

# Supporting disaster-affected communities in regional Australia with creative recovery initiatives

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## Abstract

The incidence of environmental disasters in Australia are increasing. Moreover, they are expected to continue on an upward trajectory, leaving regional and rural communities in a highly vulnerable and precarious situation. Evaluating initiatives that support communities is essential to understand how best to help people process these events. This report is based on an evaluation of a Creative Recovery Network training programme supported by Arts Mid North Coast. The project was designed to support communities to build resilience in the aftermath of a disaster using creative processes. The evaluation used an action research frame that informed practice in real time by sharing data with stakeholders throughout. Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and coded for thematic analysis. The evaluation included interviews, focus groups and surveys. The evaluation showed how the training provided the participants, all from disaster-affected communities, with a space to creatively express and process the many emotions that had arisen from their experiences. The training provided participants with tools that were successfully used in creative recovery workshops in their local communities. This paper reports on the Arts Mid North Coast and the Creative Recovery Network partnership project.

## Disasters, mental health and the arts

The 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, Australia were devastating. Sadly, 173 people lost their lives in bushfires that destroyed over 2,000 homes and seared more than 4,500 hectares of land, affecting 78 communities in total. As these numbers were unprecedented, recovery processes needed implementing as soon as was feasible. Arts Victoria recognised that creative recovery projects could help people to process, heal and rebuild and so funded and evaluated local initiatives. The evaluation found the projects had meaningful benefits for the participants on both an individual and community level. It also found that the rebuilding of community through the arts was valued on par with the necessary practical structural rebuilding (Fisher and Talvé 2011). The arts initiative helped create a ‘caring community’ that contributed to healing, self-confidence, creating structure, living memorials and, importantly, allowed people to give to each other (Fisher and Talvé 2011, p.50).

Recently, bushfires in Australia in 2019–20 burnt 17 million hectares and destroyed 3,094 homes, with 34 lives lost. In 2022, there were 46 disasters declared in Australia and these affected 316 local government areas (NEMA 2022). The Climate Council and Beyond Blue revealed that 51% of people in Australia who have experienced these events since 2019 described a range of mental health effects, 21% of whom reported major or moderate symptoms (Climate Council 2022). In 2023, the reports of bushfires around the world were again devastating. If such events continue, as is predicted, people will need a range of supports to rebuild their communities.

## Effects on mental health

It is well-documented that stressful events cause both short and long-term physiological and psychological stress (Green et al. 2003). The effects on physical and mental health have become more concerning as the regularity and severity of disasters increase. The effects on individuals and communities can be long-term and complicated, involving loss of life and injury, damage to health and wellbeing, housing, financial and material losses, family separation, education and employment prospects as well as changes in community dynamics and the environment (Australian Red Cross 2023). Greater mental health support is an imperative for people in disaster-affected communities (Australian Red Cross 2023).

Palinkas and Wong (2020) showed the importance of developing mental health services specifically to deal with sub-acute climate-related events. The Australian Government recognises the need to support communities and emphasises the need for community, individual and social recovery (NEMA 2022). Suitable provisions for communities are crucial. Since the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, there has been a better understanding of how creativity can help process the adverse effects of disaster on regional communities.

## The arts as a recovery tool

Creative arts processes have been recognised by the World Health Organization to have benefits for mental health (Fancourt and Finn 2019). They have been shown to support individual, social and community connection, and build resilience in regional Australia (Gentle 2018; Gentle et al. 2020; Gentle and O'Brien 2021). Furthermore, the arts can be easily integrated into individual and community welfare to support people to process adverse events (Bennet et al. 2022). The creativity process is an essential component in creative recovery and requires readily accessible projects (Hancox et al. 2022).

