Australian disaster resilience snapshot

What's working? What's needed to take us forward?

Australian Institute for
Disaster Resilience

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Introduction

In September 2018, representatives from across Australia gathered in Perth for the inaugural Australian Disaster Resilience Conference.

The delegates reflected voices and views from all levels of government, emergency services, emergency management, health, academia, the private sector, not-for-profits and community groups. Over two days, the group exchanged knowledge and experience to address the conference theme: *The rise of resilience: from the individual to the global.*

This snapshot presents the collective views of the delegates; what's working and what's needed to take us forward for a disaster resilient Australia. The observations, comments and calls for action within address resilience at multiple levels; from the individual and their community through to national and global strategic directions.

This snapshot also synthesises insights of the delegate group in response to two key questions:

- Thinking to the future, what's one change you'd like to see that will help create a more disaster resilient Australia?
- What's one small action you can take now to develop and support community resilience in Australia?

Disaster resilience at the individual & household level

What's working?

Supporting people to prepare

Across Australia, we have many excellent resources and initiatives to help us prepare. There are checklists and planning templates available, helping us identify what should be done to prepare for a disaster, and by whom. Some Australians are taking simple, yet effective, household preparedness actions; from practicing emergency plans to preparing important items and documents for evacuation and taking steps to ensure the welfare of their animals.

Example: The '5-minute fire chat' campaign run by the Western Australia Department of Fire and Emergency Services makes preparedness accessible by encouraging people to have a simple, five-minute conversation with loved ones about what they'll do in a disaster.

What's needed to take us forward?

Creative, whole-of-community approaches

We need to take a broad, holistic approach to increasing awareness and resilience; being inclusive of all community members and catering to diverse backgrounds. From preparedness to recovery, we need to focus on all members of the family – including pets and livestock.

We need to get creative! There are a range of channels for communicating creatively to build resilience, such as books, plays and other arts mediums, clubs, schools, TV and media campaigns.

Greater awareness about emergency planning

We need to persist in our efforts to encourage individuals and households to plan and prepare for disasters. It's imperative we work to ensure more people are aware of the importance of preparedness, and that they see the contribution they can make.

Disaster resilience education

Children are key agents of change in building resilience for their local communities. Embedding disaster resilience education in school curriculums will empower children to build knowledge and awareness in their families, to the benefit of their community.

Disaster resilience at the local community level

What's working?

Embracing community expertise

The community is increasingly central in the disaster resilience conversation. More and more, we are recognising the knowledge and expertise of locals when it comes to their own communities. Importantly, recognition is growing at the local level itself with regards to the role and capability of the community. We're seeing more community-led approaches and disaster resilience programs. Efforts to support and build the capacity of local community groups are translating into enhanced community connectedness.

What's needed to take us forward?

Listening and learning

We need to listen to community concerns related to disaster resilience; taking action based on values and priorities articulated by the community. We also need to support our communities to upskill, through initiatives such as training in emergency planning and leadership. We also have more to learn from harnessing to the experience of Indigenous groups and 'Country' relationships in the disaster risk reduction space, and doing so will help us invest wisely.

Recognition and reach

We need to identify and support key agents for resilience in our communities – groups positioned to promote and support grassroots preparedness, response and recovery. Local governments have a good vantage point for identifying these groups. In many places, small to medium businesses and primary producers are well positioned to be advocates for resilience and recovery in their local communities.

We could do more to leverage technology to make information accessible to those who are geographically isolated or time-poor. Social media and webinars are flexible tools for reaching broad audiences.

Communicating and connecting

Authentic exchanges of knowledge and experience are incredibly valuable; sitting and talking, sharing information, planning and practicing together and building relationships of trust. Locally-led, inclusive community preparedness and planning before an event will enable stronger recovery after an event, drawing in appropriate support where needed. There is a greater role for local government to partner with businesses to develop resilient communities.

Disaster resilience at the state level

What's working?

Harnessing local expertise

At the state level, as well as at the local level, we are gaining strength by recognising locals as experts on their community.

Finding out what works

We have robust evaluation frameworks that help us measure success.

