

Walking alongside, building resilience: the First Nations Recovery Group

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Background

The vision of a ‘real’ voice and footprint for First Nations peoples and communities in emergency management began in 2019 when Sam Savage joined Australian Red Cross Emergency Services program as a recovery officer. With Sam’s appointment came the realisation that the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders had limited representation relating to discussions or decisions about community disaster resilience, preparedness and recovery. Sam acknowledged Indigenous communities are built on recognising and supporting Elders who were actively involved and are ‘at the community table’. Australian Red Cross leadership supported Sam’s work and approach of walking alongside communities and to increase the existing strengths in community.

In 2020, the First Nations Recovery Group (FNRG) was formed to support communities affected by the events of the summer bushfires and floods of 2019–20 in Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. The FNRG works consistently to deliver, build capacity and advocate for the inclusion of First Nations peoples and communities in planning for disasters. The dedicated work undertaken by FNRG will add value in the sector to support better preparedness, response, resilience and recovery from disasters now and in the future. This paper discusses how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are creating a voice within Australian Red Cross (advocate), forging footprints for First Nations peoples through partnerships and collaborations (build capacity) and empowering communities by a strengths-based and community-led approach (deliver) while walking alongside First Nations peoples and communities.

Introduction

First Nations peoples and communities in Australia are between 3 and 5 times more likely to be living in areas that are affected by increasingly severe natural hazards than non-Indigenous peoples (McNicol 2023). However, emergency management and disaster resilience approaches have typically overlooked the unique strengths and needs of First Nations peoples (Colvin 2024).

First Nations Centrality is enshrined in the Australian Red Cross organisational strategy. Australian Red Cross also works with and for First Nations peoples and communities, placing cultural knowledge, leadership, values and perspectives at the centre of its strategy.

Australian Red Cross has been supporting the disaster resilience of First Nations peoples and communities for over 20 years. The FNRG was established by Australian Red Cross drawing on its experiences and in recognition of the disproportionate effects disasters have on First Nations communities. This acknowledges a gap in culturally safe disaster resilience programs and services.

Since 2020, the FNRG has delivered culturally appropriate response, relief, resilience and recovery programs and services to First Nations peoples and communities across Australia. This has included:

- working closely with Elders, leaders, youth, and emerging leaders in communities
- building ongoing insights and learnings from First Nations peoples and communities before, during and after emergencies and disasters
- recognising, systematising and embedding existing work, or ‘Formalising the Informal’ in work practices

- developing the First Nations monitoring and evaluation framework that is currently being finalised to be published later in 2025
- measuring the impacts and outcomes for First Nations communities for continuous improvement.

In 2024, the work undertaken by the FNRG was recognised with the group winning both the Queensland and National Resilient Australia Community Award. It was also nominated for the Resilient Australia National Collaboration and Partnership Award, and the Resilient Australia National Award.¹

Creating a voice

By creating a voice, the Australian Red Cross hopes to empower First Nations peoples and communities to lead community resilience and recovery efforts in Australia, and to inform the emergency management sector on best practice principles for working with First Nations peoples and communities.

The group takes a First Nations community-led approach, which allows the FNRG members to walk alongside communities to strengthen people’s capacity to respond to community priorities and to strengthen the communities they live in. This work follows principles including:

- taking a place-based approach to ensure change is community-led and builds on strengths
- incorporating a community voice to ensure initiatives are culturally appropriate and support community needs
- strengthening local and culturally strong governance to amplify community voice and decision-making
- acting as Community Changemakers to pursue sustainable community-led solutions through community reflection processes
- creating plans to 'hand over' activities to community to ensure true community control and ownership
- advocating for the strengths, priorities and needs of First Nations communities.

To support and guide its work, the FNRG developed a First Nations Recovery Framework, which is aligned with the Red Cross Emergency Services Theory of Change (Kelly et al. 2022) and Phoenix Australia’s ReCap First Nations Peoples and Recovery Capitals (Quinn et al. 2021). The First Nations Recovery Framework aims to empower First Nations peoples to lead community resilience and recovery. Outcomes of the First Nations Recovery Framework were adapted for First Nations peoples and communities and include:

- being empowered to lead and drive decisions and practice around community resilience
- taking localised, community-driven action to build resilience and recover from disaster

- having the knowledge and information needed to make decisions
- feeling safe, calm and hopeful
- demonstrating an understanding of the psychosocial effects of disaster
- having access to quality psychosocial support.

