

## Abstract

In 2022, the Northern Rivers of New South Wales experienced a significant flood event. River levels and resulting damage were the worst recorded equating to billions of dollars in damages. Local agencies in the area played a critical role in the response and recovery but were commonly excluded from formal processes. A study of the experience and role of local place-based agencies examined their place in emergency and disaster management through focus groups with agency representatives. This research aimed to understand the experiences of these place-based agencies and their contribution to disaster management within the community. Findings highlight the negative effects experienced by these organisations of their exclusion from emergency planning processes both pre- and post-disaster. This paper argues for acknowledgment of the important contributions place-based agencies make to disaster-affected communities as well as the need for their inclusion in formal processes across all phases of emergency management. Using the experience of the Northern Rivers floods, the inclusion of place-based agencies 'at the table' will enhance planning and management capacity and build community resilience.

# Bringing place-based agencies 'to the table' in emergency management

Peer reviewed

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## Introduction

In 2022, the Northern Rivers of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, experienced an exceptional flood event. The resulting damages were reported to be the worst recorded, equating to \$9.6 billion in damages (Read 2023). In many affected communities, place-based agencies were central to response and recovery efforts and continue to provide recovery and resilience-building supports. At times, these local agencies were the only readily available support in the initial post-flood period. This paper describes a 3-phase study of the role of place-based agencies in emergency and disaster management, drawing on the findings from focus groups that explored the experience of local place-based agencies in the Northern Rivers following the 2022 floods. Phase one of the study was a literature review and phase 2 was a policy analysis.

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) defines 'disaster' as 'a serious disruption of the functioning of a community leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts' (UNDRR n.d.). According to Barton et al. (2020), 'disaster management' involves 4 phases of preparedness, emergency response, recovery and building community resilience. In Australia, the *Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience* (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2020) defines these 4 phases as prevent, prepare, respond and recover.

Within emergency management, the importance of resilient communities and the benefits attributed to being disaster-prepared are increasingly being recognised (Golding et al. 2020). Golding et al. (2020) argued the benefits attributed to communities being disaster-prepared are seen as contributing to healing from the grief created from disaster events. In some countries where disaster events are more prevalent

(Okada et al. 2018; Rapeli et al. 2018), the community is respected as a major stakeholder and is actively involved in emergency management processes while in others, including Australia, community participation is not as obvious.

Place-based agencies, central to many communities, are established to support and advocate for members of a community, particularly those whose vulnerability put them at greater exposure or risk or results in disadvantage or marginalisation. The concept of 'place-based' recognises issues and needs based on location, including disadvantage. It acknowledges and focuses on the contexts and circumstances of 'people in place' with place-based agencies focused on understanding and responding to the needs of the local population to address local issues (Klepac et al. 2023, p.2; Proudley 2013). These agencies may commence as a volunteer service and because of their capacity to understand and respond to the needs of the local demographic, may be considered worthy of government funding. These agencies commonly rely on community donations and philanthropic funding to respond to community needs. Often, place-based agencies are staffed by a mixture of local and experienced community support managers alongside people with local expertise who are well-placed to effectively and efficiently respond to community needs. The availability of skilled staff and volunteers significantly improves an organisation's capacity to be responsive to community crises.

While government agencies and large-scale state-based or multi-site organisations are often responsible for emergency and disaster management processes, there is a need to recognise and engage with place-based agencies. Given the existing staff, volunteers, relationships and resources these agencies have in the community, they have a greater likelihood of being able to engage immediately with community members on a personal level and provide agile responses to changing needs (Golding et al. 2020). Further, place-based agencies are knowledge holders when it comes to providing local support and they offer greater community inclusion in emergency and disaster management (Golding et al. 2020). As such, place-based agencies can articulate first-hand the grief, loss and trauma being experienced throughout the community and actively contribute to responses. In contrast, large organisations may struggle to comprehend the intricacies of each community. Their approaches can sometimes lead to a one-size-fits-all model, which may not effectively address the nuanced needs of diverse local populations. For this research, we have excluded these larger entities from the study because we wanted a localised approach to community development.

