

A scenic landscape at sunset with a woman's silhouette overlaid. The background shows a valley with rolling hills and a rocky foreground under a warm, orange and yellow sky. A faint, white outline of a woman's head and shoulders is superimposed on the right side of the image. The word 'Care' is written in large, bold, yellow letters, and 'through disaster' is written in smaller, bold, yellow letters below it.

Care through disaster

a new lens on what's needed to survive
and thrive in tumultuous times



The background of the page is a landscape photograph of a valley at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The land is covered in green vegetation. Overlaid on this image is a semi-transparent blue-tinted graphic of several traditional Indigenous Australian figures, possibly dancers or storytellers, in various poses. The figures are rendered in a simple, line-art style.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

First Nations of Australia have been caring for community and Country for over 60,000 years and they have continued to do so through the ongoing disaster of colonisation.

Living, loving and working across this country, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to elders both past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

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Introduction

Australia is a place of contrasts and extremes: deep vast blues and sunburnt browns, bustling urban centres and vast open countryside, tropical rainforests and arid deserts. We're a land of droughts and floods, fires and frozen peaks, rare and deadly wildlife.

While we have weathered many a storm in our long and ancient history, in the coming decades we're expecting conditions that will challenge even the heartiest and most resilient communities to survive and thrive. Globally and here at home we're already seeing an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. We know that because of the damage 'baked in' to our Earth's climate, that without far more rapid and radical decarbonisation, our future is looking grim indeed.

"Climate change is exacerbating the frequency and severity of natural disaster risk from bushfires, flooding, storms, coastal inundation, erosion and landslip," according to the 2023 Intergenerational Report from Treasury.¹ Looking 40 years into the future, the report predicts a minimum tripling of federal government spending on disaster relief, relative to historical averages. That's \$130 billion in today's dollars, assuming global action is only sufficient to limit temperature increases to 3°C.²

While we may have become accustomed to hearing about 'unprecedented' temperatures, heatwaves and disaster conditions, it's fair to say that disaster itself is no longer unprecedented. On the contrary, it's expected.

Indeed, no Australian has been untouched by disaster in recent times³. Fires, floods, a global pandemic – visible disasters all set against a backdrop of dramatically rising living costs, growing private debt and breathtakingly unaffordable housing, which make people more vulnerable to begin with and less resilient in the aftermath.



How we move forward matters. We can choose to face these challenges in ways that exacerbate inequality and atomisation, or we can find new ways to approach these problems that allow us not just to survive, but to build the type of country and communities of which Australians dream.⁴

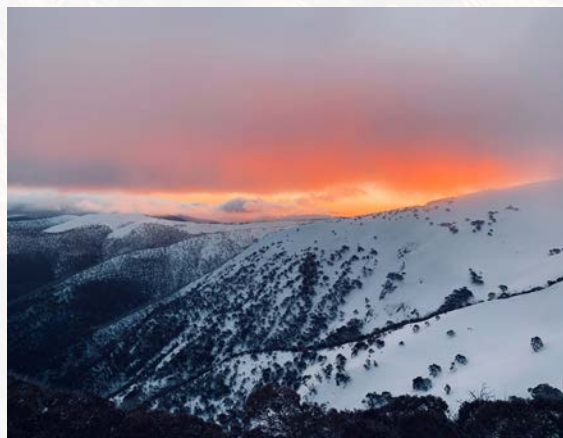
The challenge of these times is to become even better at looking after each other. The stakes are rising, but we can rise, too.

This research

BACKGROUND

In 2022, Australia reMADE released a qualitative research report⁵ outlining what people broadly want for their communities. It stated that once basic needs are met, people want the opportunity to *connect with each other and with place*, the ability to *care and be cared for*, and *pathways to contribute locally and nationally* to who we are as a nation. The report calls these “3Cs” of Care, Connection and Contribution forms of “public good”.

In *Care through Disaster*, we take the public good of Care, and explore how we can better set ourselves up to care and be cared for well during times of great disruption. ***When disaster strikes and business as usual falls away, what works and what doesn't? What needs to already be in place so people can continue to survive, recover and thrive?***



What do we mean by care?

“Care is our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures on the planet to thrive – along with the planet itself.”

– The Care Collective⁶

Care is essential, fascinating and touches everything. It’s both personal and political, a driving force in our private lives and public policy.

In our earlier work on the public good, we looked primarily at the formal institutions of care: the hospital beds and childcare centres, as well as the enabling infrastructure (adequate staffing ratios, time) and the way care is delivered (whether people felt income support payments were there to make them feel cared for, or ashamed)⁷. Elsewhere, we’ve explored how valuing care is very much a policy choice, rather than merely a personal challenge for our individual lives.⁸

In *Care through Disaster*, we focus on care through a community lens – acknowledging that both in everyday life and when things get tough, care is the glue that holds us together. Thankfully, these acts of care extend well beyond our private lives and immediate families, into the places where we live and work.

People feed neighbour’s pets while they’re in hospital and call in to see their friends for a cup of tea and a chat. Local organisations, like the fire service, care for us not just by risking their lives when our homes and environment are on fire, but by organising a yearly lolly drop from Santa to the neighbourhood kids at Christmas.

People donate their time to help the most vulnerable in our communities through mutual aid as well as more traditional forms of charity – cooking meals for people experiencing homelessness and dropping groceries to those who are sick. They also make theirs and others’ voices heard, protesting and pushing governments to ‘get their priorities right’ and care for all of us.

However we also live in a world dominated by neoliberal capitalist states that encourage us to be individualistic, entrepreneurial and uncaring in the pursuit of economic gain. People and planet suffer – trees fall, carbon is emitted, people can’t afford homes and people languish on hospital waitlists. In this system, while care might be done for all kinds of reasons – from necessity to altruism – it becomes an act of resistance.

While it’s beyond the scope of what we can cover here, there is a growing body of literature taking care seriously, and we particularly recommend *The Care Manifesto: The politics of interdependence* (2020) to anyone who wants to explore this further.



Care through Disaster

Care through disaster speaks to our basic needs as humans to care and be cared for, needs which are only amplified in times of crisis. Yet, as with the way care is largely invisible and undervalued more broadly, care in times of disaster often gets dismissed as something ‘soft’ and somehow less essential; something to turn our attention to once all the ‘important things’ have been addressed.

In this traditional view of disaster, let’s call it the ‘*Disaster 1.0*’ lens, efficiency is everything. We want to know how quickly we can evacuate a certain number of people, how soon it is safe to get supplies into a flooded region, and what are the most expedient ways to communicate with the population. Questions that are, of course, essential and important.

But what happens when we overlay these questions with the public good of Care? How does that change how we prepare for, and respond to, disaster? Which needs does it reveal and equip us to better anticipate and meet? We call this lens ‘*Disaster 2.0*’ – the lens of Care through Disaster.

THE METHODOLOGY

In 2023, in partnership with Women’s Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE), Australia reMADE recruited more than 80 people from the Goulburn Valley region and north-eastern Victoria. Each had a different experience of care through disaster: from those on the frontlines, such as the State Emergency Service (SES) and Country Fire Association (CFA), to those working for local councils, Neighbourhood Houses and other community support groups. We also spoke with people from local clubs and societies, and a broad range of interested community members from a diversity of backgrounds.

Additionally, we drew on experts and research from beyond regional Victoria, to ensure both national and global data were taken into account. Mindful of engaging sensitively with groups and individuals who may have been ‘over consulted’ about their experiences of disaster, this blended approach allowed us to strike a balance between local voices and insights, against a backdrop of wider data and research.

We took a Grounded Theory approach and via a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups, as well as an online survey, centred our inquiry on two key questions: “***what does it mean for you to be cared for through disaster?***” and “***what sort of support do you and your communities need?***”.

Further details can be found on our website:

www.australiaremade.org/care-disaster.



The findings and implications

PART 1

For people to Care and be Cared for through disaster, they need three things:

- **They need to be SEEN (in their communities and by government authorities, within communities that are strong and connected).**
- **They need to be SAFE (through disaster prevention and mitigation, access to safe places and accurate, timely, accessible information).**
- **They need to be SUPPORTED (equipped to support each other before, during and after disaster).**

In part 1 of this report, we detail each of these in turn, along with a running vignette that illustrates how it might look and feel in practice if these elements were all in place next time disaster strikes.

PART 2

Here, we turn our attention to the implications of these findings. We argue that strong, connected communities are not only beneficial in their own right, but essential infrastructure for disaster preparation, survival and recovery. We consider how the work of building such communities is often gendered, overlooked and undervalued. And we explore additional solutions, including new policies that can empower people to survive and thrive in an increasingly disaster-prone world.

Part 1 – The Findings

In order to care through disaster, people need to be SEEN, SAFE and SUPPORTED

SEEN: enabling community connection and cohesion

People need to be SEEN by each other and by organisations and institutions, enough so that their needs can be anticipated, and their expertise and agency respected.

“If a community is caring for itself and all the people in it before a fire, they are going to be better set up to care for each other after a fire.”

– Jacqui, social worker and small town resident

“To build that social coherence prior to disaster – if you already have a strong glue then that trust is already there.”

– Cindy, small town resident and business owner

Communities do significant care work for each other, and this is particularly true during disaster. Neighbours talk to neighbours, families and friends check in on each other and people go out of their way to support “their” communities. There is something wonderful about being a part of a collective working together for something bigger than the individual, and a kind of thrilling camaraderie that comes with the clarification of what is important that disaster brings.

