandonnet 2021).

## **Community Governance and Voice**

Governance models and institutional partnerships that support the inclusion of diverse voices were another enabler to community-led action. Interviewees spoke about the need for structures and mechanisms that enable community decision-making around resource allocation, investment into community, and ownership over local adaptation efforts. This included establishing standing committees and community-endorsed frameworks for action that formally and continuously included community leaders as key partners across the disaster response, recovery, and resilience policy process – beyond being engaged as ‘advisors’ (Keating et al. 2022).

**“[A key enabler of community-led responses is] being a voice sitting at the table with people that have a power and have authority and are key decision-makers. But actually, making them [community members] aware that we have every right to be at that table. We need a voice at the table that’s not necessarily sitting as a councillor or at local government or anything like that.”**

Practitioner, community organisation, regional Victoria

There is an opportunity to link community governance models with formal and pre-existing emergency management and disaster arrangements. This would better enable information and community needs to be communicated and for those needs to be met with the support of other actors such as government, non-government organisations and businesses.

Intermediary roles and organisations are another way to support community-led action. Drawing on the work of Kyne and Aldrich (2020), intermediaries can enhance ‘linking’ ties between communities most harmed by climate change impacts and decision-makers, as well as create more direct channels for advocacy and action between community groups and decision-makers (especially state government and emergency agencies).

For First Nations communities in particular, this necessitated long-term investment and decision-making pathways in recognition of: 1. the ongoing and systematic exclusion of Aboriginal people from policy-making settings and 2.

the unique status of Aboriginal peoples' experiences, priorities, and approaches in relation to disaster in the Australian context (Keating et al. 2022; Williamson, Markham & Weir 2020).

The First Nation Peoples Statement on Climate Change (2021) highlights First Nations peoples' experiences around climate change and the importance of connection to Country in an approach to climate-related changes:

*When Country is healthy, we are healthy. Our knowledge systems are interconnected with our environment and it relies on the health of Country. This knowledge is held by our Elders and passed on to the next generation. Solutions to climate change can be found in the landscapes and within our knowledge systems. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the tools, knowledge, and practices to effectively contribute to the fight against climate change. We have lived sustainably in Australia for over 100,000 years.*

The statement also outlines the follow-on impacts and consequences of climate change which are unique to First Nations people in Australia. For example, the effects from sediment run off, marine heatwave and cyclones could have devastating effects on First Nations communities: Elders can't fish for themselves, are unsure how to manage new seasonal changes, experience loss of cultural practices and resources, loss of traditional fishing licences, and deterioration of health and wellbeing (pp 5, Morgan-Bulled, McNear & Delaney et al. 2021).

## Resource Flows

### Direct investment and resourcing

An additional enabler of community-led action was direct investment into innovative people, projects, and models. From a funding perspective, this required a longer timeframe for projects to provide a setting more conducive to the emergence of diverse community leaders and the strengthening of social connections (Scott, Smith & Schaedler 2018).

The rapid review and interviews revealed that most community leaders are not paid for their efforts. A key enabler was (ongoing) resourcing for dedicated place-based staff to not only strengthen community capacity but serve a 'linking' role between their communities, governments, and other agencies (Keating et al. 2022). Moreover, interviews highlighted that resourcing that allows for compensation of community leaders would not only eliminate material barriers for community-led action but may also create conditions for broader and more diverse community representation. The increasing trend of compensating community members is illustrated by examples such as Victoria's Multicultural Emergency Management Project, which not only offered practical masterclasses but also remunerated participants for their time (Steenhoven, Arashiro & Vincent 2022).

Research participants noted a lack of dedicated resourcing where organisations with fewer financial resources have the least capacity to act despite supporting some of the highest priority communities.

## Data and Communications

Effective, transparent, and coordinated data and communications were also key to supporting community-led action, and specifically, in a range of mediums relevant to the communities and accounting for local communications infrastructure. As noted above, community leaders who are trusted, respected, and have deep networks, are well placed to respond to emergencies and know how to get information to the right people as well as organise community events and activities.

**“In our community, videos are much more powerful than written resources. Send me a 30 second video or a one-minute video and every single person will watch it.”**

Community leader, regional Victoria

Interviewees noted a need to provide appropriate and relevant information that is tailored to the needs of the community. This should consider a range of communication channels; not limited to those prescribed by emergency management professionals, service providers and government agencies.