Place-based agencies have existing relationships with local communities and possess valuable local geographical and historical knowledge. They are aware of the strengths,

weaknesses and needs of their community and have knowledge of the resources in the area and where they are placed. The importance of including local place-based agencies in every phase of emergency management in Australia is promoted in the *Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience* (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2020) and is reflected in state and territory emergency management guidelines. As indicated in the 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry (NSW Government 2023), there is disparity between what was recommended in the guidelines and what transpired during the 2022 floods. This indicates that a better understanding is required about the role of place-based agencies throughout emergency management process, including in planning and evaluation phases.

Communities in the Northern Rivers regions of NSW have been subject to many floods. This paper discusses findings of phase 3 of a study of the role of place-based agencies in disaster management by Donnarumma et al. (2023) that examined the experiences of place-based community agencies processes during the 2022 events. This phase of the study involved focus groups with representatives of place-based agencies in communities affected by the floods. This study's findings reflect the experiences across these events and identified the significance of place-based agencies during these testing times. During the floods, many areas were cut off for days, even weeks, and place-based agencies and community members rallied to provide responses and community support with limited staff and resources in the absence of other response services (NSW Government 2023).

## Literature review

Resilience is beneficial in disaster-affected communities as it reduces the gap between social isolation and disparities in the advantages of some community members. A focus on bolstering community resilience can increase community wealth and addresses gaps in services that focus on community members who are more vulnerable or at risk through social disadvantage (Ali et al. 2021; Howard et al. 2018; Matthews et al. 2020). Golding et al. (2020) detailed experiences of some rural communities affected by disasters, telling of the significance of coming together and rebuilding for the greater good of the community. Further, Golding et al. (2020) explained how many rural communities in Australia face sudden and unplanned change with experiences of bushfires and floods over recent years. They argued that greater community engagement can increase community resilience following disaster events (Golding et al. 2020). The NSW Flood Inquiry (NSW Government 2023) identified gaps in community engagement and resilience-building in the government-led approaches to emergency management as applied in the Northern Rivers, both before and after the

2022 floods. This had significant consequences for affected communities. Place-based agencies may contribute to addressing these gaps.

Place-based agencies often contribute to emergency management either formally or informally with the importance of the role of community organisation such as place-based agencies in emergency and disaster management increasingly recognised internationally (UNDRR 2015). Gray et al. (2021) stated that place-based agencies have historically built strong relationships with the community and have developed a deep knowledge of the territory, competence in providing specialised support to at-risk community members and are fundamental in helping with psychosocial recovery. Similarly, Muir (2021) and Rapeli et al. (2018) found that, in the aftermath of a disaster, place-based agencies can play a vital role in safeguarding lives by providing emergency rescue teams with precise information about the location of vulnerable people in their community. Research by Barton et al. (2020), Curnin and O'Hara (2019) and Scott and Coleman (2016) on effective strategies in emergency and disaster management show the importance of inter-agency collaboration and coordination between government and place-based agencies, stakeholders and academics.

The value of place-based agencies includes their representation of the diversity of community perspectives, including common issues and disparities, and their role as community advocates (Hyunjung et al. 2022, Okada et al. 2018; Rapeli et al. 2018). It is usual that place-based agencies actively support members of the community likely to be more affected by displacement, disadvantage and marginalisation (Howard et al. 2018). As such, place-based agencies fill a fundamental gap as they are the first point of contact in the community and often have networks that assist in reaching and supporting marginalised individuals and sectors (Howard et al. 2018; Matthews et al. 2020). In the context of emergency management, studies show that the inclusion of a wide range of different place-based agencies in local emergency management committees results in greater mitigation efforts. Place-based agencies are operated by community members who are commonly deeply invested in their communities with local connections and roots that place them as primary knowledge holders. As such, they are often the first to respond during an emergency providing both practice and social support. Further, they are there long after government support leaves (Hyunjung et al. 2022; Muir 2021; Scott et al. 2018).

Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and groups also provide place-based services. There is an inclination to ignore the historical knowledge of the lands and seas held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the community and opportunities to learn traditional

remedial solutions are often overlooked (Matthews et al. 2020; Sithole et al. 2019). Failure to include Elders and Indigenous leaders from hazard-prone areas in solutions and emergency management planning can reduce the resilience of communities (Drennan and Morrissey 2019). Importantly, this knowledge offers opportunities for a deeper understanding of natural occurrences and the relationships between people and land. Literature strongly argues for participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in government-administered emergency management processes and that increased involvement in the development and implementation of policies is necessary (Ali et al. 2021; Sithole et al. 2019; Thomassin et al. 2019). The Firesticks Initiative in northern NSW and the Caring for Country initiatives (Matthews et al. 2020; Thomassin et al. 2019) are examples of successful collaboration between local Indigenous groups, government agencies and local agencies. This reiterates the importance of building relationships among different groups to increase resilience.

Co-creation between government and communities including place-based organisations can contribute to building trust, mutual respect and communication providing greater community knowledge and access to support in the event of a disaster (Hedelin et al. 2017; Muir 2021). Donnarumma et al. (2023) stated that, in Australia, there are several examples of successful collaboration and co-creation processes between government and place-based agencies. In Victoria, the inclusion of representatives of place-based agencies in Municipal Emergency Management Plan Committees (MEMPCs) is mandatory. All organisations share equal responsibility in the co-creating process. Additionally, Victoria has implemented EM-LEARN, a lessons-management framework where MEMPCs share practical advice learnt on the ground that other MEMPCs might implement. Another example that supports collaboration between government agencies and place-based agencies comes from South Australia and the Northern Territory where online portals have been created to enhance multi-agency coordination processes and share information among the organisations involved in response and recovery. A practice implemented in Western Australia consists of including Indigenous community members in the local emergency committees, while in Queensland local disaster coordination centres host representatives of different organisations under the same roof, enabling communication and collaboration. While some states and territories also conduct simulation exercises of emergency plans to strengthen preparedness, clarify roles and responsibilities and identify possible gaps in the response, limitations regarding the nature of the scenarios used and effectiveness of these exercises have been noted by McLennan et al. (2024).

Recognising the potential to enhance emergency and disaster management through engagement with place-based agencies, this paper discusses the study by Donnarumma et al. (2023) undertaken by Southern Cross University in consultation with NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS). This study explored the experiences and perspectives of place-based community services about the support they provided to communities during recent extreme weather events, particularly the 2022 northern NSW floods. Insights regarding future opportunities and challenges are discussed.

## Methods

This study aimed to explore community sector involvement in and experiences of emergency and disaster management from the perspective of place-based organisation representatives. The study was in 3 phases: a narrative literature review, a cross-jurisdictional analysis including Australia and selected other countries and a qualitative study of the experiences and perspectives of community agency representatives. This paper reports on the findings from the third phase and focuses on the perspectives of place-based agencies and their engagement in the emergency management process.

Phase 3 of this study involved 8 focus groups, 5 were face-to-face and held in 4 communities within the identified affected areas. Three were online meetings for people unable to attend face-to-face focus groups. Agencies local to the flood-affected areas were invited to participate. Invited agencies were drawn from an initial list of 12 local agencies provided by NCOSS in consultation with the Northern Rivers Flood Working Group (NRFWG). Publicly available community directories were used to identify other place-based community service agencies to capture as many suitable agencies as possible in the region.

Identified local agencies were invited to send a representative to one of the focus groups. Nineteen, organisations responded to the invitation that resulted in 23 participants attending a focus group. The majority were from small organisations providing services only in the area in which they were based and 4 of the participating organisations delivered services in more than one location in the region. Most representatives attended a focus group in their local area. Three attended a group in a neighbouring community and the remainder attended online. Focus groups were recorded and electronically transcribed. All transcripts were manually reviewed and quality checked.

An inductive thematic analysis was undertaken (Clarke and Braun 2017). Early themes were identified during the transcript reviews. Transcripts were manually coded by 2 researchers. Early themes were expanded by the first coder and checked and developed in the second coding round. Themes were checked by a third researcher during

the coding process for consistency of coding and themes. The coding resulted in a set of primary themes with related sub-themes. Significant primary themes focused on the response of government at all levels and the role of place-based agencies.