Participants spoke with pride and surprise about the connections they made during disasters, echoing findings from other recent research which demonstrates how disaster so often facilitates the kind of community cohesion people dream about.⁹ We heard about how participating in the Country Fire Authority created a sense of a ‘second family’, and about the sense of camaraderie that appeared as high school kids lumped sand bags alongside older members of the community. Speaking at an event hosted by Australia reMADE and WHGNE, First Nations man and local Councillor Greg James reflected on the experience of a recent flood, and the joy of how ‘the normal rules of social engagement go out the window and everyone just works side by side to get things done’.

This ability to build something wonderful out of disasters points to what might be possible at other times.

Rebecca Solnit captures this most famously in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, but what our research suggests is that we need to build the paradise first, to protect us from the hell.¹⁰ Furthermore, we know how to do this. It’s not a mystery or a mission impossible; however building strong communities does take time and thoughtful investment. It doesn’t happen by magic.

Knowing our communities

When a community knows each other, they are better prepared to offer care, including through disaster. This may sound obvious enough, but it's worth making explicit.

So many participants spoke about how their existing community connections meant they were better able to care and be cared for when disasters occurred. As Hannah, a resident of the small-town Yackandandah explained:

"We were connected to our community, through simply talking over the fence or on the way to the supermarket. So when we had the bushfires in Yack, we could anticipate each other's needs. We don't have a car, so the community offered to help us get our animals and property out if we needed it. Care was expressed in people anticipating each others' needs – because we knew each other so well. It wasn't the practicalities that felt like care, it was that people knew you enough to anticipate your needs."

For many people the initial source of support in a disaster came informally via neighbours or other community members, in part because they were likely to be on the scene first. As Sonja, a disaster resilience officer with the Red Cross explained to us, *"Often it's your neighbours and passers-by that are going to be the first responders in a disaster"*. While Cindy, a local from the King Valley observed, *"Care comes from the members of the community: the CFA [Country Fire Association] captains, your neighbour down the road that turns up with a chainsaw"*.

To have their basic needs respected and anticipated, people need to be seen.

Our research found that just being a part of a community more broadly, and seen as belonging, helped people to access care and support in the moment of disaster – particularly in the context of more formalised networks of care.

By contrast, people told us about the significant risk to those who, for various reasons, are not connected to the community. Those who were not networked into the community tend to be less supported. When people are unseen both in and out of disaster, it compounds vulnerabilities, and can have dire impacts. We heard at length about the risks associated with being on the margins – whether that was because of poverty, social isolation, disability, language barriers or other factors.

Liza, a woman involved in community service provision, explained how people are told to prepare for disaster by stocking up with food to last them at least 72 hours, but, *"many members of our community can't [afford] to fill their cupboards to have a week's worth of food. [During the last disaster] there was a misunderstanding at the local [council] level at how much need would be out there"*.

When people are already struggling to manage the basics of life, whether it's putting food on the table, paying the bills, or getting support they need to manage a disability, it is incredibly difficult to plan for disaster. As a society we need to be seeing, and then meeting, these basic needs long before disaster strikes.

Remembering to see 'outsiders'

Many regional areas rely on seasonal tourists and so often have high numbers of people who are unknown. Housing, supporting and accounting for them in a time of crisis is difficult as informal existing networks often fail to connect. Carmen, a local State Emergency Services [SES] Victorian regional coordinator, explained that it was difficult to care for people who didn't have existing ties to the community. She believed her local council did nothing to properly support tourists after her town experienced severe flooding. *"The care was lacking from the local council because they weren't our community. It wasn't their home that had been displaced by the flooding, it was their campsite. We want to care for everyone who comes to our community, not just our locals,"* she said.

Recognising individual and community vulnerabilities

A community that sees its members and their vulnerabilities is one better positioned to ensure people's needs are met during a disaster. For example, research shows that rates of family violence against women are higher after disaster, with the isolation and perceived lack of confidentiality that comes with being rural making it especially difficult for women to report.¹¹ We heard one story of a woman needing to leave a family violence situation, following a flooding event in a small town. The leader of a Neighbourhood House, knowing the context, organised some people from the Men's Shed to help support the woman to safely leave her home. For this to have been successful, the Neighbourhood House leader had to have a very clear understanding of how the community was connected, and who was and wasn't likely to be safe.

Another example of the power of a connected community to anticipate each other's needs comes from the experiences of the Congolese community in Albury Wodonga during the early days of the pandemic.

For recent migrants and refugees from the Congolese community, English is not only not their first language, it may actually be their sixth. Navigating the complex and ever-changing rules of the pandemic and understanding the sources of support as they unfolded was both difficult and distressing. One woman, external to the Congolese community, realised that her friend was really struggling and assumed the rest of the group was likely to be in a similar position. Recognising she couldn't provide all the support alone, she brought in the wider community to help organise food supplies. Having someone fluent in English and able to act as an informal go-between was key to the Congolese community getting the care they needed.

“Disasters find existing frailties and weaknesses in the system and pry them open to victimise some more than others.” – Rebecca Solnit ¹²

The scenario, part 1

You're a member of a rural town, where you've lived for the last three years. You work locally, your partner works from a laptop, and your kids go to the local primary school. While the prospect of fires and even floods are real, you feel pretty confident that your community is well-equipped to manage.

Personally, you've got a home, plenty of food, access to healthcare, education and you feel known and valued as a member of the town. Because you now work three days per week, you've got time to paint, volunteer at the library, and last month you got your chainsaw ticket so that in the event of extreme weather, you're ready and able to slot into the local State Emergency Services as some extra surge capacity.

Your local town might not have a major hospital, but the medical centre is well-funded, and the conditions are so good that practitioners clamour to work there.

Later tonight you're going to an event at the town hall. It's recently been refurbished, which is a relief because your partner, who is in a wheelchair, can finally get in the front door to join in the fun and isn't worried about getting to the toilet. The recently installed air filters now help protect against Covid and other airborne disease, and will also deal with the smoke when the next bushfire comes through.

The thought of an evacuation is unsettling, but in the worst case scenario it's comforting to know you'll be able to shelter in a place you know, with people you feel a sense of connection to – including friends and contacts who know you well enough to help anticipate your family's needs and make the most of what you have to offer.

Government funding can enable people to build the relationships that make them feel seen

While friends and neighbours are important, strong community connections are also created – formally and informally – through local government-funded institutions such as Neighbourhood Houses, libraries and community service providers. These institutions may offer formal services, but because they are already embedded in communities, their activities are conducted in a way that creates and strengthens space for social connection and cohesion.

We've already heard about the Neighbourhood House leader who was able to organise men from the local Men's Shed to help a woman to escape an unsafe family violence situation following a disaster in a very small town. The Neighbourhood House and Men's Shed were both existing community infrastructure, both supported by government funding.¹³

Liza from Shepperton told us how her local community services organisation helped coordinate distribution of food and other necessities during the 2022 floods off the back of strong existing community relationships:

"We had 200 residents that helped us with door knocking and distributing food to the community. We gave out 2800 food boxes. The whole community banded together. It wasn't expecting that government or services should step in, it was neighbours helping neighbours. They helped with what they had: someone had a four-wheel drive and someone had a tinny."

Indirectly, it's true that government assisted via their funding of the community services organisation; but the reason people managed so well during the floods was because of the relationships that funding had already enabled. Having trusted people and organisations already connected into the community before disaster strikes is essential. This was certainly Liza's experience: *"The connections that we had before the disaster hit were integral. Whether we needed a forklift driver or food and fresh vegetables, we could call on those connections."*

It was common for participants to explain how community spaces like local halls, Neighbourhood Houses, sports clubs and emergency service sheds often also served as evacuation centres. While these places provided practical assistance, they were also places of comfort where people could feel supported and connected.

As Betsy, a Neighbourhood House manager in one of the smaller towns that endured recent flooding explained, *"We called ourselves the house of hugs... You could get a cup of tea, a hug and one of Carol's muffins. [People] felt that there was support."*

Carmen, a local SES member, talked about the role of the local SES shed during a disaster. *"We can make them a cup of coffee and try and give them the tools to reduce their fears a bit or help them be as prepared as they can."*



When you are already known in the community, it is easier to offer comfort and care alongside practical information and support.

Libraries are another example of an existing infrastructure of care that gets repurposed as a familiar port of call during and after disaster. Kate, a woman who worked with the local council, explained that the library became a focal point for supporting a lot of the elderly in the community to access disaster grants and payments. More than just computers, the library provided staff support to help people understand the system:

“We had a lot of elderly people come into the library trying to apply for the emergency funding grants of \$1,000 and \$1,500. A lot of elderly people couldn’t understand the MyGov system. We spent time logging them in and helping them fill out the form. They didn’t have this computer literacy and they didn’t have access to computers at home. Once we got the recovery hub up and running people could be helped there.”

Government authorities and other external operators need to see local expertise

People want their knowledge to be seen and respected by external experts and government authorities.

Whether it’s an understanding of how floodwater is likely to run and how this interacts with weather predictions, or how best to fly helicopters through smoke and wind, there is a great deal of specific and detailed expertise that shapes how we respond to various types of disasters. Some of this expertise exists within communities, while some of it needs to be brought in from the outside.

We clearly heard the need for more avenues for local expertise to be seen and respected. For example, Karen told us about the local firefighters in Corryong: they had specific knowledge of how fire would travel up a certain valley, but once firefighters from outside the region were brought in and given control, the local knowledge was disregarded.

While there is a place for external support, *“[I]t’s the experiences of the people in the area that count the most,”* as Tabitha, a long-time resident of a region prone to being isolated during flooding, explained. She told us how, during the most recent floods, she and her family had watched the SES blow up their boats to motor over and rescue them in a big display for the media. From Tabitha’s perspective they didn’t need rescuing. *“We’d chosen to stay here knowing that we’d be fine and could support each other.”*

Locals didn’t want their place-based expertise to be disregarded, and they didn’t want their disaster experience to become a media stunt opportunity for politicians and other ‘heroes’.