Partnerships for preparedness

A number of strong examples illustrate effective partnerships between state level agencies and NGOs to increase disaster resilience and preparedness. Many organisations are taking steps to provide accessible information to communities via public websites.

What's needed to take us forward?

Reshaping resourcing

We need a paradigm shift to see increased funding flow to community preparedness, prevention and resilience activities at the local level – current funding is disproportionately skewed towards disaster response. We need to resource local communities to lead in learning, training and preparedness – including inner city communities.

Collaboration and understanding

There's more to be done in bridging the gap between emergency services and management agencies and the communities they serve – including Indigenous communities. Collaboration is key to making our resources and reach go further – agencies, NGOs, local government, other actors and the community need to work together. In some places we need to clarify accountabilities for leadership in recovery; local and jurisdictional governments need to be on the same page, effectively allocating the capabilities, experiences and resources available at both levels.

Enabling environment for change

Across sectors, we need to have some courageous conversations about our values when it comes to resilience – and where we're prepared to compromise. It may be time for an honest appraisal of our legislative and regulatory environment, whether certain areas should be insurable, and who is to be held to account for inappropriate development. We may also need to re-examine and reshape community expectations when it comes to the capacity of emergency services for response.

Disaster resilience at the national level

What's working?

Investing in national significant resources and guidance materials/decision support tools

Resilience thinking is permeating strategic thinking at the highest levels. We have several nationally significant initiatives underway that will contribute to disaster resilience and risk reduction moving forward, including National Principles for Disaster Recovery, the Australian Vulnerability Profile and the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework.

What's needed to take us forward?

Strategic investment and profile

We need to continue to elevate disaster resilience in national conversations and invest in advocacy to support those currently working in this space to achieve buy-in from others. We need to make informed, strategic funding decisions to ensure the greatest return on investment in projects of national significance and relevance.

Legislation (hard solutions)

We need to consider, develop and collectively advocate for legislative changes and solutions that will reduce risk and prevent us from creating new risk – for example, legislation around land use planning.

Cooperation and role modelling (soft solutions)

Organisations with influence should model resilience values; emergency organisations need to ensure they 'practice what they preach' and take practical actions that send a message such as holding zero waste events and having solid procurement policies. Within the sector, we need to strive for and model collaborative approaches and cross-agency advocacy that supports communities to be prepared and resilient. Resilience should be a long-term, bipartisan issue – we need to break down silos and consolidate our thinking.

Leadership guided by community voices

At all levels, including the highest levels, we need to be listening to community voices and support a bottom up approach. Leaders need to develop strong real-world community grassroots links with communities that identify as vulnerable or impacted, to draw upon and support community capacity and knowledge.

Learning across levels

We can learn from what is being done well at state and local levels, and upscale them to a national scale for the benefit of all Australians. For example, creating a national assessment of wellbeing to be used as a baseline for national policy intervention, building on work done in South Australia. We also need to revisit the inclusion of disaster resilience education in the national curriculum.

Disaster resilience at the global level

What's working?

High level frameworks and agreements for global cooperation

We now have the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change to guide global priorities and actions supporting disaster resilience. An increasing number of people have knowledge of the Sendai Framework and what that means for Australia in terms of roles to play and the opportunities it presents.

What's needed to take us forward?

Show leadership and engage

Australia needs to be part of the global conversation. We need to understand our role as leaders at a global scale, show leadership for our region, and support cooperation between neighbour states. As part of this, we need to have everyone working on the same page – across all levels.

Localise appropriately and fund adequately

Recognising that different processes occur at different scales, we need to distil and tailor what's been agreed to globally to be relevant locally. In the context of increasingly severe, frequent disasters, we need to be prepared with funding support and resourcing at all levels.

Thinking to the future, what's one change you'd like to see that will help create a more disaster resilient Australia?

We asked delegates at the inaugural Australian Disaster Resilience Conference what change they'd like to see to help create a more disaster resilient Australia. This is what we heard.