**“And what we found in working with multicultural communities was... they use forms of communication that vary as widely as there are different backgrounds. One community might be really strong in social media, and they might be using Facebook and WhatsApp and a whole bunch of different apps and platforms that we have never even heard of but are very common in their countries of origin and very common and popular within their own communities.”**

Practitioner, emergency management and disaster resilience, regional and metro Victoria

The rapid review noted additional benefits of community-informed and localised communications as they supported the development of healthier relationships between community leaders and government agency representations and fostered a sense of ownership by those contributing to its design (Howard et al. 2020; Scott, Smith & Schaedler 2018).

Keating et al. (2022) also noted the need to streamline information flows across government and emergency management services to ensure that community leaders and organisations had access to timely and accurate information about services and supports available at local, regional, and national scales. A specific consideration for multicultural leaders from larger, more established communities was a preference for government agencies and community organisations to provide short, plain English information for community leaders to then translate and interpret in line with the preferences and needs of their communities (Steenvorden et al., 2022).

# Structural and Systemic Barriers

National emergency management guidance advocates for recovery efforts to follow a community-led and locally managed model (Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee, 2022). However, the research indicates that there are a range of structural and systemic issues that exclude some community members from these processes; the experience of our research participants aligns with this finding and differs from this doctrine.

While community leadership in response and recovery efforts promise a wide range of advantages and benefits to emergency services and civil society organisations, there are a range of challenges or obstacles to this. Across the rapid review and interviews there were common barriers to community-led action. These have been grouped into four themes in the table below:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>a) Lack of collaborative structures connecting formal and informal response efforts</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An absence of collaborative structures to coordinate between formal and informal disaster response efforts, contributing to tension between community-led and service-led efforts</li> <li>• A lack of collaborative platforms for communication and information sharing across formal and informal response efforts</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>b) Community knowledge and experience not recognised</b></p>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate information and communication channels to communities; and a lack of community capacity, capability and literacy to engage or take action</li> <li>• A lack of capacity and implications of taking up a community leadership role at the local level</li> <li>• Failure to recognise the mental health implications of the intersections of personal trauma and disruption (i.e. the ability to 'turn off')</li> <li>• False positioning of local knowledge as being the key source of answers to address community needs (unrealistic expectations of community leaders in having to have 'all the answers')</li> </ul> |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>c) Decision-making and resourcing</b></p>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tensions between different approaches to decision making, organisational agendas, and roles in emergency response and response efforts</li> <li>• Divisive reduction of the complexity and interconnected nature of communities into 'affected' and 'not affected' by governments and 'outsider' organisations</li> <li>• Failure to fund the spectrum of supports provided by place-based organisations, with service delivery generally the only support funded</li> <li>• Lack of data changing community needs across stages of disaster recovery</li> <li>• Lack of data to evaluate the effectiveness of the emergency response and recovery activities</li> <li>• Imposition of rigid and artificial timelines for 'recovery', specifically by 'outsiders' such as some emergency services</li> <li>• Mandate of disaster preparedness programs which rarely stretch to building resilient and just communities (i.e. addressing root drivers that cause vulnerability)</li> <li>• Lack of dedicated resourcing where organisations with fewer financial resources have the least capacity to act despite supporting some of the highest priority communities</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>d) Institutional and Structural Inequities</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ongoing and systematic exclusion of First Nations people from policy-making settings</li> <li>• Ongoing discrimination and omission of First Nations perspective in response to climate events</li> <li>• Lack of cultural competency and willingness for genuine engagement with, for example, First Nations and newly arrived immigrants, by emergency management and government agencies</li> <li>• A perceived lack of diversity and representation in emergency management services</li> <li>• Emergency management and climate change concepts that are Western-centric, poorly defined and lack meaning in other cultures</li> </ul>   |

## Lack of Collaborative Structures Connecting Formal and Informal Response

A lack of collaborative structures to coordinate between formal and informal emergency response and recovery efforts is a key barrier for community-led action.

Additionally, an absence of collaborative communication platforms can restrict information sharing between local emergency services and community organising efforts. As a result, community groups might not be familiar with important decision-making entities and processes. (Howard et al. 2020; Ingham & Redshaw 2017).