## Limitations of the method

While attempts were made to include a wide range of place-based agencies, this process may not have identified all relevant organisations. In particular, local groups may not have been recognised as service providers and therefore not included or may not have had capacity to participate. As qualitative methods were used, there are limitations to generalisability of findings. Further, as indicated in the literature, research regarding the role of place-based agencies in emergency management is limited. Thus, as the research focuses on the experiences and perspectives of place-based agencies that have directly contributed to emergency management in their local community, perspectives of other agencies and individuals involved in emergency management that may differ from those of the study participants are not considered or reflected through this study.

## Ethics statement

Ethics approval was received from Southern Cross University, approval number 2022/134.

## Findings

These findings discuss the data collected from the 8 focus groups. The participants reflected on experiences of multiple hazard events including floods, fires and drought, with a focus on the most recent floods in 2022. The data were analysed to identify themes. Quotes from the focus groups that best represent common statements were chosen and are provided as examples of the themes in this paper. Focus group participants and organisations have not been named to maintain anonymity.

### Place-based agencies as first responders

Focus group feedback confirmed that place-based agencies across different areas in the Northern Rivers were the first to respond to the 2022 floods. These agencies mobilised people and resources, coordinated volunteers and gathered and distributed a wide range of goods to flood-affected people.

*We're just doing whatever we can to support the people... huge crisis as far as domestic and family violence, child sexual assault, homelessness... so that's our world.*  
(Study participant)

Additionally, participants mentioned how they ended up advising staff from NSW and Australian government agencies on what to do as participants indicated some



government agencies appeared disorganised and confused and lacked an understanding of the local context and needs. This demonstrates how crucial local knowledge is during the response phase. Participants described how their knowledge of the territory and community and their ability to fill the gaps seemed to be ignored. They also indicated that their efforts seemed devalued as shown by an apparent lack of government support and acknowledgment. However, in other instances, large-scale state-based or multi-site organisations not normally operating in the community relied on place-based agencies to provide the priorities and advise about where to go to assist locals. Participants felt this collaboration was often a delayed response.

*ADF [Australian Defence Force] was reporting to me every morning. I was dispatching jobs... I was also feeding back to council... we provided... drinking water and showers for 6 weeks.*

(Study participant)

The aspect of place-based agencies being historically overlooked in emergency and disaster planning, inter-agency meetings and post-disaster evaluations were considered and participants drew this out.

*We had skills and expertise and local knowledge...we stood ready... but we weren't invited around any tables at all.*

(Study participant)

Even if inter-agency coordination differed in inclusivity and uniformity across the Northern Rivers, the exclusion of place-based agencies from meetings with government and other stakeholders was a pressing issue in most focus groups. Participants lamented the apparent lack of effective disaster planning, community engagement and coordination as well as the consequent confusion, disruption and slowness of responses by various government agencies during and following the 2022 floods. This reflects findings of the 2022 Flood Inquiry (NSW Government 2023) that identified issues in relation to preparation, use of available resources, training, coordination and nature and timeliness of response and recovery. Participants also highlighted the key roles they play in building community resilience and the importance of participating in preparedness meetings that include government and non-government organisations together with local stakeholders and community groups. This commitment was evident although participants commonly indicating that their agencies were not supported to undertake this role through funding arrangements.

*We're not even at the table. And they make decisions for us, not with us... We work with all our community.*

(Study participant)

Participants stated that place-based agencies had an important role in the aftermath of the 2022 floods.

However, most agencies were not included in any disaster management co-planning or inter-agency meetings. Participant perspectives indicated there was a lack of recognition or acknowledgement of the role and contributions of these agencies by those leading local emergency management processes. The failure to involve these organisations in the pre-planning phase limited local capacity to act fast and effectively. Most of these organisations were on the frontline during the response and were trusted by the community and were sought out as a source of support during recovery. Therefore, their exclusion from meetings hampered their ability to contribute to resources and information during the response efforts.