Jade, who had experience working for local council, explained that so often the frustration with external support comes as a result of the community feeling generally ‘unseen’ by the powers that be, and how this is exacerbated by the rural-urban divide. She explained, *“The talking heads from government speak like a script and they don’t listen to people first. It gets people’s back up. There’s a perception that the speak comes from the city; people behind a desk who haven’t experienced it.”*

Seeing communities

Infrastructure needs to be put in place for people to be truly seen for their vulnerabilities, agency and expertise – before, during and after disaster.

Governments, charities and other organisations most likely to work with people in a disaster context need to build strong relationships and connections with community leaders and members. This means having processes in place to truly listen to communities and then to act on what is heard: for example engaging people (including those on the margins) in surveys, town hall meetings, kitchen table conversations, door knocks, vulnerability and asset mapping, online forums, resilience planning; or simply chatting to people at the local shop, community events or over a coffee. Recognising the relational elements of disaster preparedness and recovery and investing in them is important.

We heard that registers of vulnerable people were important infrastructure for ensuring that everyone is seen, but that they needed to be more expansive, and easier to join. Liza said that in her experience working with the vulnerable, *“The hoops that they needed to jump through to be registered were extreme.”*

Insights can also be gathered from the information that’s already out there – media reports, local council websites, government data and academic research. Some communities are already over-consulted, and perspectives can be gained without having to take more of their time, but there are not shortcuts to building relationships.

Those gathering the insights need to do so with respect, and show that they are actively listening. It’s important not to come into these sessions with preconceived ideas, or already having a pre-decided answer.

Key Takeaways: SEEN

While disaster can often create the sense of community people have been searching for, existing community connection and cohesion are essential infrastructure for disaster, and need to be in place well before disaster strikes.

- We need to be equipped to **see each other – both for our needs and vulnerabilities, and expertise.** Already connected communities are communities that survive and thrive.
- We need to **know each other** and to **know the places** we are likely to seek help in **BEFORE disaster strikes.**
- **Existing community services** and infrastructure, such as libraries, Men’s Sheds and Neighbourhood Houses **become places of refuge**, support and comfort in times of disaster.
- Government authorities and external operators need to put **infrastructure in place to truly see communities’ vulnerabilities and expertise.** Building community connections, allowing people to have their say and existing information can be used to bolster insights.

SAFE: preventing where possible, providing refuge where not

People need to be as safe as possible from physical and psychological harm; safe from the disaster itself and safe in the places where shelter and relief are sought.

“I don’t expect as a community that we should expect anyone to go into those situations ever again.”

– Wendy (a deputy mayor who saw her community through the 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires)

Preventing disaster

Prevention is better than cure and people were clear in wanting governments to act to reduce risk.

Communities know that disasters are getting worse and more frequent as a result of climate change – they’re the ones on the front lines experiencing it, as they fight uncontrollable fires and stand on their roofs as flood waters rise where they never have before.

Jade, who had significant experience working in disaster resilience, caught the mood of many people we spoke with as she expressed her intense frustration at lack of government action: *“The planet’s on its death rows and people aren’t going to take much notice, it seems... how much more evidence do you need of the impact of climate change?”*.

Prevention is not just about climate change mitigation, it is also about adapting policies and infrastructure to suit the changing and more disaster-prone climate. People told us that this means no more developments on flood plains, destroying forests or constructing bridges which divert the natural water flow. There was a strong desire to see First Nations-led fire management practices, local councils developing resilience plans with the community and ensuring that the local SES had the equipment they needed.

In some places we also need new infrastructure or to renovate what we already have, in order to keep us safe during disasters: things like ensuring a second road in and out of a fire-prone areas, a local hall that can withstand extreme heat and a corner store situated above flood levels.

Disaster prevention is also about remaking the systems that currently mean people are likely to be more severely impacted by a large-scale crisis. When people are disadvantaged because of factors like isolation, poor health, poverty or lack of housing, their ability to prepare for, and respond to, disaster is diminished.

We need functioning health systems, public housing and social welfare before disaster strikes. As Kylie saw it, we need big systems level structural change because for her, *“Capitalism is the disaster that underpins every single thing that we’re talking about.”*

Our current national approach to crisis is through an efficient “just in time” model, where resources such as food, water and fire fighting equipment are deployed and ordered at the last minute so that costs are reduced and budgets are smaller.¹⁴ Research shows that only 3% of funds are spent on preparation, with the rest diverted to recovery.¹⁵ To prevent and prepare for what is coming, we need to shift the focus.

Safe places

Evacuation centres

Of course, disasters will happen. And when they do, people need places to go that are safe from immediate threat – whether this is an evacuation centre, a fire bunker or safe accommodation with family and friends. For these to be truly safe places they need to meet the diverse needs of the community. While we heard about many positive experiences of the places people sought shelter, we also heard that for some people their needs went unmet.

Wendy, a deputy mayor from a regional area with similar experiences to the Goulburn Valley and North-East Victoria, explained that:

“What we learnt from the Black Summer bushfires was startling, just how underprepared we were to care for mothers and young people [in evacuation centres] [...] We had designated evacuation centres but they were completely ill suited to the situation. I had people tell me ‘I would never go to one of those evacuation centres’. If you have a disability or any special needs that’s not the place to go.”

This observation aligns with research on emergency preparedness for families with very young children, which found evacuation centres were better equipped to deal with pets than babies!¹⁶ People spoke of a lack of access for people with disabilities, not enough beds or places for the elderly to lie comfortably and unbearable heat.

Physical safety is important and in an emergency situation is always prioritised. But preparing individuals and organisations with basic mental health training can help improve people’s psychological safety and limit the traumatic impact of an event.¹⁷ Kylie told us about a woman who had a panic attack at an evacuation centre. Staff and volunteers did not recognise it for what it was and responded in ways that exacerbated the situation. Prior training would have reduced the distress for everyone.

Safety takes on another dimension for marginalised members of the community especially. A member of the LGBTQIA+ community told us that the constant threat of homophobia and transphobia from society more generally meant there was an underlying fear of new spaces, or spaces with a history of discrimination. As Harriet, a social worker and member of the LGBTQI+ community explained, *“[The queer community] live with hyper awareness that they can’t be their true selves otherwise we’ll be in danger.”*

The experience of First Nations people in the 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires is a specific example of where a marginalised community was failed by the emergency response systems in place. Because they experienced poor treatment and racism while fleeing from disaster, many were hesitant about seeking further support from mainstream services. They were also hesitant to go back to evacuation centres when the threat returned, and were exposed to higher fire risks as a result.¹⁸

We’ve also talked above about the heightened instances of family violence in the aftermath of disaster, including contexts like the pandemic when families were trapped at home. The National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines, developed by the Gender and Disaster Pod, offer clear suggestions for how family violence can be better prevented and managed in the disaster context. Recommendations include involving gender specialists in organisational emergency management guidelines, engaging local and already-embedded organisations where possible (to avoid outsourcing to unknown parties), educating emergency managers to identify risk factors, and professional development that supports people involved in emergency management to understand the role gender stereotyping can play in exacerbating violence during disaster.

We discussed in 'SEEN' the value of places and services already embedded in the community. By contrast, where evacuation centres are not already visible, known and embedded within existing community infrastructure (either physically far away or not at a place people are already familiar with), they are less likely to be accessed and people are more likely to remain in unsafe locations.

This suggests governments may be better off funding and upgrading existing, multi-purpose infrastructure than building new single-use evacuation or cooling centres. This has certainly proven the case in places like Seattle, USA where cooling centres sit empty when they are difficult to access or unpleasant to be in.¹⁹

People need safe places to go that they will actually access. As Carina noted, *“During the recent fires, people were told to evacuate to Wodonga or Wangaratta. But they didn’t go because they wanted to be close to their homes. We need a place nearer where people can be safe.”*