This included a failure to map local assets and resources to make apparent which organisations and groups are providing support, existing referral pathways, and gaps in these services (Dare & Schirmer 2021). For example, a lack of knowledge regarding the existence and role of Local Emergency Management Committees resulted in organisations acting in isolation (Ingham & Redshaw 2017). Local emergency services were not only unfamiliar with the activities and services provided by community sector organisations, but the established, inter-agency networks (such as via peak bodies) that allow them to share information quickly (Ingham & Redshaw 2017).

*“In both the bushfires and the floods, the community response was admirable. And, in part because the governments were so weak in their own response and failed in so many ways. So, there was a lack of choice... people had to stand up to pitch in because no one was doing it.”*

Senior Leader, community organisation, regional NSW

**The lack of collaborative structures and social capital may also have contributed to a lack of recognition of the importance of cultural diversity and impacts of trauma on the community.** Research participants spoke of the very real effect of trauma resulting from climate-related disasters and the very real risk of re-traumatisation and the need for services, volunteers and community leaders to be supported to operate with care and understanding of these dimensions.

*“There were lots of people that were traumatised. When they met with those volunteers who just weren’t trained, it wasn’t safe. From what I understand as an outsider it was very hostile.”*

Practitioner, local council, regional NSW

*“We need to make sure [community leaders] are supported, that their capacity is enabled, that they understand trauma, the effects of it, and to make sense of what happened.”*

Manager, local council, regional NSW

*“[The event impacted] the mental state of the community because of not just the crisis, but because of the lack of response.”*

Senior Leader, community organisation, regional Victoria

## Community Knowledge and Experience Not Recognised

The Australian Disaster Recovery Framework recognises most importantly, communities are a critical source of local experience, knowledge, capacity, and skills which can help to shape and direct recovery processes (Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee, 2022). Yet, the local knowledge of the community, as well as the burden being asked of it, are often not recognised.

The rapid review revealed that failure to recognise community strengths, values and critical local knowledge by formal response efforts was a barrier, particularly in post-disaster settings. In fire-affected areas, this centred on the imposition of leadership by outsider actors rather than endorsement via local channels (Helfgott 2022; Moreton 2018; Leadbeater 2013). In part, this was attributed to the language of 'recovery', with community leaders suggesting it not only pathologised their experiences but neglected the transformative nature of such events in contributing to a new sense of individual and collective identity (Moreton 2018). Moreover, it undervalued the role of trust and relationships maintained outside of disaster events (within communities and with government agencies), which were reported to have an influence on post-event attitudes and relationships (Leadbeater 2013).

Many of the small community-led organisations and groups named a struggle with externally perceived legitimacy as a barrier to access to resources.

**“What a lot of the small stand-up community organisations struggle with is legitimacy. Because, you know, the bureaucracy doesn’t recognise the value and validity of the work that we’re doing.”**

Senior Leader, community organisation, regional NSW

**At the same time, individual leaders who take up a community leadership role absorb significant financial, psychosocial, and time burdens.** These individuals play a crucial role in helping the community maintain cohesion during response and get back on its feet through recovery efforts. The emotional, economic and community labour takes a toll on these people.

An important caveat here is that while previous experiences were a source of strength for some, for others they led to re-traumatisation and had the adverse effect of hindering capacity and wellbeing. In the post-bushfire context of Snowy Monaro, the 'mining' of community organisations for information, knowledge, and support was a source of stress and trauma for community organisations whose staff were often personally affected by the fires.

**“...some community members see me as a young [multicultural] leader, but the majority just see me as [name] who does work for the community. Another [multicultural] young leader, he’s in the education sector. No one pays him for that work. He does it outside of hours. When you’re not getting paid, and you’re there every day, staying there until 2, 3, 4am. If you don’t love what you’re doing, you wouldn’t do it...”**

...If you don't do it, the government's not going to do it. The army's not going to do it. We were telling the army that we've got families in crisis.

The water has reached their house, and we need to go pick them up. We didn't have cars. They [the army] has those huge cars, but they said, 'sorry, it's after hours'. The [the army] finished at 5pm. I think it was 7pm or something. If someone is struggling, you can't wait until tomorrow morning. We were there with this family helping them at like 8 or 9pm. We drove with cars that aren't designed for that. My car still has an issue from the floods that no-one is going to replace."