Arts Mid North Coast (AMNC) is a well-established regional organisation and is the peak body for the arts and cultural development. It champions community engagement to build resilience and wellbeing (AMNC 2024). AMNC is situated in one of the areas harshly affected by the 2019–20 bushfires and 2021–22 floods. As such, it was well-placed to use local and state networks. Learning lessons from the Regional Arts Victoria evaluation by Fisher and Talvé (2011), AMNC applied for funding to deliver the Creative Recovery Network's training programme to disaster-affected communities. The training programme was an opportunity for:

- the arts to meaningfully support communities to recover and rebuild
- the arts to be integrated into and valued as part of broader community recovery efforts

- local artists and arts workers to gain increased knowledge, skills and confidence to respond to communities in recovery
- arts and cultural organisations to enhance their capacity to work with communities in recovery and respond in a coordinated way.

## An arts-based partnership

AMNC partnered with the Creative Recovery Network<sup>1</sup> to provide a 3-day training programme to the Mid-North Coast of New South Wales. The Creative Recovery Network described the training workshops as:

*...an introductory programme designed to establish best practices in trauma informed care to work with disaster impacted communities in safe and productive ways. Based on the recognition that disaster planning is a whole of community responsibility that requires specialised knowledge and experience, the programme supports the identification and development of creative facilitators to work in community-centred disaster planning.* (CRN 2023)

The training programme was devised, developed and facilitated by the Creative Recovery Network and funded and coordinated by AMNC.

*Creative Recovery is a particular approach to supporting individuals and communities after a disaster. It involves introducing art and creativity as tools to work through feelings of grief, pain, foster connection and build stronger, resilient communities.* (AMNC 2024)

The collaboration gave the project flexible and responsive approaches to ensure communities had some agency in their recovery as recommended by the NSW Reconstruction Authority (Department of Planning and Environment 2022). The organisations provided a unique platform that placed regional communities front and centre of the project.

## The training programme

The Creative Recovery Network is Australia's foremost leader in supporting and advocating for the intrinsic value of culture and the arts in community recovery. Creative recovery is a particular approach that involves introducing art and creativity as tools to work through feelings of grief and pain, foster connection and build stronger, resilient communities. The Creative Recovery Network developed a training programme informed by its experiences working with communities and the creative leaders fostering connected participatory programs with their communities. Their training program embeds arts

1. Creative Recovery Network, at <https://creativerecovery.net.au>.

and cultural development practices in disaster recovery and preparedness.

This research mined the data collected from focus groups, observations, interviews and surveys during the evaluation of that training.

## Data collection processes

It was essential for the programme that data collection did not compromise the flow of the training sessions nor interrupt the participant’s experience. A project’s accessibility can be increased in regional areas by using evaluators who are emic to the data collection process (Harrison 2008). Hancox et al. (2022) used creative arts approaches to their study with communities in Australia to ensure the research itself was a supportive process. Similarly, this research used sensitive, naturalistic data collection methods. This ensured the research did not interrupt creative processes during the workshops and emphasised the study's authentic approach. The multiple methods and sources helped to provide robust and relevant data. Hancox et al. (2022) recommended that arts projects should be flexible enough to respond to community needs to remain relevant to the community needs. The action research frame the evaluation used guaranteed the data would be shared throughout, so it could be used in real time to enhance the programme. The evaluation was completed with participant's full written consent to publicly share the collected data.

## Stakeholders and engagement

The training program was built from community need and was disseminated through the community by a range of organisations and individuals. AMNC saw connecting authentically with stakeholders through community and state connections as an imperative.

The stakeholders included:

- Biripi, Dunghutti and Gumbaynggirr Elders and communities
- AMNC council partners - City of Coffs Harbour, Bellingen Shire, Nambucca Valley, Kempsey Shire, Port Macquarie-Hastings and Mid Coast areas.
- communities affected by recent disasters
- service providers (emergency services and non-government organisations)
- local artists
- all state governments and the Australian Government
- Creative Recovery Network.

The Creative Recovery Network developed the training so it could be delivered to local councils, health services, emergency services organisations and artists. The training programme was rolled out by AMNC after some of the

worst back-to-back disasters experienced in the region. Many of the possible associated risks were mitigated by the professional experience of the Creative Recovery Network training facilitator who could envisage where participants might struggle.