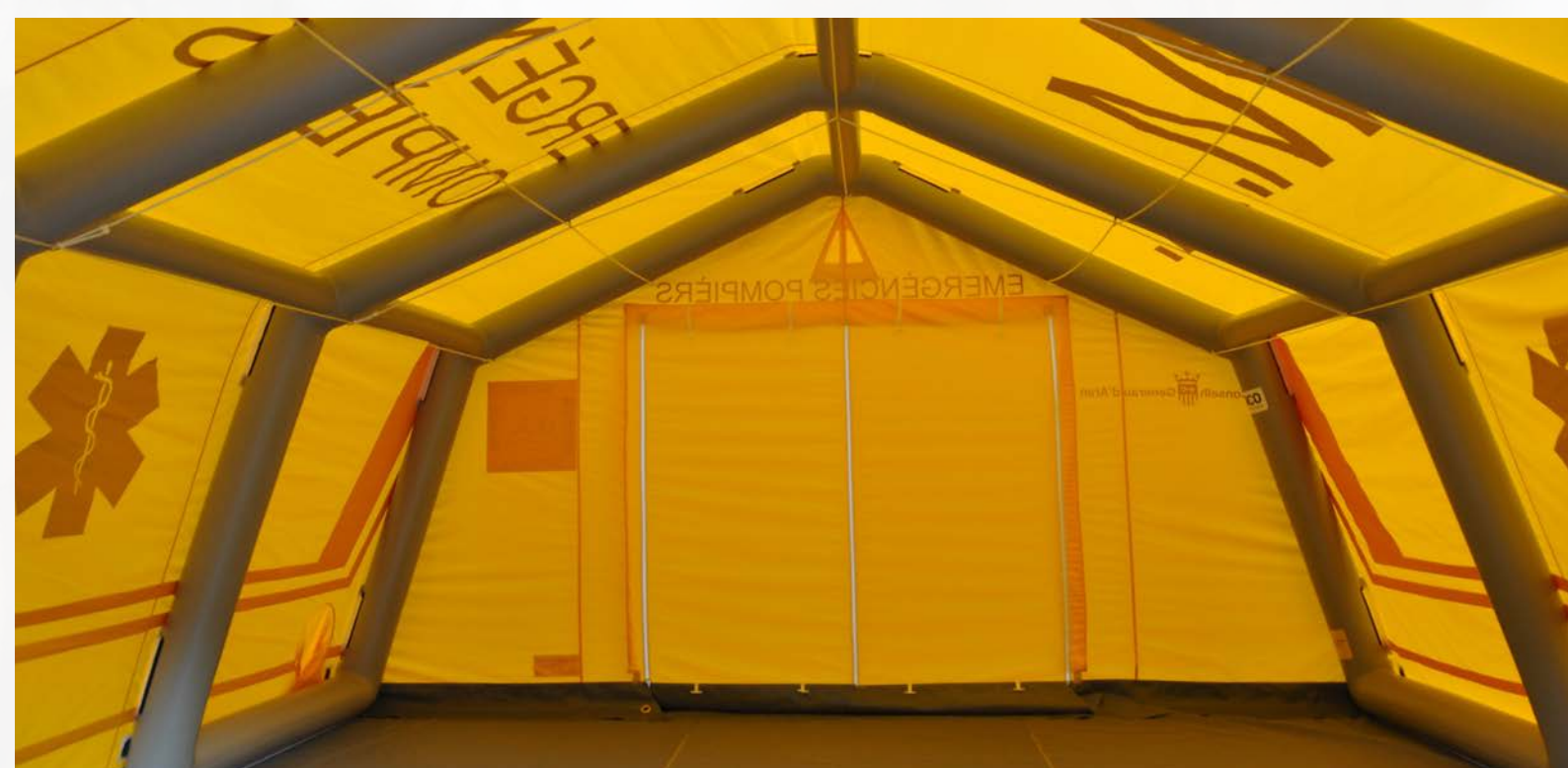
Temporary housing

Safe places are not only understood to be important during the moment of disaster, but in the months and even years that follow. We heard stories of temporary housing being unavailable, unsuitable or costly for people who’d already lost everything.

Caravan parks were often relied on by communities for temporary housing – but when they were situated near the river to attract tourists they were the first place to flood. In another community, the local caravan park operator went bust, leaving the closest accommodation fifty minutes away.

An elderly lady was unable to climb the stairs into the caravan she was provided with. Some caravan parks charged families \$800 a week for housing, and they were told that they couldn’t use their heaters because the electricity cost was too high.

It’s time to try alternative models to ensure that people can be appropriately housed after a disaster. What if the community owned assets like caravan parks? What if they were supported to connect, so everyone had a friend with a spare room for them to stay in? What if we had more social housing across the nation, with room for people not just in the good times, but the bad? While the technology and the designs exist for moveable temporary accommodation, we’re yet to see governments invest in this as a public asset.



The scenario, part 2

It happened. And wow, was it a lot. Even though you were prepared, things were pretty scary. There's a lot to process and much has been lost. But you made it to the evacuation centre and you're pleased that your kids are being distracted as they help out with some of the littlies in the playgroup room. You're taking a moment to just sit with others and chat through what it means to have lost the house.

For now, you're thankful to be in a familiar space with people who you know. Someone tells you that your partner is fine and will be getting a lift over later that day. While the kids are occupied you decide to take a turn cutting sandwiches, which feels better than sitting idly wondering what next.

You also sit with an elderly man for a while and listen to him talk about a major rain event from his childhood. He doesn't say it directly but you know he's thankful you've taken the time to connect and hear his story.

In the days that follow you're impressed with the simplicity of getting the basics done. Money goes into your account, no questions asked. Because you're already connected into the government system via the disaster preparation leave payments, all it takes is one phone call and you've instantly got money available to spend on basics.

Losing the house is tough. Nothing can bring back your parent's wedding photos, but thank goodness for the National Disaster Insurance Scheme. You can't imagine having to navigate an insurance company trying to back out of its commitment at this time.

You're not sure how long it will take before you can go back to work. Your partner's job is better paid so you'll probably be the one who has to take the time off to navigate a new place to live and new ways of living. You'll also be needed to help re-settle the kids (and who knows how long the school will be closed for) and to provide some sort of stability with so many changes.

It's not ideal, but it's relieving to know that you'll be paid properly through a government payment, your superannuation won't get behind, and it's recognised by your employer that this is not a failure on your part.

Even among the wreckage you're thinking about how you'll bring people together. You've noticed one of the teenagers, who was the lead in the school musical, is looking a bit lost. Your mind is already planning an afternoon concert...



Accurate and accessible information

To stay safe and to make good decisions under pressure in a crisis, people need accurate and accessible information about preparation, predicted weather, how a disaster is unfolding, where to seek shelter and other support, and how to begin the process of recovery. We've already talked about the importance of seeing and respecting local expertise. But we also heard about the impact of just poorly-timed and inaccurate information for people trying to keep safe during disaster.

Tabitha, a long-term community resident explained:

"We live in an area that gets isolated when it floods. We were doorknocked the night before a flood [to] warn us. [But then] the emergency warning system didn't go off until 1am, saying to get out now, when the water had already been too high to cross since 10pm. Some people tried to leave at that point because of the warning, which just created more risk."

While Tabitha had lived in the area for years and her local knowledge meant she was prepared to be flooded in, others in the area with less experience were put at greater risk as they tried to evacuate through unsafe flood waters in the dark – on the basis of out of date and therefore dangerous information.

Information keeps us safe, but we also need the monitoring systems and ways of distributing the information to be fit for purpose.²⁰ That includes user-friendly online platforms where those on the ground can share up-to-date and location-specific information about conditions.²¹

Information needs to be accurate, and it needs to be accessible and available in different forms. Participants were clear that door knocking, social media, phone trees, letter drops, town hall meetings, announcements in evacuation centres and the public ABC local radio were essential. These communication channels need to be in place and functioning *before* disaster strikes. They need to be the functional norm so that people don't need to change gears to get disaster information; they can just go to their usual trusted channels.

And it's not just about the channels used to communicate, it's also about language accessibility, how the information is conveyed and by whom. For example, Nswadi, a leader in the Congolese community one of the major regional centres explained how:

"People in the multicultural community don't have capacity to listen to what's on the radio and TV, because of language barriers. If they have a translation then they'll know what warnings there are and can prepare for themselves. When hard times happen, we need volunteers from different ethnic groups who can help because they can speak that person's language."

Cultural sensitivities are also essential to consider as information is shared. Again, Nswadi pointed to the Congolese experience: how many of his community were from refugee backgrounds and were thus anxious about opening the door to people in uniform due to past traumatic experiences. *"Everything that happened in Congo is still there in your head,"* he said. Similarly, for First Nations communities, a history of trauma relating to interactions with authorities is also important to be aware of and should inform disaster response.



Key Takeaways: SAFE

The conditions for people to both be and feel **SAFE** are set long before the flood waters are rising or the fire is over the hill.

- We need all levels of government to do everything possible to **prevent disaster** in the first place, and **limit its impacts** – including rapid decarbonisation, ensuring new homes aren't built on flood plains and managing fire with the age-old knowledge and practices available to us.
- We need to be and feel **SAFE in the places where shelter is sought**, or we won't use them. That includes women, babies and young children, the elderly, those with disabilities and those from marginalised backgrounds who too often experience discrimination.
- Places that are already **welcoming and familiar** to us are the places **we're most likely to turn to** in times of crisis. Investing in shiny new evacuation centres might not be as effective as upgrading existing, multi-use community infrastructure.
- We need accurate and **timely information that is accessible** to us in different forms, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach is likely to fail our most vulnerable when they most need help.



SUPPORTED: enabling communities to do what they do best

People need to be equipped to prepare, respond and recover.

Preparing for disaster

“If you’re prepared you won’t be anywhere near as scared as someone who has no plan. We can all help ourselves to feel better through disasters by being a bit more proactive.”

– Cindy (Kinglake resident)

People want better support to prepare for disaster. Participants were clear that they need more support from government agencies and programs to help them personally prepare for disaster. Support might be as simple as fridge magnets listing evacuation tasks, or the local fire service working with certain communities to access training and preparation as a collective. But having a plan in place, and the support to create one, is key.

Cindy talks about the importance of a plan:

“The one thing that every single farmer and person, the hospital, all the businesses that we spoke to about – the key thing was a plan. If they already had a fairly good plan before [the fires] happened they were the ones that bounced back way better than the ones who were flying blind. They had a compass to go to.”

Government and government agencies at different levels have an important role to play in supporting communities to develop both individual and community-wide plans. Examples of where the community saw this support include It’s Up to You for 72 run by WHGNE, or Red Cross’ community resilience or mental health first aid training programs.²² Disaster Legal Help Victoria educates communities on how to prepare their insurance for worst case scenarios. All of these programs are highly valued and arguably need better ongoing funding and support.

Moreover, everyone can be included in preparation. One participant from the SES told us of a program to prepare children for disasters by helping dolls pack an evacuation kit. In Tarnagulla, Victoria, the community got together to create a Resilience Action Plan, identifying their key risks and strengths, as well as goals to make them more resilient.²³

Yet a recent survey by Fire to Flourish, a transdisciplinary research program run out of Monash University, reveals that at least a third of people in disaster-prone areas do not feel prepared.²⁴ In our work people were questioning what to put in evacuation kits, where to store possessions safely and where to evacuate. People were unsure about how to minimise risks on their properties, whether or not they would be rescued by the SES and what boxes to tick on their insurance forms. With proper resourcing and the expansion of programs listed above, our communities can be better prepared to care for each other and themselves through disaster.