*We had not been involved in any planning... with the council or any government agency... We had skills and expertise... they [the government] lent pretty heavily on us.*

(Study participant)

This lack of communication contributed to some confusion and could have exacerbated difficulties in sourcing valuable information and in providing coordinated and consistent information to the public. Participants felt some residents, already affected and/or traumatised by the disaster event were left in limbo and exposed to conflicting information. Participants also felt a 'dysfunctional' relationship with some government agencies was a contributing cause of fragmentation and divisions within communities. A main concern was that when local organisations are excluded from decision-making processes, the whole community was affected and that social, psychological and physical disadvantages were not addressed.

*There's lots of vulnerable people. As you know, they're just here in my town, like, a couple of streets away, going: "I need help. Where is it?" So much capacity got shut down by our council and government... it's just criminal.*

(Study participant)

### The role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups

Participants expressed the need for local Indigenous groups to be included in emergency and disaster management. This was related to their vast knowledge, their cultural care for Country and their capacity to provide a culturally safe and responsive approach for their communities. The failure to involve these groups was regarded as having led to a series of government interventions described as 'dictatorial' and lacking a trauma-informed approach. Some communities were cut off for weeks. The feedback from the focus groups indicated the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander place-based agencies would improve the response to disasters and enhance the effectiveness of emergency management through a culturally responsive approach that respects and engages the local Indigenous community and their knowledge.

*Self-determining behaviour for rural and remote communities [was] lacking for Aboriginal communities... cut off for weeks ... no access to food and worries for our Elders.*

(Study participant)

During the focus groups, examples were provided of situations where input was not sought from local Indigenous organisations or other place-based agencies related to cultural and community knowledge. This was regardless of the significant support provided to respond to local need. Participants provided insight into how local community members implemented local initiatives that government resources were unable to provide or where these were not available in a timely way.

*Police, SES [State Emergency Service] would arrive when the community was already undertaking the rescue.*

(Study participant)

*They couldn't help us because they couldn't get anywhere near us.*

(Study participant)

*Everything we're doing, we did off our own backs by way of preparedness... response ... recovery and by way of managing trauma.*

(Study participant)

### Contributions of local knowledge and communication

There is a depth of knowledge held in place-based agencies concerning a community's needs across all stages of emergency management. Given this knowledge and community connections, the participants reinforced how place-based agencies were pivotal during the response and recovery and could contribute to planning.

*It's incredibly important for the community to feel empowered in their own recovery to buffer against... developing PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] and further embedding of more complex trauma.*

(Study participant)

Participants felt that, when acknowledged by government as an equal in managing emergencies, organisations are in a better position to collaborate effectively with community members, particularly people who may be at risk of being displaced or have difficulty in evacuating. Participants shared instances where this had occurred and how shared expectations increased community resilience. Place-based agencies also have knowledge about appropriate local expertise to enlist. Participants mentioned capacities of accessing resources for rescues, working with local Indigenous representatives and providing recovery and resilience-building support.

*Considering that we don't get funded... we don't respond because that's what the government does... we've had to bear the primary brunt of the response, not just us as an*

*organisation, but our community.*

(Study participant)

Participants also suggested how they could do more with online platforms designed explicitly for managing emergencies. This could help improve communication and assist timely interventions.

*Through this platform, NGOs [non-government organisations] and government agencies could communicate quickly, access and share information, where plans and terms of reference and everything to do with disaster management were kept up-to-date and stored on this platform.*

(Study participant)

Participants explained how the recovery stage continued for longer than was expected. It was identified that resilience comes from building psychological strength within the community. Continuing to build community resilience and mutual aid approaches, particularly in communities more prone to extreme weather events and emergencies, can assist communities to be better placed to support one another and know who in their community can provide a conduit between external resources and community-organised initiatives in future events (McLisky et al. 2025). The participants stated it was important for communities to feel empowered; to have a voice when it comes to their own risk reduction and emergency planning.

*Those of us who are in rural locations...we are the main infrastructure in the town, around human service provision... It takes a whole community to try and respond to something as big as this.*

(Study participant)

### Inclusion of place-based agencies

Participants were insistent that their contribution in the planning of future emergencies is fundamental for wellbeing within their communities. They indicated that place-based agencies often receive limited funding and rely on volunteers and philanthropy to provide their normal services. Therefore, to have the capacity to effectively participate in and contribute to disaster management processes on an ongoing basis, there is a need to consider their capacity and the associated funding requirements for effective engagement and to support the broad range of community needs during and following extreme weather and other hazard events.

