

Introducing the new AIDR Executive Director



Margaret Moreton

Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience

'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'

Margaret Mead (Cultural Anthropologist)

It is my privilege as the Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR) to work with the professional and dedicated team at AIDR, and to collaborate with the many individuals and organisations who work tirelessly to strengthen community resilience to extreme weather events and other emergencies.

By collaborating and sharing knowledge, skills, and experience we all build on the resilience of Australian communities, increasing everyone's individual and collective capacity to face a shared and challenging future. Together, we share ideas, celebrate successes and create sustainable and scalable knowledge and resources to support this endeavour.

My professional experience includes time working within government, in the not-for-profit sector, in private enterprise, in the philanthropic sector and, for the most recent decade, as an independent disaster resilience practitioner and advisor. I bring my humanity and compassion as a friend, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a mother and a grandmother. I strive to do all that I can to build on the work of those who preceded me, to collaborate with others, to be curious and to learn from every encounter. I work to build a future where all of our grandchildren and their grandchildren can thrive.

Throughout my life I have witnessed the power of individual and community-led action to build capacity and strengthen resilient and sustainable communities. I experienced the consequences of my first significant bushfire in my teens. My family's farm was spared by a change of wind direction. My parents worked as part of the community response to that fire; fighting the flames using our water tank on our 'always at the ready' truck and then sharing our hay and household resources to support others who were affected.

Much has changed since that time. Extreme weather events have become increasingly intense, frequent and devastating. We are now experiencing compounding events, with insufficient time and resources to recover between them. We live, learn and work within an increasingly complex system that exposes more of us to disaster risk. Systemic disaster risk affects all aspects of our lives - from where and how we build our homes, how we and our families often learn and work separately from where we live, how we build and use infrastructure, how we travel across the landscape, how we engage with and enjoy our natural environment to grow our food and to refresh our body and our spirit and how we communicate with each other and share information. We have sought to separate ourselves from the natural world upon which we rely, believing that we can control the elements of nature or protect ourselves from them. Many people in Australia usually live separated from Indigenous knowledge and culture. As a society, we have increasingly isolated some groups; the poor, the geographically isolated, those living with disability, those who speak another first language or practice different values and beliefs, children and young people as well as the elderly. People and institutions such as the media now tend to divide the world around us, into 'us' and 'other'. Trust in governments, organisations and in many sources of information and assistance has eroded, or is at the very least complex.

While unintentional, by living in these ways, we have increased our exposure to the risks, effects and costs of disasters. The focus of decision-making at all levels has been on the short term, rather than actively considering the long-term consequences of each decision. Thinking and action have frequently been siloed, with economic benefits prioritised over social and environmental concerns. There has



© 2023 by the authors.
License Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, Melbourne, Australia. This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

been limited change in rural, regional and urban land use planning practice. We need to find a new way forward.

There are voices that challenge these ways of thinking and acting, sometimes loudly and sometimes quietly, asking us to reassess what we value, how we protect what we value, and how we live and interact with one another. Some wonderful work is happening to change how we think and act to build resilience. Some approaches place people at the centre of resilience practice, including people with disability, Indigenous groups and those with diverse cultural backgrounds. Locally led community resilience action is visible in several communities. Emergency services agencies are partnering with schools and community groups. Indigenous groups now lead cultural burning and other practices to care for the environment in regions across the country. We need to amplify these voices and these examples of collaboration, demonstrating their value and success and encouraging their broader uptake. Further examples of collaboration and creative action can be found on the AIDR Knowledge Hub, and we build on this valuable resource each year. Resilient Australia Award nominees provide additional examples of good practice collaborative projects and demonstrate the innovation and resilience that occurs across Australia.

Research is critically important to inform, support and scale up effective and meaningful resilience-building practice. New research can amplify and incorporate those voices and perspectives that have been traditionally marginalised or neglected. I therefore propose the following:

- Let's ask questions both new and old to focus our research, policy, and conversation on encouraging a vibrant, diverse debate about what community resilience looks like and how to achieve it. Let's learn from the past and reimagine the future.
- Let's collaborate and coordinate our efforts, even when this makes it challenging to progress our work. Let's do this even if, and perhaps especially if, we don't understand one another. This diversity may be what we need most if we are to successfully face the future.
- Let's continue to challenge ourselves to place communities at the centre of our efforts more frequently. Not as passive recipients of what we do, but as active partners in this endeavour.
- If we don't know where to begin, or how to proceed, let's say so. Our greatest opportunity may come from confessing vulnerability and opening our minds and our doors to work on this problem together.

The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience is Australia's primary institute for the development and activation of knowledge and information to build capacity and strengthen networks focused on strengthening community resilience to disasters. In addition to the Knowledge Hub, AIDR supports networks of likeminded people, including disaster resilience practitioners in government and the non-government sectors,

emergency services volunteers and personnel, researchers based in various institutions, and many others involved in exploring, understanding and building disaster resilience. Established in 2015, AIDR is funded by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) on behalf of the Australian Government and works closely with its partner organisations – AFAC and the Australian Red Cross.

Collaboration, partnership and relationship is at the core of how we work and this approach underpins our products and the events that we host. We are expanding our network of partners every year. Most recently, we strengthened relationships with Gender and Disaster Australia, with Natural Hazards Research Australia, with partners such as the Red Cross and various individuals and groups who work or conduct research that supports AIDR aims or who have a commitment to strengthening community capacity and disaster resilience. We will work harder to increase indigenous participation in disaster resilience; to include the needs of infants, children and young people and give agency to people living with a disability.

I am committed to including and promoting diverse voices in our work. Since joining AIDR, I have had a role in key advisory groups and projects to progress these efforts.

I believe that we are stronger together. I encourage researchers and practitioners to explore the questions we most need answered, including how we successfully work together to undertake and share innovative research and to include diverse voices in solving the challenges of our shared future. I invite everyone to find ways to collaborate with one another, even (and perhaps especially) with those who may have very different experiences and perspectives, as we continue to build disaster resilience at an individual, local, regional, state and national level.

Access resources on the AIDR Knowledge Hub at <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au>.