To embed culturally safe approaches and practices, the FNRG developed Terms of Reference to:

- provide a support base for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and volunteers working in Red Cross Emergency Services
- support specialist and outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- coordinate community development, support and referral to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disaster-affected people, families and groups
- provide advice to internal and external leadership groups to enable learning from their experiences to better prepare for future disasters.

The FNRG collaborates with First Nations community leaders, members and organisations as well as government departments and agencies and non-First Nations organisations to deliver its work. Feedback from one community member and services provider was:

...it was such a positive thing to happen for the community. We've had the bushfires, we've had the trauma from all of that, we've had COVID-19, we've had floods. People not being able to visit their relatives, aunties and uncles and grandparents, that was quite a traumatic time. The last 2 years have been awful for us. To be able to celebrate and get together as a whole family, community family, if that was to continue, that would be an awesome thing. ...It's a feel-good thing, isn't it? Everybody felt good. To have that (community events) after, like I said, the trauma of the last 2 years is really amazing.

(Leppold et al. 2022, p.49)

Forging footprints

The FNRG has walked alongside First Nations peoples and communities in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia to support recovery and resilience across events including COVID-19, bushfire, flood, cyclone and support for collective trauma events. The FNRG has worked in the following First Nations communities:

New South Wales

- Baryulgil
- Bundjalung

1. Awards recognise Queensland disaster resilience builders, www.qra.qld.gov.au/news-case-studies/news/awards-recognise-queensland-disaster-resilience-builders

- Darkinjung
- Darug
- Dhungatti
- Gambayggir
- Gumbaynggirr
- Kamilaroi
- Malabugilmah
- Yaegl
- Yuin

Queensland

- Bindal
- Gudjal
- Girramay
- Gurambilbarra Wulgurukaba
- Juru (Birri Gubba)
- Manbarra Bwgcolman
- Nywaigi Warrgamay Bandjin
- Wanamara
- Yerunthully

South Australia

- Bindjali
- Boandik
- Bodaruwitj
- Ngarrindjeri
- Meintangk
- Narungga
- Meru
- Peramangk/Ramindjeri

Using a strengths-based approach and the First Nations Recovery Framework as a guide, the FNRG has designed, delivered and supported a range of culturally safe community initiatives co-designed with First Nations leaders, emerging leaders and organisations including:

- advocacy
- cultural burns, yarning circles, dances and storytelling
- disaster preparedness for school children through the Pillowcase Program²
- disaster resilience and emergency preparedness workshops
- first aid, psychological first aid and mental health first aid training and healing days
- First Nations staff are present at evacuation centres
- initiating and contributing to events such as Bermagui Survival Day, Eden Dreaming Garden Project, NAIDOC Big Day Out, Narungga Family Day, Safer Communities barbecues and Warramali Building Group launch

- information and advice on housing and rebuilding
- psychosocial recovery support services
- support for grant applications
- training and resources for volunteers
- wellbeing workshops
- women's groups and Aboriginal fathers' groups
- workshops on understanding fire, traditional fire-starting practices and lessons on an ancient fire spirit.

Importantly, the FNRG has provided ongoing, culturally safe wellbeing and psychosocial support to help with the extended disaster effects.

Empowering community

The FNRG provides a space for culturally safe communications, access to peer support, a place for celebrations and a personal approach when supporting members in times of challenge.

The FNRG operates as an advisory group and has contributed to the strategic planning of Australian Red Cross Emergency Services with First Nations recovery considerations embedded in workplans, advocacy priorities, strategies and responses. The FNRG also developed its 'First Nations Peoples and Communities in Recovery' induction online platform for new Red Cross emergency services staff to build cultural capacity when working with First Nations peoples and communities.

The FNRG is guiding the development of the Australian Red Cross needs assessment documents to encompass the Phoenix Australia's Recovery Capitals and Indigenous Peoples Resource (Quinn et al. 2021) as a reference point and tool for recovery teams completing community assessments following emergencies and disasters. Specific areas of importance for a holistic understanding of Indigenous peoples are now included in needs assessments to support inclusion, being:

- caring for Country
- connections
- culture and identity
- Elders
- gathering places
- healing
- Indigenous organisations
- food, fibre and medicine
- self-determination and leadership
- traditional and contemporary knowledge.