Community leader, regional Victoria

Across the spectrum of place-based and community-led initiatives supported by Collaboration for Impact, these challenges are common. There are efforts being made in establishing good practices to consider compensation in recognition of community members' time. For example, Hands Up Mallee (a community-led initiative based in Mildura, Victoria) has developed with community members an agreed process for reimbursement for participating in collaborative governance, yarning groups, and project workshops. There are different rates of reimbursement depending on the type of participation. Families have a choice as to what form to receive the honoraria (voucher or direct payment to account).

## Decision-making and Resourcing to Government Timeframes

There are inherent power dynamics at play between priorities at a community level and at a system-level. This plays out in the tensions between different approaches to decision-making and organisational missions. In some instances this has been interpreted as collaborative and community-centred versus centralised or hierarchical disaster risk reduction. There is significant crossover between the systemic challenges of power dynamics and resource flows.

**"Big bureaucratic agencies are structured in a really specific way. That means, you know, there's not a bigger voice for community in those structures."**

Manager, local council, regional NSW

Research participants spoke of a failure to learn from the community in a genuine two-way process. They noted top-down decisions needing to be made quickly in response to disasters, with less of a focus on supporting longer-term recovery and adaptation activities. Holding a lower risk appetite, government agencies may be more likely to retain control of decision-making and resources, exacerbating challenges with resourcing essential community activities and infrastructure.

**"There are decisions that are made [in disaster response] that maybe wouldn't have been made in the normal context, but we don't recognise that in chaos, there's a different way of making decisions. I think if we had more time to think about this, consider talking to the community, talking to each other (in Council), we would have landed differently."**

Manager, local council, regional NSW

Government-driven timelines for resource allocation in the response phase can preclude the voices of community members being heard who are likely to disproportionately experience the impacts of the event. This is especially relevant for groups who are systematically excluded from decision-making on climate change, including people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, Aboriginal people, young people, older people, and those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

“The speed at which the government kind of comes in with this money means that we... [all services] have to think really quickly about how to design a project or spend money and they’ve got days or weeks to figure that out. That means that there’s duplication of services, there’s huge gaps, you know, all these things that play out. Then you add in the extra complicated level of you might be personally impacted as well as having to act in your professional role.”

Manager, local council, regional NSW

“The speed in which decisions have to be made in response is challenging. Compared to the recovery, it really frustrates me that there is less of a willingness to throw money into looking at risk and adaptation, because essentially, that is how you prevent getting into those situations in the first place, right? I think a lot of that leads to these injustices that occur.”

Practitioner, local council, regional NSW

“I just remember when the flooding happened, and we were all just pulled into every direction. As an LGA we got given \$3 million and then \$1 million and got told to find projects. That doesn’t allow for community consultation, that doesn’t allow for strategic planning, that doesn’t allow for collective decision-making or ownership over what’s most important.”

Manager, local council, regional NSW

Research participants expressed frustration of bureaucratic and impractical funding rules and procedures for recovery efforts that are restricted to initial stages of recovery (12-18 months) after which resources phase out. This left a lack of dedicated resourcing where communities and organisations with fewer financial resources have the least capacity to act despite supporting some of the highest priority communities.

“A lot of people don’t present for help until after 18 months after a disaster... by that time, things have moved from acute into chronic and then they’re much more difficult problems to solve. We’re about to enter that space here now. But it also coincides with the end of all of the funding.

“So, we’re moving out of acute into chronic, and we’re not going to have any resources to deal with it either... There is even less funding to deal with more complex issues – the more complex, the less resources. It’s like an inverse relationship into the way you would look to solve the problem.”

Senior Leader, community organisation, regional NSW

## Institutional and Structural Inequities

Most of the research in this project has focused on participant experience in relation to disaster response and recovery efforts. However, the barriers to participation cannot be separated from institutional and structural inequity.<sup>5</sup>

The Australian space is shaped by coloniality and entrenched with white patriarchal sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2004). Australia's ongoing legacy of colonisation excludes some, namely First Nations people, from formal decision-making systems and structures. As one participant highlighted; vulnerability to climate change is not inherent in, but is created by, unjust systems rooted in Australia's historical, cultural, and socio-political context:

**"We don't name the colonial structures or the systems...it's not that communities have fewer resources themselves, it's because structures and systems don't allow them to, or the systems and structures are not set up for that... I don't think the oppressor here is climate change."**

Manager, community organisation, metro Victoria

In researching justice theory on climate change and the capacity to participate, Shchlosberg argues that the key concern is in understanding "what determines poor distribution — the institutionalised domination and oppression that underlies injustice... distributive injustices stem from a lack of recognition; cultural and political exclusions lead to vulnerability and economic inequality." (Schlosberg, 2012 pp. 450).