Honest and authentic communication

- "Open communication on the reality of disasters, with training (e.g. schools) on what to do, what it would be like, etc. Keeping in mind that a lot of youth do/will travel to disaster prone areas."
- "Honesty with people"
- "Better communication with general public"

Risk-informed planning

- "Planning at local govt level and with developers not to place people in high risk areas."
- "People engaging with future challenges to be more aware and prepared for hazards and risks"

Children and youth

- "More engagement with our kids as agents of change"
- "Increased youth engagement by the emergency management sector"
- "Include disaster resilient education into Australian curriculum"

Embedding resilience

- "Resilience as a guiding way of life — people caring about their world and living with increasing change with ease and joy"

Collaboration and consultation

- "People working together rather than getting caught in a culture of blame or "us and them" — greater mutual respect between agencies, organisations and communities for each other's expertise and experience. Not just seeing it as working top down or bottom up but also working across and between."
- "Collaboration between emergency management sector and community and business sectors to better reflect shared responsibility"
- "Coordination and planning with community organisations for response and recovery."
- "Government organisations responsible for formulating policy, need to engage and consult with the communities for which their policies will impact upon."

Bipartisan political leadership

- "Taking the politics out"
- "Less politics"
- "Real leadership at all levels of Government"
- "Politicians committed to change"

Empowering and enabling communities

- "Better consultation in planning processes to deliver more support for community led resilience building initiatives"
- "Emergency service-enabled community-led initiatives (to provide continuity and guidance — not control)"
- "Realistic ways to help the community help themselves."
- "Communities supported to drive their own resilience"
- "Empowerment of people through enhanced awareness"
- "Communities empowered"
- "Capture and foster self-perpetuating bottom up networks of resilience activities across communities"
- "To reclaim our democracy and train communities in how decisions are made and how they can influence decisions. Until we wrestle power from vested interests, we will continue to prepare for what is unimaginable and unliveable"

Representation and culture change in emergency management

- "People from communities — diverse, marginalised, vulnerable, activists — in residence of emergency management departments to support communication, realistic planning and the direct voice of our community being fed into research planning and application of policies and strategies"
- "Cultural change in the emergency services — living the principles of diversity and inclusion"
- "Permanent Recovery & Resilience Officers in communities — not temporary roles for short terms post event. Work, social capital, organisational knowledge, and momentum is lost between events."
- "Identifying the concept that people who are likely to be affected are key stakeholders."

Sharing successes

- "Better coordination of stuff that works"
- "Sharing knowledge and learning about what is working and why"

And finally...

- "A rampant epidemic of self-love and compassion"

What's one small action you can now take to develop and support community resilience in Australia?

We asked delegates at the inaugural Australian Disaster Resilience Conference what small action they could take immediately to develop and support community resilience in Australia. These are the actions they identified.

Start at home

- "Get own household in order"

Champion the change

- "Devote my work and energy to this work — dream big"
- "Be an agent for change"
- "Be a champion of resilience...talks to service groups about preparedness for the cyclone season"
- "Facilitate community place-based resilience, preparedness and disaster prevention processes"

Advocate

- "Speak up more when key decisions and policies are being planned"
- "Advocate to acknowledge capacities of community within my command and control organisation"
- "Asking questions publicly about how emergency management needs to recognise people as key stakeholders. Talk to presenters over lunch."

Partner

- "Develop novel partnerships with other agencies outside of own vested interests and goals, simply to further the cause of "working stronger together""

- "Develop cross border community resilience partnerships"
- "Engagement and collaboration with others from different sectors."
- "Talk (more) to Emergency Management folks about how they may be able support community needs and expectations in my area."

Connect with neighbours

- "Get to know my neighbours"
- "Drop in on my neighbours"
- "Meet your neighbours"
- "Say hello to the people in my street"
- "Use social media as a reminder to look after your neighbour, the elderly, the mobility challenged and to just care for one another in fire season. And of course, to be aware of each other's pets and offer a plan if help."

Communicate

- "Communicate and empower"
- "Start conversations about resilience"
- "Keep banging on about it"
- "Talk"

Share knowledge

- "Share the knowledge"
- "AIDR to run Future Disaster Resilience conferences to provide a platform for sharing knowledge and experience. And greater engagement with local government so that more delegates are able to participate from this sector"