In addition, the FNRG reviewed and redesigned *Communicating in Recovery* (Australian Red Cross 2022, p.90) and created content taking a strengths-based

2. Pillowcase Program at www.redcross.org.au/pillowcase-workshops



A NAIDOC Cultural Cook Up in 2023 was supported by the FNRG in the Narungga and Nunkunu community and hosted by the Aboriginal health team from the Yorke and Northern Local Health Network, Port Pirie Hospital and the Nunkuwarrin Yunti Community.

Image: Australian Red Cross

approach in recovery when communicating with First Nations peoples and communities.

The FNRG presented at the 2023 Australian Disaster Resilience Conference and is regularly invited to speak about experiences in advocating for and enabling First Nations community resilience. This provides the opportunity to share expertise and insights to inform and educate the emergency management sector about better approaches of working with First Nations communities.

The FNRG is supporting and guiding the work of other projects, including the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience (NIDR) research program³ and Fire to Flourish.⁴ FNRG presented at the inaugural Brisbane National First Nations Resilience Summit in 2023 (McNicol 2023) and FNRG members attended the NIDR Indigenous Disaster Resilience Policy Roundtables in South Australia (McNicol 2024a) and Queensland (McNicol 2024b) to co-design the First Nations footprint in state disaster management arrangements.

In South Australia, work by the FNRG has helped build relationships and trust between First Nations communities and local emergency services. This has included providing advice and information to local emergency management organisations of the effects of emergencies from a cultural and community perspective. This has been exemplified in the relationship between the Narungga community and the emergency management sector on the Yorke Peninsula. Increased understanding of First Nations peoples' relationships to Country has led to cultural burns training for rangers and greater sensitivity in firefighting. The relationships between the Aboriginal Land Trust, South Australian Country Fire Service, Point Pearce Aboriginal Corporation, Firesticks and the South Australian Fire and Emergency Services Commission are now stronger. There are further plans to build relationships with local Police.

In addition, a reconciliation event in Adelaide saw the FNRG provide opportunities for First Nations community

3. National Indigenous Disaster Resilience at www.monash.edu/arts/social-sciences/national-indigenous-disaster-resilience.

4. Fire to Flourish at www.monash.edu/firetoflourish

members to connect with health services, housing support, grief counselling, Aboriginal legal services and bushfire legal services.

Footprints and walking together in New South Wales

In New South Wales, the FNRG began by building connections in the community to understand what would be helpful. This approach informed the planning and delivery of new types of recovery support activities for cultural healing as well as connecting service providers in ways that had not existed before. An evaluation found that:

...this is highly significant given that across the entire disaster sector, there has been limited work to collaborate with First Nations communities; the work of First Nations recovery officers in the program appears to be driving forward a new wave of disaster recovery work. (Leppold et al. 2023, p.77)

The NAIDOC Big Day Out event, conceived by members of the FNRG, was noted by the Australian Parliament for its significance in bringing First Nations and non-First Nations people together. Thirteen organisations collaborated to deliver this major event that was attended by more than 1,000 people. A community member and service provider commented:

I think see many mobs out there, seeing so many mobs, connecting back with each other, as growing up, we were always camping, we were always having big family dinners. We've lost a lot of that...We stopped doing that stuff. On Saturday, it was that feeling coming back of, "Yes. My mob's coming back together". (Leppold et al. 2022, p.49)

Another community member stated:

Even the NAIDOC day, that was a healing thing. As First Nations people, we see our family more for sorry business, so to be able to have something that's not sorry business, something to celebrate, something to acknowledge our culture, that was really awesome. That was a good healing source as well for the whole community. There were Elders out that I hadn't seen for a long time, and kids. ...I think that was really, really helpful for the whole community. Not just the Aboriginal community either. ... I think it's good for closing the gap and reconciliation and cultural appreciation. It was awesome for the whole community. (Leppold et al. 2022, p.50).