*We're trying to argue that we need to be funded.*

(Study participant)

*It took 3 days for the [evacuation] to be officially set up. Because [the government agency staff] couldn't get in here...we were here and supporting the community with limited resources.*

(Study participant)

Participants felt that local agencies were either not given an opportunity to apply for funding or were not offered funding but needed to continue to provide services and respond to needs in their communities.

*Then 3 [government agency] funded programs came from out of town...staffed by humans with multiple degrees...They don't come with food. They don't come with blankets... Acknowledge and fund who is here already.*

(Study participant)

Participants felt that place-based agencies played a significant role in emergency management at times critical to the safety and wellbeing of their community. They felt there was a clear argument for local agency inclusion in the formal processes of planning, response, recovery and resilience building.

## Discussion

This study highlighted fundamental roles of place-based agencies in emergency and disaster management. This is because these agencies are commonly the first to respond within the community and because of the knowledge and relationships they hold. It was noted that when place-based agencies had funding for collaboration and resilience projects resulting in increased capacity, that there were improvements during challenging times. The community reliance on place-based agencies when facing difficulties both outside and during times of disaster is a feature of the fundamental role they play in local communities. As they maintain contemporary local knowledge and relationships, they are invaluable resources during the response and also through the long haul of recovery. Gray et al. (2021), Muir (2021) and Rapeli et al. (2018) argue the need for attention on the crucial role place-based agencies have. These agencies are connectors within communities and provide significant mitigation efforts that can enhance resilience in the community. This is amplified when included in risk reduction and emergency planning and are recognised as a partner in response and recovery (Hyun Jung et al. 2022).

Place-based agencies can be agile and responsive. As such, they can play a critical role in early response, supporting effective coordination of broader responses at a local level. In this study, once recognised as knowledge holders within their communities, participants said agencies provided a valuable coordination role in directing government services, including the ADF, to people and areas of highest need. Similarly, they were able to assist people in need to receive practical and psychosocial assistance and assist people to access formal recovery services such as those available from recovery centres.

Barton et al. (2020), Curnin and O'Hara (2019) and Scott and Coleman (2016) all recommend including place-based agencies in every phase of emergency management. The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (2020) and most Australian states and territories promote this collaboration. However, this study found that the experience and views of local communities are that local councils and government departments fail to include place-based agencies in emergency management planning (Donnuramma et al. 2023; Drennan and Morrissey 2019). This study identified that place-based agencies are not recognised and are often excluded from the response and early recovery coordination processes while actively engaged in and playing a critical role in response and recovery.

Study results indicated the valuable insights local Indigenous groups bring to the planning, response and recovery phases. They can provide expertise in caring for the land and mitigating the local hazard risks. They also provide help and support to their communities by following culturally safe practices. During the 2022 floods, Indigenous groups experienced inappropriate forms of help, there was a lack of trauma-informed and culturally responsive interventions and the use of an authoritarian, directive or 'mission style approach' when supporting flood-affected Indigenous communities (Donnarumma 2023). These findings align with the literature, which supports the inclusion of local Indigenous organisations to provide appropriate assistance to local communities while benefiting the broader community (Ali et al. 2021). Matthews et al. (2020) and Thomassin et al. (2019) point out that the collaboration between the government and place-based agencies leads to successful results (e.g. the Firesticks Initiative and the Caring for Country Initiative).

Failure to include place-based agencies across the phases of emergency management has been an obstacle to resilience-building, slowing the access to local resources and compromising the agility and efficiency that these organisations can provide. The 2022 floods offer an example of the risks of not engaging place-based agencies in risk reduction and emergency management. This is also highlighted in the NSW Flood Inquiry (NSW Government 2023). The inquiry report confirmed the issues identified in the focus groups and identified that excluding local organisations from emergency and disaster management had a negative effect on the response and recovery phases and adversely affected the local communities.