Research participants referred to emergency service organisations commonly lacking diversity in gender, age, culture, and ethnicity. There are several reasons why this is the case, including historical inequities (discrimination and social inequities that persist), network effects through historical agencies or lack of minority group representation at the leadership level, to name a few. All of these create conditions adverse to the inclusion of diverse people within organisations and between service workers and communities. This is not unique to climate justice as responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have shown.

**"[The multicultural community] strengths and needs, and their own priorities as communities, are not very well understood by our mainstream organisations. Particularly in the emergency management sector. Those agencies and organisations are very much male, very Western, both in their makeup and their approach. And operate within a Western framework and way of thinking and way of doing things."**

**"It comes down to inclusion and diversity. I think the emergency management and disaster resilience sectors are not very inclusive."**

Manager, community organisation, metro Victoria

<sup>5</sup> Institutional inequalities stem from the policies and practices of organisations (educational institutions, government, companies) and are often experienced as the status quo, whereas structural inequalities are based on the accumulated effects of institutional decisions across society and history (Lewis, Hasty, Snipes 2023).

This was similarly reflected in the rapid review which noted that for First Nations communities, a key barrier was the lack of cultural competency and willingness for genuine engagement by government agencies. This included the reported omission of First Nations interests and perspectives from major post-bushfire inquiries, situating First Nations groups as an “historical footnote, rather than featuring as contemporary residents, as First Peoples, as land and rights holders, or as part of contemporary fire management” (Williamson, Markham & Weir 2020, p. 14).

Similarly, several studies reported on the failure of government and emergency management agencies to meaningfully engage with the experiences of newly arrived communities, including ensuring that information and resources are fit for purpose: persisting with written translated information rather than video/audio assumed shared understanding of concepts, assumed digital and language literacy, and neglect of oral traditions of certain communities (Chandonnet 2021; Steenvorden, Arashiro & Vincent 2022).

# Opportunities

The insights from the rapid review and interviews highlight the ways in which climate change exacerbates inequity. They also pinpoint key conditions that require attention to enable a more effective response to climate change, one that promotes greater equity and encourages community-led action.

This section briefly outlines three opportunities that provide a means to address the structural barriers to community-led action on climate change while centering equity and inclusion in a response. These are not community-specific and rather provide a means for the diverse knowledge, skills, experiences and needs of communities to be adequately represented and enabled.

## Opportunity 1: Collective learning systems at multiple scales

There is an opportunity to bring together actors across places and scales for collective learning and action on systemic issues.

Climate injustice is a systemic issue requiring collaborative action across various levels, involving individuals, community members, include: cultural leaders, industry, service agencies, philanthropic and government bodies.. In climate change adaptation and planning, it's crucial to incorporate perspectives from diverse voices often marginalised due to structural inequities, particularly those systematically excluded from decision-making processes on climate issues. Interviewees emphasised the importance of coordinated, community-scale organisations in enhancing disaster response, recovery, and resilience efforts:

*"I don't think we as a community really have one central point that is advocating for this...and having shared priorities and understanding how on an individual household level, as an organisation, as big business, the farms, how it all ties in. I just feel that we're not at that. We're not at action, as a community."*

Chief Executive Officer, community organisation - regional Victoria

Establishing collective learning systems across scales (local, regional, national) and sectors (public, private, philanthropic) has the ability to:

- establish new relationships and foster trust through facilitated dialogue,
- enable knowledge sharing collaboration between actors,
- facilitate shared-decision making and collective action,
- create network and systems for collecting and sharing data, tools, and resources,
- shift power dynamics and embed multiple accountabilities across the system.



Drawing on Collaboration for Impact's experience supporting community-led, place-based change, in particular in the *Stronger Places, Stronger People* initiative, we have seen communities benefit from opportunities to learn directly from each other. A national scale network could support connections between communities offer a platform to learn and share.