A service provider working on suicide response in the region commented that they saw the role of the recovery officer bringing people together and supporting individuals through extremely challenging circumstances in the

community and credited their work as contributing to suicide prevention in the area. The service provider stated:

To me, the work that [recovery officer] does...on the ground is so important ...My day job is to sit down with people in a post-[suicide] attempt situation and try and work through that. To me, the work that [recovery officer] does in the community is so vital, because that's the prevention work, and identifying the work that's done there so that they don't end up sitting across a coffee table from me. (Leppold 2022: P53)

Other activities in New South Wales included the Australian Red Cross partnership with Miyay-Birray Youth Service. Led by the FNRG, the partnership supports First Nations resilience in Moree. The project evaluation identified lessons learnt and possible improvements to strengthen and sustain the partnership. A key factor in its success was the shared values. 'We are all bound to each other to delivery to community. This is our shared goal' (Woodward 2024, p.16). The Miyay Birray-Red Cross partnership is an example of how working with the strengths and networks already embedded in First Nations communities has mutual benefits for First Nations and mainstream organisations alike. These features have broader application for the creation of other partnerships in disaster response, recovery and preparedness.

The Understanding Psychological First Aid training (Richardson et al. 2023) was adapted to the cultural needs for the Moree Aboriginal Fathers Group. This was supported by the FNRG and the fathers with outcomes including and increased awareness of how to support families to become more aware of how to support their families. In addition, a cultural healing day, attended by First Nations and non-First Nations community members, included a workshop on understanding fire, traditional fire-starting practices and lessons on an ancient fire spirit. There was also didgeridoo playing and a reflective circle.

Evaluation of work in Mogo, New South Wales, focused on events, cultural healing activities, connecting service providers through new working groups and advocacy activities which '...highlighted the innovative, creative, and respect-driven approaches that were taken by the First Nations recovery officer to champion this community and deliver support in ways that were meaningful'. (Leppold et al. 2023, p.76).

Footprints and walking together in Queensland

In Queensland, a FNRG member was commended for their role in supporting an increase in COVID-19 vaccinations in First Nations communities. A stakeholder noted the:

...profound comprehension and adept leadership in orchestrating collaborative endeavours among government and non-governmental agencies was pivotal in enhancing easily accessible COVID-19 service leading to First Nations Vaccination rates to among the highest in the state.

(personal correspondence to Sam Savage, 15 September 2023)

An independent evaluation report to assess the 2019–20 bushfire recovery program referenced pillars of the Australian Red Cross Emergency Services Theory of Change. The evaluation highlighted:

...the strong advocacy work happening around this community along multiple intended outcomes of the Theory of Change. Beyond advocating for psychosocial needs ... but specifically (advocating for) the impacts on First Nations communities as a group that has been historically overlooked or ignored in disaster recovery spaces. Advocacy for Mogo, linking First Nations service providers with national disaster recovery bodies, and facilitating up-skilling training sessions for Red Cross volunteers, all underscore relevant and inclusive practices to progress towards outcomes on the Theory of Change. (Leppold et al. 2023, p.57)

It should be noted that adaptive approaches extended to the evaluation where the university research group remained flexible to adapting research methods to align with ways the community was most comfortable with sharing information. For example, while in all other settings interviews and focus groups were typically 45–60 minutes long, a 3-hour ‘walk and talk’ focus group discussion on Country with a group of emerging leaders taught the researchers about reading Country in addition to discussing bushfire recovery and experiences (Leppold et al. 2023, p.15).

Conclusion

The FNRG is working towards ‘Formalising the Informal’, documenting and systematising principles, approaches and practices of its work to ensure longer-term sustainability, scalability and transferability across the emergency management sector.

This paper discussed how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are **creating a voice** at Australian Red Cross, **forging footprints** for First Nations peoples through partnerships and collaborations, **empowering communities** by taking a strengths-based and community-led approach and walking alongside First Nations peoples and communities.

This paper provides real-life strategies and examples of the work undertaken by the FNRG to date. With consequences of climate change increasing, this work is more important than ever. By walking with community and taking a

community-led, strengths-based and culturally safe approach, the emergency management sector can help change the game so everyone can bounce back better.

Acknowledgment

Australian Red Cross acknowledges the positive work initiated, supported, and undertaken by the FNRG since its inception in 2020 and the substantial contributions from former and current members. Australian Red Cross acknowledges the generous donations, grants and support from community members, the public, private and tertiary sectors that have enabled the work of this group.

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