Supporting community volunteers

Small regional areas are particularly vulnerable when it comes to relying heavily on community engagement for disaster and emergency management.

Alana, an SES coordinator, spoke to us about the small town of Corryong. Located on the north eastern border of NSW and Victoria, 90 minutes from the nearest major centre at Wodonga, Corryong has a population of approximately 1,348 people. It was severely impacted by the Black Summer bushfires in 2019/2020, and then again by the pandemic. The local SES branch is too small these days to properly attend even the most basic of disasters such as car accidents.

Alana explained that numbers are low for two reasons. First, people are disaster fatigued and need a break from this ongoing type of emergency work. And second, towns like Corryong are seasonal with many folks having primary residences in larger towns.

For Corryong, the size and scale of overlapping disasters without proper external support has left them even more vulnerable to what happens next. The SES is essential community infrastructure but cannot function if communities do not have the capacity.

As Alana said, *“We need community to be SES for there to be an SES.”*

Brad, a member of the CFA, was also worried about volunteer numbers in the context of increasing disasters. He wanted a model that allowed spontaneous volunteering, so for example, anyone with a chainsaw ticket can quickly join in a time of crisis but doesn't necessarily need to commit to regular volunteering. He noted that *“When communities are cut off [due to disaster] they tend to do their own things. It would be good to have it more organised.”*

Both Carmen (SES) and Brad (CFA) talked about how their organisations were extremely successful in some communities, while in others they struggled to recruit and retain. Where they were successful, this was at least partially attributed to the way the group operated as an integral social hub for the community. Brad also said that while his CFA unit was adequately resourced much of the time, government needed to get better at listening to what volunteers want. Interestingly, local surveys by the CFA indicate that pay would not be a significant motivator for participation and that they volunteer to serve the community.

So if paying volunteers isn't a way to increase capacity, what is?

Brad explained that in his experience volunteers wanted their places of paid work better supported and encouraged to allow staff flexibility around disaster and volunteer leave. He thought that this could be in the form of tax breaks or financial support for businesses.

We heard from other participants that, unsurprisingly, a major reason they were unable to volunteer was a simple lack of time. As Cindy put it, *“It's hard [to join a volunteer organisation] when everyone is working non-stop to put food on the table.”*

And of course we need people not just to volunteer for the SES or the CFA on the frontlines, we also need the hearts and hands to make the cups of tea, soothe the anxious evacuees, door knock, coordinate volunteers and much more. A lot of this is done through formal disaster-oriented organisations, but much of it also emerges organically.

Ultimately, we heard that communities need more support to help themselves. While we heard that some local emergency services were well-resourced with the equipment they needed, we also heard that during the Black Summer bushfires, many crews were short of basic safety equipment (such as face masks) as well as the personnel to run the units. A lack of resources at all scales meant that some towns and regions were unprotected. Carina told us how shocked the locals were when told by the Department of Environment, Water, Land and Planning (DEWLP) that, *“If the fire comes through here we can’t protect you. We don’t have the resources.”* While governments are expected to have to dramatically increase their disaster funding in the next 40 years, it is important to note that resourcing is an active policy and budgetary choice.²⁵

Wherever possible government needs to facilitate and enable, not take over

Governments need to get better at offering support in ways that do not take over, or try to own processes and programs that communities are best-placed to lead.

We heard numerous examples of how government stepped in to take over community-run programs and how this was often a death knell for the services provided.

Chloe told us about the retreat that was organised by the community to give people some respite after the 2009 fires. There was a lot of community consultation and the event was a huge success. Chloe laughed as she then told us, *“[After that], well-meaning bureaucrats came in and imposed what they thought would be good for everyone... but people just didn’t go! The system just didn’t have a care lens.”* While the government may have taken elements of the organising burden from the community and made the process more efficient, they also (unintentionally) took away the personal nature of the event. It would have been more effective to have simply funded the community to organise themselves.

Betsy, the manager of a small Neighbourhood House, told us that her centre was used in the early days of the pandemic as a Covid testing clinic. After a time the Royal Australian Air Force (RAF) was brought in to provide much needed support, but because they took over without listening to those already on the ground, the effect was disruptive. From Betsy’s point of view the RAF ended up creating an environment in which many of the locals, particularly the elderly, felt unsafe to attend.

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) provides essential capacity in disaster preparedness, response and recovery. But the hierarchical organisation of the defence force means that it is less able to take instructions from the community members on the ground, who are most equipped to deliver them. As discussed above, the defence force also has the potential to re-traumatise people, particularly refugees, who have been discriminated against by authorities.

Furthermore, Greenpeace Australia Pacific²⁶ have expressed concern that ADF is not well set up to do this work: they don’t have the long term capacity, and nor is it an organisation set up specifically for disaster work. More significantly, if we centre the ADF as the ‘go to’ responder during a disaster, it contributes to the increasing militarisation of society. Ensuring a clear distinction between civil administration and the military helps to maintain our democracy and enables us to focus resources on expanding existing civil institutions.

The recent Defence Strategic Review itself found that using the defence force in disasters was detracting from their capacity to fulfil their defensive purpose.²⁷ With climate change worsening disasters, the Review saw disaster services as threatening to “overwhelm” the defence force.²⁸

The Federal Government needs to acknowledge that more frequent and intense disasters are our new normal, in part by getting better at enabling and trusting communities to lead. A federally-funded, resourced and trained disaster response team could increase capacities of communities to respond to disasters.

Support to recover

“The joy of care is in the timing.”

– Karen (long term resident of the region)

Communities and individuals need support to recover from disaster. Disasters have long tails and while the sudden crisis of an event might last a week, rebuilding can take months, if not years. And both physical and emotional support can be needed for decades.

When (and how) care is offered shapes the impact it can have. Research shows that disaster impacts linger long past the flashpoint moment.²⁹ As Cindy, a Kinglake resident, pointed out, *“The disaster might have been a short sharp event that took ten seconds but the recovery might take years.”*

Delays in receiving support to rebuild, coupled with the withdrawal of support services too soon, had big impacts on communities and individuals. Albert, a Yackandandah resident told us that *“It’s trauma, not just in the caring when things are happening right there and then when the fires are going through your community... but also these long delays in things getting fixed.”*

We heard many stories of people still unhoused months after disaster. Betsy, the Neighbourhood House manager noted that, *“We’re now nine months down the track and still nothing has happened. There’s still houses boarded up that can’t be lived in”*. Often these situations were a result of insurance companies being slow to pay out, long claims backlog and convoluted dispute processes. Marg, who works at a community legal centre, captured the mood well when she said, *“The idea that [insurance companies can] self-regulate is patently not working”*.

Having immediate access to money to buy basic goods and services is an essential that needs to be available to everyone affected after a disaster, and this needs to be easy and quick to access. While state and federal governments offer a range of disaster support payments and grants, navigating the websites simply to determine eligibility and what is on offer is stressful, convoluted and frustrating.³⁰

Thankfully the recent National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework³¹ highlights many of these issues, with key guiding principles including strengthening local community capability, ensuring frictionless access to help, providing culturally safe and appropriate support, and planning for long term support.

Getting ‘back to work’ is also about who can’t get back to work without timely action

According to the National Women’s Alliances, some of the most important elements of relief for women after a disaster were the quick reinstatement of public infrastructure such as roads, public transport, telecommunications, child care and schools.³²

This is not just about needing things up and running as quickly as possible so we can all get back in business. Following disasters, women tend to take up even more of the responsibility of unpaid care work – so that if basic services are not reinstated quickly, women often cannot return to paid work due to increased care demands.

Add to this that women are more likely to be in casual and part time roles in small businesses, which may not recover as quickly from disaster, increasing their economic insecurity. A care lens gives us an appreciation for minimising the disproportionate burden on those people, usually women, who are left picking up the pieces and keeping everyone going until life can return to normal.

The aftermath of disaster is also an opportunity to challenge gendered care roles; to respond and rebuild in ways that try to ensure care responsibilities are not just left to women.

“If paradise arises in hell, it’s because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems we are free to live and act another way.”

- Rebecca Solnit³³

Offering support that is universal and collaborative, rather than competitive

Participants told us repeatedly that their communities faced real challenges due to patchy funding following a disaster. Some organisations did not have the staffing or resources to deliver services they’d been funded for, and we heard that better funding prior to disaster would have made recovery easier. Funding often leaves out the most vulnerable – people experiencing homelessness or renters can’t claim grants to rebuild a house they didn’t have. Sometimes people’s businesses were considered too small for support. For example, Diana, a Corryong resident who had lived in the area for 6 decades was unable to access recovery grants because her farm was too small. *“We are small hobby farmers and we were left out when grants were being given. I find that very disappointing as it doesn’t matter if you have 13 acres or 1,300 acres.”*

Furthermore, we heard that when funding becomes competitive it threatens to damage the very infrastructure needed to get through disaster – community cohesion and trust. One anonymous survey respondent noted the way that community began to fracture once people had to compete for scarce funding. *“It was an odd reality to see how well the community banded together during the immediate impacts of the disaster, but in the years after, the community is more divided than ever.”* While disagreements will always be present, it does point to the need for universal systems of support.

This lack of awareness of the length of the tail of disaster also has impacts for mental health and wellbeing in communities.

A common theme was hearing that mental health support and other services more broadly were removed too soon following disaster – whether this was the availability of social workers and counselling services, or locally-run community events to support collective healing. Jodie, a long term resident and community services provider, has seen the significant and traumatic repercussions of what happens when people cannot access the services they need. *“Services come in and celebrities come and do all this great stuff and then it’s gone and the people haven’t recovered,”* she said. Jodie noted that there were suicides after the fires because people weren’t coping and the services weren’t there to help them.

