



# Care through disaster

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

SUMMARY REPORT



# Summary

We have weathered many a storm in our long and ancient history, but in the coming decades we're expecting conditions that will challenge even the heartiest and most resilient communities to survive and thrive. Extreme weather events are intensifying, and projected to get worse. Current projections are that the exceptionally hot and dry fire conditions of the 2019-20 "Black Summer" bushfires are set to become the norm by 2040, and will seem "exceptionally cool" by 2060.

While we may now be accustomed to hearing about 'unprecedented' temperatures, heatwaves and disaster conditions, it's fair to say that disaster itself is no longer unprecedented. It's expected. Recent fires, floods and the global pandemic have affected nearly every Australian: visible disasters set against a backdrop of dramatically rising living costs, growing private debt and breathtakingly unaffordable housing – making 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 social harms, or we can find ways to approach these problems that allow us not just to survive, but to build the type of country and communities Australians want.**

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

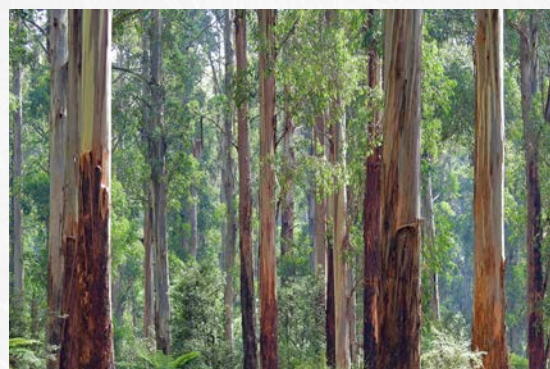
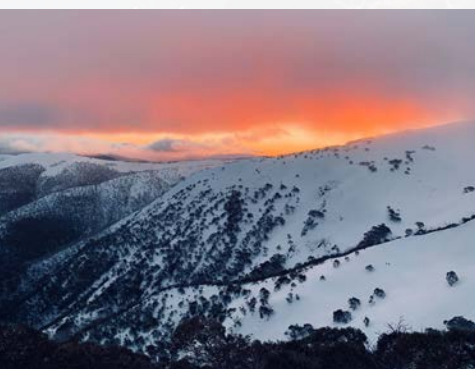
## This research

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 with a different experience of care and disaster – from those on the frontlines, local councils and other community support groups, to local clubs and societies and a broad range of interested community members. We also drew on experts and research from beyond regional Victoria, to ensure both national and global data were taken into account.

Taking a Grounded Theory approach, via a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups plus an online survey, we 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?*".

Full report, references and more information can be found on our website:

[australiaremade.org/care-disaster](https://australiaremade.org/care-disaster)



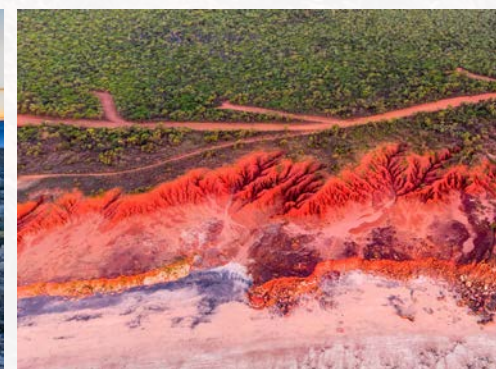
# The findings

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).

## SEEN:

- **Strong, pre-existing community connections save lives and promote recovery** through disaster. People also experience meaning and satisfaction working together in the suspension of ‘business as usual’. This ability to build something wonderful out of disasters points to what might be possible at other times.
- Seeing people means being equipped to **anticipate their needs, respect their expertise and support their vulnerabilities**. We need to know each other and to know the places we are likely to seek help in BEFORE disaster strikes. By contrast, being *unseen* compounds vulnerabilities, posing additional risks to people on the margins, as well as to tourists and visitors.
- Government funding of local services **enables essential trusted relationships** to be forged. When people and services are already known in the community, it is easier to offer comfort and care alongside practical information and support.