The community and, particularly vulnerable community members, rely on the support of place-based agencies. This reliance is higher and critical in times of crisis. As these findings indicate, the knowledge, community and individual relationships and the trust of community members make a significant contribution to good response and recovery. They are also the community supports that

remain after the event. They become valuable resources and their recognition and inclusion in the planning process, as well as post-disaster phases, can enhance emergency planning effectiveness.

While place-based organisations provide a critical, often unacknowledged, role in emergency management, they are overlooked in the planning processes and in the funding arrangements to support their work. In the recovery phase, the additional demands for services result in specific funding, but it was often not equivalent to demand and often not allocated to smaller local agencies.

These findings reiterate the value of inclusion of place-based agencies and their depth of knowledge about community needs over time and across events. They have a significant potential to bolster effective management when acknowledged and included in formal processes. In contrast, significant gaps exist in the planning and initial response when place-based agencies are excluded. Another vital asset they have is an understanding of where at-risk people might be and what kind of specific support might be required. Being involved in a community contributes to both individual and community resilience (Scott et al. 2018). Local community organisations are significant contributors to this and can be valuable contributors if included in emergency management across all phases.

Donnarumma et al. (2023) stated that the role place-based agencies play in emergency and disaster management at a local level is critical and argued for co-planning and inter-agency work as well as for inclusion of place-based agencies and Elders. A newly formulated disaster management framework should include place-based agencies that are adequately funded to address the lessons learnt from the experiences of place-based agencies.

Planning for emergencies may put significant burdens on already overstretched agencies and not all agencies will have the capacity to participate in these processes. In recognition, this paper identifies the existing role many place-based agencies play in responding to community needs. Boetto et al. (2021) indicate that credibility and support, including financial support provided by the government to place-based agencies in disaster management, enhances capacity and can significantly benefit communities. To effectively include place-based agencies as partners in a collaborative and inclusive approach there is a need to acknowledge their role and consider funding required for this additional work. This highlights a central issue of how government and place-based agencies collaborate to provide coordinated and effective planning and recovery. Further research about the role, capacity and support needs of these organisations would be beneficial.

## Limitations

As a qualitative study with a small number of participants and a focus on a specific disaster event and associated responses, there are limitations to the generalisability of the study findings. It is acknowledged that multiple, but not all, place-based agencies in the affected area were participants in this study. Therefore, there is potential bias given the nature of place-based organisations with other perspectives not captured or represented in the study. To minimise bias, the study sought to include organisations that were not associated with the NRFWG or NCOSS. This study occurred during the recovery phase, which may have limited the sharing of perspectives regarding other phases of emergency management. Despite these limitations, insights from this study align with other research and contribute to informing inclusive approaches to emergency and disaster management.

Although there were methodological limitations, the study provided insight into the contributions of place-based agencies in disaster contexts and where additional involvement and resources could improve responses. These insights point to where communities were better supported with funding to improve collaboration and resilience projects and the potential for other improvements.

Further research including a follow-up study on resilience-building and future planning processes in the period 3 to 5 years after the floods would be beneficial to understand the experiences and roles of place-based agencies in emergency management.

## Conclusion

This study strongly points to a need for place-based collaboration with government agencies actively partnering and using local agencies in emergency management. This is supported by research, which demonstrates how the whole community's involvement equates to communities being better equipped to deal with hazards. Existing practice in Australia shows the importance of engagement at a local level for effective community response. For this to occur, governments must provide place-based agencies with opportunities and the support to be involved. Enhanced engagement builds on the potential of positive outcomes where agencies are actively involved in planning, response and recovery activities particular to the local event and community and are given adequate funding to actualise initiatives. This has been shown where place-based agencies could and did make substantial contributions when their role was acknowledged and adequately resourced.

This study showed that while Australian and international practice and contemporary research promotes the engagement of place-based agencies in emergency and



disaster management, this was not the experience in the Northern Rivers floods. A review of the approach and processes implemented across all levels of government for effective engagement of place-based agencies would be beneficial. Bringing these agencies 'to the table' is vital to improve disaster management processes and to better support communities, particularly those in hazard-prone areas.

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