Mary, the manager of a Neighbourhood House, also voiced concern about the impact of support services being withdrawn too soon. *“The other kids in the community who were really affected [by the fires] and are only just starting to show signs or talk about it, and they are about to pull all of these programs in the schools. That’s pretty frightening for me,”* she said.

Data from our research and elsewhere shows that mental health support in the form of counselling and access to social workers is often needed years down the track, rather than (or in addition to) the immediate aftermath. It’s not something we can parachute in and out. As much as possible, services need to be widely available for the long term.³⁴

Support needs to remain in place not just because individuals need it, but because without it, community connection, that essential disaster infrastructure, begins to fray.

Opportunities to help are just as essential

Offering pathways for people to not only be cared for, but to do the caring, was an important theme to emerge from this research. There was a sense that being recognised as able to contribute is seen by people as important for their mental health and wellbeing.

The older community members that we spoke with felt that they were too often dismissed as “little old ladies”, without any recognition that they were capable of caring for themselves, much less the community. In fact, their connections with the community, and experiences of disaster in the region, can be vital to ensuring that people are safe during disaster.

“When we don’t have the storytelling and don’t pass on those lived experiences then we lose that vital information.”

– Tabitha

As Jade wisely reflected, care is not just about giving people help, it is also about recognising and enabling their ability to contribute. Jade did exactly that when, during the floods in a small town, a 90-year old woman wanted to help. Unable to do the many of the more physical jobs required, this woman did what she could: spending vouchers at local cafes and keeping volunteers caffeinated and caring for the carers.

We also heard from women of all ages who wanted to be valued for their ability to do different kinds of physical jobs and care work – from re-fencing their farms to being a part of the CFA.

Brad, from the CFA, spoke about the power of sharing responsibility with young people. He’s keen to support them to be trained early on to help in disasters as part of the CFA Youth Brigade. As he explained, *“[Young people] can have a role, they can have a voice. And we can relieve trauma too if people have a role, a responsibility.”*



The scenario, part 3

It's been a few years since the big storm that took your house. You're now proud of what we've learned, and to live in a country that seriously prioritises disaster prevention. Governments at all levels have acted strongly on climate change and Australia is no longer extracting fossil fuels. Thank goodness, because you don't think you could stand the rage of surviving another disaster event without being sure that everything possible had been done to prevent it.

You're also relieved that as a community we've decided not to build on floodplains, to ensure that new developments have multiple evacuation points and access, and that landscapes are managed using age-old techniques like First Nations burning regimes.

Disasters will continue to happen of course (those famous words "of droughts and flooding rains" don't come from nowhere ³⁵), but you know that with each event we learn something new; and we continue to strengthen and refine how we respond, both collectively and as individuals.

Your town is now preparing for whatever may come again in the future (a sobering, but real thought) and you're thankful you've got the time to participate in disaster preparation events run by the local council. Your family were well prepared in the last event and it's wonderful to be able to share your knowledge with others. Your partner is also thrilled that their language skills have a place, as they spend time each week connecting with the multicultural community. Now they're proudly on standby for emergency translations.

It's also comforting to know that most of the neighbours feel prepared to survive on their own for 72 hours after a disaster event. Government funding has meant there are several fire bunkers available nearby and they are well stocked with supplies. People have more than one plan, it's normal to have a Plan B and Plan C.

Funding has increased for the local ABC radio. They are often out and about in the community, recording stories of the disaster that just was, and helping communicate what needs to happen to prepare for the future. You know they'll once again be a source of comfort and reliable information should any other crises occur.

There are safe places to go, people to help and communications systems you can rely on. Your community may not be able to control or prevent every disaster; but you take tremendous comfort, pride and strength from knowing you're doing the best you can to care for each other well.



The therapeutic power of arts and creativity

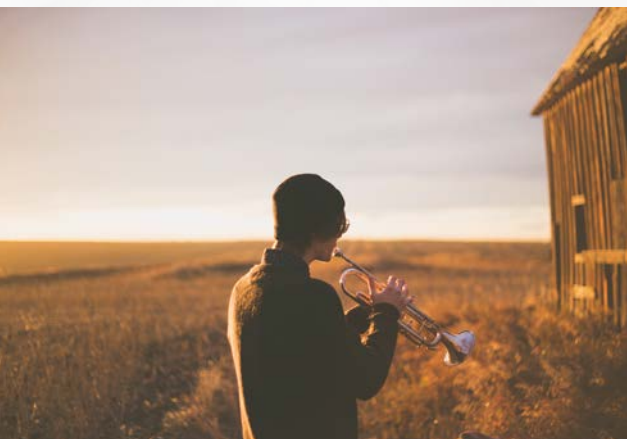
With an efficiency mindset, it would be easy to overlook the importance and value of art, creativity and play as a key part of recovery and community cohesion. Yet our research shows otherwise. People we heard from spoke with warmth and delight about the power and importance of arts-focused events and gatherings.

Carina, manager of a Neighbourhood House in one of the smaller towns, talked about the thrill of a concert with musician Katy Perry for first responders after the Black Summer bushfires. *“It was the most amazing community experience I think I’ve ever had. She got the fires up on the stage to sing with her!”*

Others spoke about the joy of a steel orchestra performing, of community barbecues, and even workshops which involved the whole community. One community was funded to run a songwriting workshop for children as an opportunity for them to talk about the experience, voice their fears and celebrate their resilience. As Carina explained, these kinds of events were important not just because they brought life and joy and connection, but because they acted as conduits for other important conversations. She explained that such events gave people the space to process to talk about their experiences with insurance companies, or how life had changed, and what mattered most to them.

Communities all around the globe draw on joyful events and creative practices to reconnect during and after disaster, and researchers recognise it as being essential to disaster recovery.³⁶ There are many examples from recent events in Australia that point to the power of art and creative connection in making space for care, with communities knitting chickens, hosting music festivals, painting murals and more.³⁷ While the following quote comes from Carol Belle, who experienced Hurricane Katrina in 2005, it captures key elements of what we heard of the power of creativity:

“There are so many things that anchor our existence. To lose them all leaves us on a sea without an anchor. So people were dealing with identity issues. They were dealing with disenfranchisement issues, they were dealing with homesickness. They were dealing with loss in a huge fashion. What we really came to appreciate was the necessity to get some air in the room first before you try and do something else, to get them some oxygen so that they can start breathing. So art became the oxygen.”³⁸



Key Takeaways: SUPPORTED

People want government to support communities to do what they do best – before, during and after disaster.

- We need more support to **prepare for disaster**: from fridge magnets to bushfire safety training and planning.
- We need to **better support people to volunteer**, whether formally or via crisis surge capacity, with resources and time to help.
- We need **long-term, universal funding and support** that builds solidarity and empowers community recovery in a variety of ways, not overlooking people's needs to give care, as well as the healing power of the arts and creativity.



Part 2 – The Implications

Disaster 2.0: Care through Disaster as a new approach

Times are changing

For much of our history, disasters were reasonably rare events ('Disaster 1.0'). Yes there were floods, droughts, fires and cyclones – but they were most likely once in a lifetime events and more often than not they were limited in geographical scope. So when disaster occurred in one region, people from another were able to offer resources and support.

But times change. And as we face the reality of the climate crisis, we can expect that communities will experience multiple crises per generation as disasters overlap (remember Lismore and their floods, fires, floods and pandemic – all in just a few short years!), and as larger areas are affected by each event. Greg Mullins, one of Australia's longest serving Fire Commissioners, is at pains to point out that our resources for responding to disasters are going to be stretched as fire seasons between states and territories increasingly overlap.³⁹ We need to prepare and support our communities to be able to care for themselves better (*'Disaster 2.0: Care through Disaster' lens*).

To ensure that people are seen, safe and supported, the way we respond to disaster can no longer simply be limited to the event itself and the following months. **We need to re-evaluate the way our societies are organised and resourced, to equip ourselves to better ride the waves of disruption as they occur.** We need to understand that 'disaster' is no longer the exception, it is expected.

This is a hard and uncomfortable truth to confront.

We still have a choice

No one wants to face a future that is likely to be more disruptive, more marked by risk and fear.

But what if understanding disaster through a Care lens enables us to prepare for crises, while building communities that are more connected, better resourced and safer for everyone all year round? Communities that are Seen, Safe and Supported are better places to live 365 days a year, after all.

Doing this will require a commitment from government to invest not only in the physical and technical infrastructure of disaster mitigation and response, it will also require an investment in the infrastructure of community cohesion and relationships year-in, year-out, year-round.

Communities that are strongly connected are better able to weather the storms of disaster. But connection isn't something that happens magically and without effort. The way we organise ourselves as individuals and as a society shapes our capacity to connect or disconnect to varying degrees with each other.

"Understanding community and social networks pre-emergency is important in identifying the different ways in which information is acquired and shared. Women, in particular, are more likely to learn about disaster risk from their social networks, including their friendship circles, through connecting with other parents/carers and through acquaintances in community work." – GAD Pod Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines⁴⁰

The Federal Government's \$1 billion Disaster Ready Fund exists to improve Australia's resilience and reduce risk of natural disasters.⁴¹ Successfully funded Victorian projects include things like work to redesign and redevelop a flood levee, projects to better engage community in disaster risk and preparedness, a microgrid system to improve the energy resilience of a small town. It is heartening to see that among the technologically-driven projects, there is at least some resourcing going to work directly with communities on preparing together. However, our work shows the value of community connection and relationship-building, as much as investment in technical solutions. **In other words: community connection is a form of disaster preparation, and requires equal emphasis and enabling funding.**

Investing in the infrastructure of connection

Because of the way we resource and fund infrastructure as a society, it seems easier to fund a new fire truck than to fund the time it takes (usually women) to build community and connections that ultimately form a key piece of safety infrastructure. It is easy to tick off how many people have safety gear and how many houses a fire truck attended. It is much harder to account for the impact that a community art event, or an informal playgroup, or a community concert has on building strong communities; and then how that translates to lives being saved and soothed in a disaster. And while we do fund these more relational forms of infrastructure to a degree, it is time to more fully appreciate their value and invest accordingly.