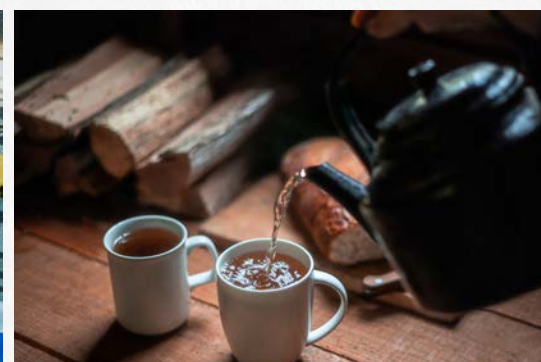


## SAFE:

- People feel strongly that government should do everything possible to **prevent and mitigate disaster** (including decarbonisation, disaster-ready planning and infrastructure, and First Nations-led fire management). Our current “just in time” model of deploying disaster-related resources needs to be re-evaluated, shifting more funding to prevention and preparation.
- Physical shelter needs to be safe from the disaster event, safe from risks of violence and discrimination and better equipped for a range of community needs (including mental health support). Places that are **already welcoming and familiar** to us are the places we’re **most likely to turn to** in times of crisis. We also need better access to affordable temporary housing. Governments should invest in moveable temporary accommodation as a public asset.
- **Accurate and timely information that is accessible** in different forms is essential. Cultural sensitivities, trauma backgrounds and language barriers all need to be considered, as a one-size-fits-all approach is likely to fail our most vulnerable.

## SUPPORTED:

- People need more support to **personally prepare for disaster**. Currently there is widespread confusion around basic preparation, and many are unprepared to look after themselves for recommended minimum periods of time. A range of existing programs, which are highly valued, require further government funding and support.
- Communities **need more support to help themselves**: including basic safety equipment, supported volunteers and recovery assistance that strengthens community cohesion. Governments need to get better at supporting without taking over or attempting to own processes and programs that communities are best-placed to lead. Over-reliance on the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is problematic, and should be jettisoned in favour of federally-funded, resourced and trained disaster response teams.
- Quick **reinstatement of infrastructure such as roads, transport, telecommunications and schools** is not just about getting back in business – but limiting the burden on those, usually women, left picking up the pieces and keeping everyone going until life can return to normal. Immediate access to money for basic goods and services following a disaster event is essential.
- **Mental health support is being removed too soon, and is often needed years down the track**, not just in the immediate aftermath of disaster. **Being a part of the effort** to prevent, respond and recover can help people to deal with the trauma of their experience; as can access to the **creative arts** and art-focused events and gatherings.



# The implications

No one wants to face a future that is likely to be more disruptive, more marked by risk and fear. However, understanding **disaster through a care lens enables us to prepare for crises**, while building communities that are **better places to live 365 days a year**.

We need to re-evaluate the way our societies are organised and resourced: investing not only in the physical and technical infrastructure of disaster mitigation and response, but in community connection and cohesion.

**Strong, connected communities are essential disaster infrastructure. Let's take our capacity to build them seriously.**

This requires investing in a range of public infrastructure (parks, playgrounds, community centres and activities), but we also need time. Financial pressures and overwork are costing people the time they need to build the community cohesion that will literally save lives in future disaster events.

Potential structural changes to consider include **shifting to a 4 day standard working week, a form of basic income** and a policy of **full employment, backed by a federal jobs guarantee**. Regardless of the mechanism, we must recognise that care and community building are real work. They may be hard to measure, nonlinear and 'inefficient' – but without them, nothing else works.


We also need to remove barriers to community cohesion following a disaster.

**Individualising our approach to risk will not work into the future.**

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. We need national infrastructure like public insurance schemes and paid community care and disaster leave, so individuals everywhere are more protected financially. Government support can and should contribute to community cohesion.

**In these changing times, we need a new approach** – *Care through Disaster 2.0*, which acknowledges that disaster requires strong communities that are properly supported on a much longer timescale. 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.

No one wants to live in a more disaster-prone world, and it's still essential to do everything possible to prevent further damage to our climate. 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 build that now, come what may.



This work is a collaboration between Australia reMADE and Women's Health Goulburn North East. It has been made possible by generous funding from the Victorian State Government via the Office for Women and Prevention of Family Violence, Department of Families Fairness and Housing.

For more information about the project, including the full report, please visit: [www.australiaremade.org/care-disaster](http://www.australiaremade.org/care-disaster)

## 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](http://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>.

This report was prepared by Dr Millie Rooney, Rachel Hay and Lilian Spencer. 2023.

## 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.