## Methods

### Methods and sources

Table 1 shows the data sources and methods of collection used for the evaluation. It includes the projects that stemmed from the training due to the action research frame that was used throughout.

## Analysis

### Evaluation data verification and coding

Data were analysed using Nvivo software. Table 2 shows the methods that indicated if objectives had been met.

## Outcomes

Biripi, Dunghutti and Gumbaynggirr Elders and artists welcomed participants to Country for each of the workshops. The local cultural knowledge they provided confirmed how creative recovery is integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and is rooted in creative practice.

The training was attended by 41 artists, arts workers, council and emergency service providers. The participants were

Table 1: Data collection methods and sources.

Groups	Method	Source
Kempsey	1. Survey 2. Observation 3. Focus group 4. Interview	Training group participants Training groups Participants and stakeholders Participants, organisers and facilitators
Taree	1. Survey 2. Observation 3. Focus group 4. Interview	Training group participants Training groups Participants and stakeholders Participants, organisers and facilitators
Bellingen	1. Survey 2. Observation 3. Focus group 4. Interview	Training group participants Training groups Participants and stakeholders Participants, organisers and facilitators
Creative recovery projects	1. Survey 2. Interview and video	Project participants and facilitators

given a post-workshop survey and a total of 39 completed surveys resulted in an overall rating of 4.8 out of 5 stars. It was a strong outcome for using the arts as a mental health and recovery tool in disaster-affected communities. Figure 1 shows general participant feedback.

Participant feedback from the training showed the workshops were used as a creative way to process some of

## How would you rate the event overall?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 1

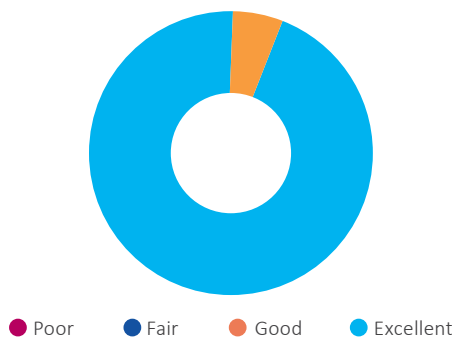


Figure 1: Survey outcomes.

the trauma associated with extreme events. Observations of the training showed how empathetic response, listening to community, connecting with people and using creativity as a tool were skills that could be learnt and applied. Additionally, the creative recovery projects that had stemmed from the action research procedures used a diverse range of techniques and art materials to engage geographically disparate communities. 16 participants of the training applied for and received small art grants to run 14 creative recovery projects. 745 people from local communities participated in those workshops, reaching far beyond the original aims of the training programme.

The evaluation demonstrated the original objectives set by AMNC and the Creative Recovery Network had been successfully met. These included:

- raised awareness of the role the arts can play in disaster recovery
- increased understanding of the disaster context and improved confidence
- increased awareness of the risks of future disasters, and built capacity in mitigating these risks
- increased skills, knowledge and networks
- supported community needs
- worked with stakeholders to show the benefits of arts-led recovery
- ability for communities to express changing disaster recovery needs
- increased awareness of the disaster recovery processes

- increased awareness of the risks and their response to future disasters.

Data showed that that the training provided participants with increased capacity to support resilience in disaster affected communities, increased connection to other people and services, and improved participants facilitation skills and confidence in offering targeted support.

The training outcomes extended beyond the original objectives to help connect communities in the Mid North Coast area who had felt separated. Figure 2 shows the ways communities benefited and that building collaborative, area-based projects can add to connectivity and, thus, resilience of communities. The programme was successful because there was an emic organisation coordinating the project that was using a ground-up approach that involved elders from communities as integral to planning and consultation.



Figure 2: How the training affects communities.