Collective learning and action at a regional, bio-regional and local-level could also enable community-wide dialogue and planning in anticipation of further climate impacts. For example, by supporting community members, community organisations, council, emergency services and service providers, to meet and focus on equity and inclusion. Convening would contribute to key enablers of community-led action and resilience building including:

- Shared understanding of the challenges of climate justice
- Inclusion of experiences of groups who have been excluded from decision-making on climate change
- Building of social capital and networking across the community
- Understanding of community strengths, assets and social infrastructure
- Understanding of local risks and vulnerabilities
- Coordination and support of joint action
- Cross-sector, collaborative literacy building
- Development of appropriate actions and activities
- Building of trust across the community
- Effective, transparent and coordinated data and communications.

Specifically, this could take the form of offering selected communities support through an independent, third-party to support a process that includes a broad range of voices. This offering would facilitate the group to share perspectives and identify priorities.

## 2

### **Opportunity 2: Pilot new models of sustainable and flexible investment in community-led approaches to climate change**

There is a need to test new ways to fund place-based, community-led activities that are sustainable.

The cascading impacts of climate change means there is a growing demand for support, exceeding governments' ability to fund disaster and recovery efforts. Sustainable models for investing in community-led approaches to climate change and resilience building need to be explored.

Interviewees shared a need for more flexible funding models and resources that

are community-controlled; a solution to the challenge of misaligned investment into community. Namely funding that is:

- Time flexible, needs-based post-disaster funding with allocation and distribution informed by community priorities, and
- Non-prescriptive funding for recovery and resilience projects to support creativity and inclusivity in project design

The research highlighted a desire from community members and organisations to both participate in and directly manage investments into the community for equitable and just outcomes. It was suggested that direct investment could support innovative projects to be incorporated to local emergency response, recovery, and resilience building efforts based on a community's own understanding of its strengths, assets, needs and vulnerabilities.

Communities called for addressing a gap in funding to support the following initiatives:

- Development of trauma-informed and culturally appropriate capability and processes
- Development and distribution of accessible, trusted, and reliable information
- Capability building and skills development of local leaders and responders in (i.e. emergency management)
- Resourcing for community leaders and members for essential, yet unpaid work, throughout different phases of the emergency management cycle
- Investing in coordinated community scale responses to build relationships and facilitate people to come together (e.g. backbone organisations)
- Investing in social scaffolding e.g. community connectors that play a role in connecting people, knowledge (research/skill development), resources (money/assets/land), and action
- Access to capital to build social continuity, social assets, and peer support, and developing community wide emotional literacy
- Access to resources to enable community groups to invest in intervention – building from the strengths of existing work undertaken by groups in the social justice space
- Purchase and replacement of personal and community physical infrastructure

Specifically, this could take the form of working with a select number of communities at differing levels of capability and readiness to develop and pilot new forms of financing and place-based (re)investment mechanisms.

# 3

## Opportunity 3: Support establishment of collaborative governance structures

There is a need to include diverse voices in decision-making around climate action, recovery, response and resilience building efforts.

Collaborative governance involves structures and processes that enable coordination across organisational and sectoral boundaries toward a common agenda (Emerson et al., 2011). Implementing collaborative governance structures at various levels holds promise for transforming relational dynamics and addressing power imbalances in current systems and decision-making processes. These structures would offer communities and stakeholders a shared platform to collectively address issues.

Research noted that agile and flexible governance arrangements were needed to enable organisations to respond quickly and proactively to emerging needs. One suggestion was establishing standing committees and community-endorsed frameworks for action that formally and continuously include community leaders as key partners across the disaster response, recovery and resilience policy process – beyond being engaged as ‘advisors’ (Keating et al. 2022).

Collaborative governance arrangements could support:

- Community decision-making about resource allocation and ownership, and
- Shared decision making between community, service sector and government agencies

It is important to note that for First Nations communities in particular, this necessitates long-term investment and decision-making pathways in recognition of: 1. the ongoing and systematic exclusion of Aboriginal people from policy-making settings; and 2. the unique status of Aboriginal peoples’ experiences, priorities and approaches in relation to disaster in the Australian context (Keating et al. 2022; Williamson, Markham & Weir 2020).

Specifically, this could involve supporting communities where there’s sufficient interest in establishing local governance structures that prioritise equity, incorporating the perspectives of community members, organisations, councils, emergency services, and service providers. Adequate resources and support would be necessary to ensure these governance structures account for diverse experiences across communities, addressing barriers to participation and decision-making. Given the context, it’s strongly advised to invest in building local capacity in cultural intelligence and trauma-informed, inclusive, and anti-oppressive practices to effectively integrate these principles into governance structures.

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