We need to be brave enough to invest in a complex social ecosystem, as well as the tangible and easily-counted infrastructure of safety equipment and other formal programs.

We have already talked about some of the key solutions to helping people to be Seen, Safe and Supported: including strong prevention policies, processes in place to truly listen to communities and then to act on what is heard, government funding that enables strong community relationships; federally-funded, resourced and trained disaster response teams, immediate access to money to buy basic goods and services following a disaster event, and publicly-owned moveable temporary accommodation.

From our previous work asking people what they want for themselves and their communities, we also know that enabling infrastructure for community connection includes things like:

- public parks, playgrounds, community and seniors' centres, outdoor 'furniture' like park benches and exercise equipment, and other physical public spaces that are thoughtfully designed, accessible and maintained;
- publicly-available community activities where people are actively welcomed and engaged (both online and face to face); and
- workplaces of all kinds where time and space is made for human interactions that are not directly related to output or productivity (something many of us lost during COVID when we began working from home).⁴²

This type of infrastructure provides opportunities for people to connect with each other and to build a sense of shared purpose and community ownership prior to disaster; it allows spaces and places for people to be seen.

But it is no good having places and spaces if we do not have time to access them. **We cannot prepare our communities for disaster if we do not have the time to participate in such preparation.**

If strong, connected communities are essential disaster preparedness infrastructure, we need to take seriously our capacity to build them. And to do this, we need to free up time.

Time as essential enabling infrastructure

“Time is valuable, to everyone. The problem is that the time is limited, it can’t be stretched, and most people face many demands on their time. Yet limits on availability of time, or ways to reduce demands on time, are not explicitly considered when designing cities, policies, programs, actions and services.”⁴³

Research from the ANU’s National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH) shows that Australians work significant amounts of overtime, with at least 40 per cent of all employees working well past the National Employment Standard Recommendation of 38 hours per week.⁴⁴ This radically reduces capacity to engage in community activities. Overtime also has a gendered element and one that plays into how care is valued, understood and given. The Cities for Our Time report states that, *“such long hours are impossible to combine with care, placing long hour jobs out of the reach of most Australian women. They also constrain many Australian men from being the fathers they wish to be. The current long and short hour labour market is polarised by gender, and this polarisation is growing.”⁴⁵*

In the context of a more disaster-prone world we need to free up time in two particular ways:

- We need time for people to actively engage in disaster preparation and response (joining the Rural Fire Association or the State Emergency Services, attending community preparation meetings, fighting fires or evacuating those caught in floods), that enable them to better keep each other safe; and
- We need time to build the community connections and bonds that allow the response work to run smoothly and efficiently and with care.

According to the Australian Fair Work Act, an employee is entitled to take as much unpaid ‘community service leave’ as they like for activities such as jury duty and voluntary emergency management. In response to the Black Summer bushfires, volunteer firefighters who work for the Australian Public Service, or the New South Wales or Victorian state governments are now entitled to four weeks of paid disaster volunteer leave (if they are volunteering via a recognised emergency management body such as the CFA, SES, Red Cross of St John’s Ambulance) – conditions on par with Army Reservists. This leave is heavily geared towards formal disaster response in the moment of crisis.

Big players in the private sector also offer paid emergency response leave. Corporations like Suncorp, National Australia Bank and the ANZ all offer unlimited leave to those doing frontline disaster response, and fairly generous personal leave and access to support services for those affected by events. Laudable as these efforts are, a privatisation model does not sit well with a care through disaster approach.

In the first instance, each of the corporations listed above make significant profit from supporting the fossil fuel industry and thus exacerbating the risk and severity of climate-fuelled disaster (each of these businesses have strong statements about their commitment to the Paris Agreement but research from Market Forces shows evidence of high levels of financial support for fossil fuel projects from these and other companies).⁴⁶ Support that does not also commit to keeping us safe is not the kind of support we need.

Secondly, by privatising and individualising our capacity to respond to disaster we run the risk of further entrenching inequality and social divides. Business can play a positive role by (at a minimum) paying their tax, not contributing to the climate crisis, providing good jobs and stepping up when the communities they operate in require additional support. But people should never be reliant on the benevolence and generosity of their employer to access the time they need to respond to, and recover from, disaster. So we know we need some kind of (arguably, national) system of paid and unpaid leave to free people up to be a part of an immediate disaster response.

And we also need to free up time to enable people to pick up the informal care burden that also comes with disaster. **Whether this is looking after children and the elderly, volunteering to translate emergency information into other languages, sitting with people as they process loss, or any other type of relational (and usually gendered work), we're going to need to expand our definition of what is seen as essential labour during disaster, and better support it.**

Volunteer leave (paid or unpaid) currently tends to be only available in the moments of crisis and does not acknowledge or recognise the significant time investment we need from community members both before and after the disaster event.

So we also need time before disaster strikes: time to get our chainsaw licences so that we can offer surge SES capacity as needed, time to get to know our neighbours so that we can anticipate their needs in disaster, time to advocate for disability access to the town hall.

We need time to laugh, play, and work together so that when disaster comes we are ready to act decisively, efficiently and with deep care.

How wonderful that the things that we know support safe, joyful and fair lives are actually the very things that keep us safe in disaster.

Time is not a rabbit we can pull from a hat, but it is something that we can design into how we work as a society. Professor Lyndall Strazdins is an expert in the field of time, care and work. In a recent submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care, she wrote:

"Capping long full-time work hours at 38 hours represents a feasible, first step towards achieving a modern working week sustainable in a modern, gender mixed labour market. This would be a first, minimum step to support men's time for care and unpaid work, and women's time for paid employment, with the potential to transform equality of opportunity at work and at home. The current legislation provides an established and ratified foundation for action."⁴⁷

We think this should go further to ensure not just the opportunity for all genders to work in and out of the home, but to free everyone up to become active participants in building community – as both a good thing to do, and as preparation for a more disaster-prone world. **When paid employment comes at the expense of all else, we lose the ability to invest time in developing the community infrastructure that will literally save lives in the coming disruptions and disaster events.**



There are various structural changes we could make to free up people's time. Here are a few leading policy contenders to consider.

- **Shifting to a 4 day standard working week.** This is already starting to get underway, in a change being led not so much by governments, but by companies looking for an edge in recruitment and retention, including here in Australia.⁴⁸ However all over the world governments are starting to pick up the baton.⁴⁹ Reducing people's work hours for no loss of pay is demonstrated to improve gender equality, strengthen community and volunteering, help the environment and boost wellbeing.⁵⁰ The four-day standard working week would flow through to part-time workers as well, who would effectively get a pay rise for the same hours.⁵¹
- **A basic income.** This has already been trialled around the world (not just in rich countries) and can be paid for in a range of ways — from a modest increases in taxes, to resource-derived funding and reallocation of existing government funds.⁵² Research finds a basic income promotes a range of positive social outcomes while reducing health care costs, crime and a range of other social harms.⁵³ In other words, a basic income has been found to help people build better lives and stronger communities.

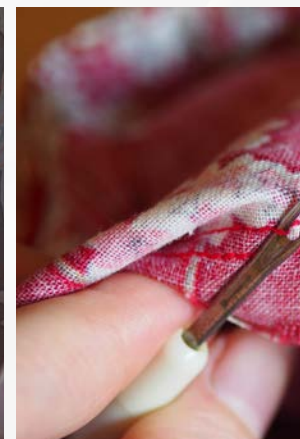
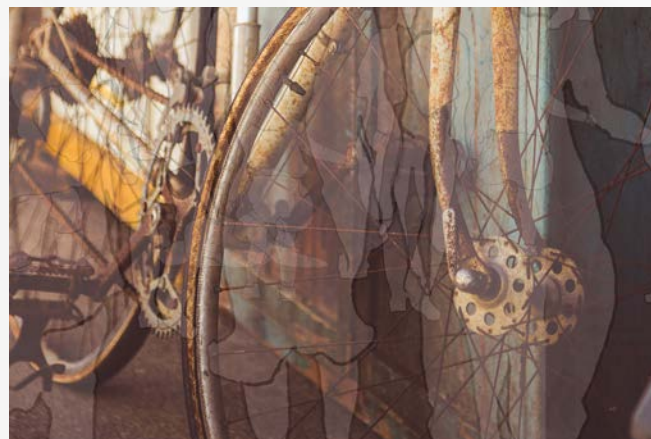
A form of basic income would not only free up time for people to better engage with their communities prior to disaster, but it would support people to recover from disaster by alleviating some of their economic pressures. As it stands, financial support is available in various forms from the state and federal governments, but there are limitations (13 weeks) as to how long people can access payments and those on visitor or temporary visas are not eligible.⁵⁴

Given the expected scale of disaster and the very long tail of recovery, we need support to exist as long as it is needed. Support that is already in place cuts out the need for people to navigate a complex bureaucracy at a time when they are likely to already be highly stressed.

- **Full employment, backed by a federal jobs guarantee.** There are many important jobs that need to be done — both in and beyond disaster preparation and recovery. A jobs guarantee makes involuntary unemployment and its associated harms no longer acceptable, while unlocking huge potential for people to serve and strengthen their communities in a paid capacity. Certainly new public sector jobs would expand the opportunities for a wide range of workers, not just those at risk of involuntary unemployment. Imagine if our best and brightest minds weren't snapped up by Big Tech and Big Consulting, but by public sector jobs in research, development, resilience-building and innovation in the public interest. As economist Marianna Mazzucato argues, this kind of market-shaping 'entrepreneurial state' offers huge benefits and potential for us all.⁵⁵

Regardless of the mechanism for freeing up people's time, the most important first step is recognising that care work, community building and networking are **real work**; and that while they might be hard to measure, non-linear and 'inefficient' – without them, nothing else works.