## Recommendations and practice implications

The evaluation (Gentle 2023, pp.29–37) identified 9 recommendations and 5 practice implications that can be used to enhance future creative recovery work in regional areas:

- Evaluation: creative recovery projects needs to be emic to the workshops, either arts- based throughout the training, during reflection at culmination of training or as a focus group soon after. The focus group could be a way to initiate a community of practice.

Table 2: Evaluation data verification and coding.

Measures	Observation	Surveys	Focus group	Interview
Awareness of the role the arts can play in the disaster recovery process and supporting and sustaining community resilience. <b>Codes:</b> Resilience, arts in recovery, enhanced creativity, empowerment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Increase in the participant’s understanding of the disaster context in the creative recovery. <b>Codes:</b> Arts in recovery, knowledge	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Were participants more confident in working with communities impacted by disaster? <b>Codes:</b> Confidence, empowerment	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Awareness of the risks of future disasters and feel confident in mitigating these risks. <b>Codes:</b> Disaster awareness, confidence, empowerment	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Increased skills, knowledge and networks and capacity to respond to future disasters. <b>Codes:</b> Skills, knowledge, connections	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
How well the program supported the needs of community and whether there are areas for improvement. <b>Codes:</b> Barriers, connections	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
How well the program worked with key stakeholders (e.g. local councils, community organisations, emergency management, health services). <b>Codes:</b> External collaboration, connection	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
If the training led to an increased understanding and recognition for embedding arts-led recovery programs in disaster management plans. <b>Codes:</b> Disaster management planning	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

- Facilitation: creative recovery training programs is crucial to their success and having an experienced, knowledgeable and skilled facilitator is imperative.
- Project officer role: essential to support the project and organise a community of practice and should be integral to the program.
- Community of practice: with creative recovery facilitators would offer support and share knowledge. This will help to maintain momentum, collaboratively respond to local events and support future projects.
- Grants: identified and made available by the project officer and offered to trained facilitators post-training.
- Time allowed: the training could be residential or run over 3 days to help participants absorb, collaborate and be ready to begin a project by completion.
- Accreditation of training: essential will be essential for creative recovery responses to be embedded in emergency response management. The training is methodical and comprehensive so could be restructured to build a module of formal learning.
- Dissemination: optimal to be available throughout regional Australia. It would be beneficial for local council emergency preparedness and response teams, for creative recovery units at a state level and for emergency management agencies.
- Use of hubs: regionally based organisations used to spearhead the devolution of disaster recovery. Local, trusted organisations are best placed to act in recovery as they have the necessary connections and structures in place to respond to community needs.
- First Nations knowledge: local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities should be prioritised when developing creative recovery training and projects to ensure knowledge and wisdom are at the heart of the programmes. This leads the whole community approach and encourages inclusiveness. By taking the time to acknowledge and reflect on the local knowledge of communities can enrich participant experience through connection with a deeper story of the land and its peoples. This provides a rich form of connection to the space. It grounds the project in something beyond time and place. Such consideration has the potential to allow for the grieving of what has past because of a disaster, using the perspective of the long history the area has already experienced. The wisdom of Dadirri (Ungunmerr-Baumann 2022) and other cultural approaches teaches ways of being that supports an appropriate recovery response and acknowledges cultural connection to the natural environment as a protective factor that can be harnessed during and after stressful events.

- Holding the space safely: facilitation of a group with experience of the trauma associated with disasters requires considerable skill.
- Upskilling artists: preparing local artists and arts workers using the Creative Recovery Network training will give participants a understanding of how to work with communities as well as build their local networks.
- Connections: focusing on the inter-relational aspect of the Creative Recovery Network framework will support a community and an individual’s ability to ‘bounce back’ after experiencing a disaster.
- Creative recovery process: preparing communities to use creativity to process what they have encountered can help build strength and resilience.

### Collaboration at every stage

The main outcomes were a direct result of the collaborative approach taken by AMNC and Creative Recovery Network that focused on what the communities needed. The ethos of both organisations allowed for a smooth partnership that was able to grow according to the community needs raised during the training. Figure 3 shows the flow of the process.

