

How the Australian Disaster Resilience Conference reflects the rise of resilience



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Having attended the Australian Disaster Resilience Conference 2026 (ADRC26) in Melbourne in August, staged concurrently with AFAC26, Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE) and Women and Firefighting Australasia (WAFA) conferences, I have been reflecting on the rise of resilience in the digital age.

To observe hundreds of ADRC delegates filling 2 conference presentation rooms and watching the general buzz of delegates engaging in conversations with community-based organisations in Resilience Lane, was truly profound for me. This outcome may never have been possible without the foresight and vision of a small group of leaders.

In 2018 in Perth, the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) staged the inaugural ADRC alongside AFAC18. Then, 80 practitioners came together for the first ever conference focused on disaster resilience in Australia. What was then a single stream conference has, over the intervening 8 years, grown into a disaster resilience movement, with community at the centre of presentations and conversations.

Practitioners come to the ADRC from a range of sectors – emergency management, local councils, not-for-profits, community-based organisations, academia, humanitarian, health, and what they all share is a passion for understanding how best to harness the inherent capacities and capabilities of communities to support and enhance disaster resilience, and to work with communities to support them to prepare, adapt and cope for whatever disaster may unfold.

In my experience, these conversations were not always front and centre in the national discourse. Those working in hazard

preparedness roles in emergency management agencies were often seen as peripheral to the main effort that was focused on response. And while having a capable and effective emergency response capability is critical, so too is the need to invest in communities.

Others were working in roles focused on community engagement and development, capacity building, communications, health promotion, humanitarian aid, and research to name but a few across a disparate range of sectors.

ADRC has created a safe space for these practitioners to come together to share learnings, good practice and knowledge from the myriad programs and initiatives they are working on, to contribute to the national discussion around what it means to be disaster resilient, and gain greater understanding on how we can best support communities to enhance their resilience in the face of increasing impacts from more frequent disasters of greater scale and consequence due to climate change.

But how did we get here? I have been reflecting on the journey that we have collectively been on that has created what I believe to be an unstoppable movement.

I believe the rise of resilience that was demonstrated at ADRC26 originates at the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (2011) which was endorsed by COAG in February 2011. The Strategy outlined some core principles including that of shared responsibility; that disaster resilience is not solely the domain of emergency services, and that individuals, households, businesses and communities all play a role. A second principle outlined that community and organisation

resilience encouraged proactive planning, preparedness and risk reduction; and a third outlined an inclusive and co-ordinated approach that required co-operation across sectors and jurisdictions.

When AIDR was established in 2015 by AFAC together with the Australian Red Cross and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (BNHCRC), a national disaster resilience conference was not part of the initial contracted offering. However, AIDR partners including Emergency Management Australia (EMA), wanted to provide an opportunity for practitioners focused on disaster resilience from across sectors and jurisdictions to come together face-to-face.

It was proposed that AIDR host a single stream disaster resilience conference concurrently with AFAC18 in Perth, an idea that was supported by sector leaders at the time including then AFAC CEO Stuart Ellis, Dr Mark Crosweller, Director General Emergency Management Australia, Dr Richard Thornton, BNHCRC CEO, and Andrew Coghlan, Australian Red Cross, National Manager Emergency Services. Without their leadership this initiative may never have got off the ground. And as the famous line from the 1991 protest song by Australian singer songwriters Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody goes ... from little things, big things grow.

Less than a decade ago, ADRC was a leap of faith: if we created a conference for those working to support disaster resilience, they would come. Keeping registration affordable and providing sponsored places for volunteers and community sector workers have remained core principles over the past 8 years. The conference has grown both in terms of delegate numbers and national influence, and more recent initiatives including Resilience Lane provide a focal point for these conversations and connections to flourish.

Importantly, the conference has never stood alone. Knowledge management has always been a focus for AIDR, and through the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (AJEM), the ideas, lessons and innovations shared at ADRC have been captured, extended and shared more broadly across the sector. Together, ADRC and AJEM create a complementary cycle of knowledge exchange: ADRC provides a forum for practitioners, researchers and communities to come together and explore emerging challenges and opportunities, while AJEM provides a lasting record that enables those insights to inform policy, practice and future research long after the conference concludes.

In the digital age when we are all glued to screens and apps, working remotely or in an office, the ADRC provides an important stage for a national conversation on disaster resilience to continue to expand, creating benefit for communities and practitioners. It is only with the benefit of time and experience that we will truly be able to value its impact.

About the author

Amanda Leck GAICD is a respected leader in disaster resilience and emergency management with more than 25 years' experience. Her senior roles have included Head of AIDR, Deputy Commissioner at Emergency Management Victoria, and Deputy Secretary and Group Head at the NSW Reconstruction Authority, leading significant resilience and recovery initiatives.