Government, drawing on community and civil society expertise, must take the lead to determine the most effective way forward to enable a revitalisation of community engagement, participation and collective care work.



Bringing government closer

A recent key critique of government has been its apparent distance from the reality experienced by communities on the ground. We've seen examples in this report of how this plays out in the disaster context, but the issue is larger than that. The recent findings from the Royal Commission into Robodebt point to such a disconnect, with a key recommendation being that senior policy makers spend time on the front lines of service provision.⁵⁶ Public Service Commissioner Gordon de Brouer sees better engagement with community as a key part of the public sector reform process, explaining that he wants community and government to have a positive relationship; one where community says:

*"[The public service] are really good to engage with! They listen to me! They help me solve my problems, they've got my interests at heart as well in finding solutions. They know when I'm trying it on but they're good to deal with and they really act with integrity."*⁵⁷

Community groups are not staying quiet about their needs. Governments need to take these needs seriously and to trust community in genuinely collaborative partnerships.

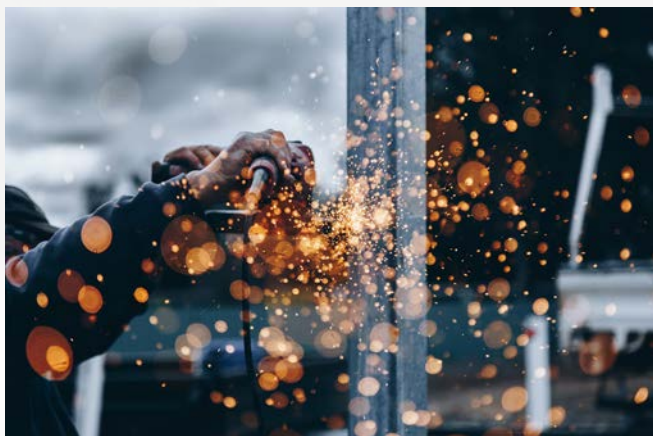
Removing the barriers to community cohesion

"There is a clear fork in the road for the Australian response to climate change impacts. Either we harness and nurture the energy of the collective spirit ignited by climate disasters into a set of robust, transparent, empowered, universalistic and locally responsive public institutions, or we proceed down the path of individualising the burden, leading to immiseration and deepening social divisions and inequality." - David Ritter, CEO of Greenpeace Australia Pacific⁵⁸

While communities need infrastructure to support community connection and cohesion, we also need to remove systems and structures that currently undermine what communities need to feel seen, safe and supported.

There are two key examples that emerged in data discussed already about how our disaster response is actually undermining our collective ability to care through disaster. The first is our reliance on the insurance industry, and the second is the way organisations and individuals must compete for recovery funding.

Let's further explore the first point, how our reliance on the insurance industry influences our capacity to respond with care.



Ensuring solidarity, not insuring for profit

The insurance industry offers a window into the way we, in Australia, think about risk and disaster. At the moment individuals pay large sums of money to insurance companies in the hope that should disaster strike, the insurance pay out will cover the cost of rebuilding and recovery. As it stands not everyone is insured enough, or at all. In these instances government grants are available to support the recovery effort, however The Royal Commission into Natural Disasters states that, *“Recovery support is intended to assist people in need, to help them ‘get back on their feet’, not cover the cost of replacing lost assets or income. It is not a substitute for being properly prepared for disasters, particularly by obtaining appropriate insurance. Recovery support should not create a disincentive for appropriate risk management.”* In essence, the report supports the ongoing privatisation of risk.

Experts in climate risk and insurance from the University of Tasmania argue that when we individualise our approach to risk we undermine our ability to work as a collective and we undermine the power that shared experience and connection has for ensuring our safety through disaster.⁵⁹ As we heard above, participants were frustrated by the delays in insurance payouts. Paperwork, lengthy evaluation and validation processes and an industry driven by profit impact the speed with which payouts can arrive.

While the delay is problematic, a potentially more significant issue is our reliance on the private sector to manage and deal with a very public problem.

Research from the Climate Council predicts that by 2030 one in every 25 houses will be uninsurable, whether because insurance companies refuse to pay insurance or because premiums will be so far out of reach.⁶⁰ Academics Kate Booth, Chloe Lucas and Christine Erikson, explain that, *“Those not insured or underinsured will be financially devastated. Insurance premiums will rise. As a result, more people will underinsure or drop their insurance completely, compounding the social disaster that will come with the next natural disaster.”*⁶¹

Privatising risk is not the answer and some form of publicly-funded disaster relief fund is needed that goes beyond the current payments and grants available. The Australia Institute suggests a fund should be paid for by a tax on fossil fuel corporations. While this might risk us becoming reliant financially on those causing the crisis, *there is no doubt that a fund is needed.*⁶²

Private insurance also tilts the playing field in favour of the wealthy and runs the risk of disaster exacerbating already existing inequalities. The way this plays out in communities is that those who are able to afford insurance, to understand how to best be insured, and who can live in insurable locations, are significantly advantaged over those who cannot.

You might remember reading about private firefighters protecting the homes of the wealthy during the 2022 California fires.⁶³ While this on its own is a dangerous privatisation of shared risk, insurance companies are now offering this service as a part of their coverage, further entrenching inequality and increasing the opportunity for profit. The privatisation of risk threatens to exacerbate inequality, yet research shows that more equal societies are happier societies and better placed to deal with major challenges as they arrive.⁶⁴

Anything that exacerbates and increases inequality will not serve us well.

The recent Intergenerational Report predicts governments at all levels will be spending significantly more money on disaster recovery.⁶⁵ We should spend this money well, and do it in a way that does not fracture already stressed communities.

If we are to invest in community cohesion and connection prior to disaster, we must also be willing to maintain such solidarity in the aftermath. This means finding ways to support communities that are universal: a universal and comprehensive disaster safety net that prioritises cohesion and equality. **Government support can and should contribute to community cohesion.**

Conclusion

There is an increasing amount of research and analysis emerging from disaster-affected communities, including in the Australian context.

By bringing a Care lens to disaster, our intent is to broaden the scope of what is considered important to pay attention to, and to resource.

Typically, the way we have responded to disaster in the past – *Disaster 1.0* – has been built on the understanding that disaster is rare and it needs heroes of the moment (very often male) to ‘save the day’. Support to recover occurs in the following months and then life is assumed to return to ‘normal’.

It is a response driven by efficiency and tends to focus energy on the moment of disaster with fairly limited preparation beforehand and limited ongoing recovery support.

In these changed times, we need a new approach – *Care through Disaster (2.0)*, which acknowledges that disaster is increasingly common and requires strong communities (often held up by women) that are properly supported on a much longer timescale. This new approach does not discard the importance of transactional and ‘in the moment’ efficiency of disaster response; instead it seeks to better enable this by investing in the complex and nonlinear relationships of community cohesion. In simple terms, it says that the work women have been doing for centuries needs to be recognised, validated and supported for the sake of us all.

It is encouraging that the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework recognises this. It states that the Framework “*focuses on action to support individuals as well as action to strengthen families and communities, given the evidence clearly indicating that community connections are vital to recovery, adaptation, and resilience in the future.*”⁶⁶

This 2.0 lens on disaster means paying attention when things are boring and the media and politicians are nowhere to be seen. It takes seriously investing in stuff beyond the shiny hero’s equipment (though it prioritises that too). It sees people’s complex needs and recognises the different kinds of care at work in strong communities as essential. In this *Care through Disaster* lens we appreciate just how much these things add up to better lives in good times, as well as lives saved and able to recover better when the worst happens.

When we take a *Care through Disaster* approach we recognise the need for people to be Seen, Safe and Supported during and after a crisis; and that their communities **already** need to be strong and connected before disaster strikes for this to occur.

When we take a *Care through Disaster* approach, people have time, support and resources to care for each other and their communities – so they know what to do, have built up some trust and feel confident they can manage. When we centre Care, government is looking hard at how it can reduce risk: doing whatever it can to prevent and limit disaster, fund and support good local community infrastructure, and set up national infrastructure like public insurance schemes and paid community care and disaster leave; so individuals everywhere are more protected financially.

A *Care through Disaster* lens also takes time poverty seriously: not just as a private challenge or gender equality issue, but a threat to community wellbeing, readiness and resilience. So things like 4 day standard working weeks, basic income and a national jobs guarantee are considered both as positive ideas in their own right, but also as key to empowering stronger disaster-ready communities.

The thing is, we might not want to live in a more disaster-prone world, but we don’t have much choice. Fortunately, we *do* want to live in the kinds of communities that can thrive before, during and after disaster. We have the will, the know-how and resources to centre care as an organising principle, and build the paradise now, come what may.

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ABOUT AUSTRALIA REMADE

Australia reMADE exists to support ambitious, collaborative, and transformative change-makers to reMAKE more of the world we want. We are independent, not-for-profit and here for anyone who aligns with our vision and values.

More information about this project and the work of Australia reMADE is available online: www.AustraliareMADE.org.

ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH GOULBURN NORTHEAST

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is a feminist organisation, leading change towards women's empowerment, women's health, the prevention of violence against women and ultimately, gender equality, in rural and regional Victoria. More information about WHGNE is available online: <https://www.whealth.com.au>.

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We rely on a wonderful community of individuals, organisations and donors to do this work. If you are interested in supporting or partnering with us for future work, or would like a tailored briefing on this work please get in touch with our Co-Director, Dr Millie Rooney (Millie@AustraliareMADE.org).

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