### Discussion

The Creative Recovery Network provided interested communities with the skills necessary to facilitate local creative recovery projects. The training sessions were valued by participants not only for the learning they acquired but also because they were a means to process the many difficult emotions they had experienced during a host of climate-related events that seriously affected their communities. The participants were offered a range

of information and tools that they could use to facilitate creative recovery groups in their local areas. The projects they designed and delivered used a variety of creative techniques that helped their groups form connection and process the effects of recent disasters, thus enhanced individual and community resilience. The creativity and accessibility of these projects responded to the recommendations of Hancox et al. (2022). The programme and its outcomes were aligned with the Australian Government’s emphasis on community, individual and social recovery (NEMA 2022).

The evaluation examined the effectiveness of the network’s 3-day training using surveys, observations, focus groups and interviews with participants and facilitators. The evaluation process enhanced the programme, as the action research method provided the data that instigated artist-led creative recovery projects that were also evaluated (Gentle 2023). A creative recovery model for supporting communities to process and recover was disseminated to stakeholders via the evaluation. Similar to the work of Bennet et al. (2022), the arts were shown to be a fitting way to support people and their communities to process the many emotions that surface from disasters.

### Conclusion

For communities to build resilience and strengthen they need to feel supported and to connect with others. The arts have a unique capacity to support healing and are playing a pivotal role in disaster recovery in Australia. The research and associated literature show that the individuals, families and communities will continue to be exposed to high-risk hazards. Using creative recovery techniques to support people after such events offers opportunities to process emotions, build resilience and move beyond the event. This report illustrates how collaboration between organisations

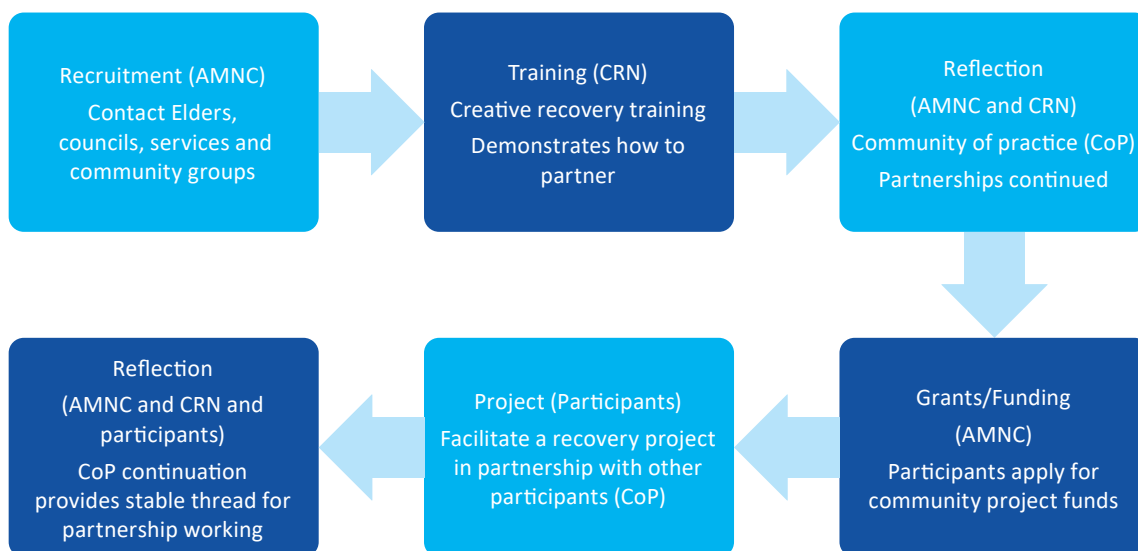


Figure 3: How organisational collaboration can work.

with a common goal can provide a range of stakeholders with the tools, services and supports they report as being necessary for their post-disaster recovery.

### Acknowledgments

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