



Australian Government  
National Emergency  
Management Agency

Australian Institute for  
Disaster Resilience



RECOVERY EXERCISING TOOLKIT  
ELECTIVE MODULE

AUSTRALIAN DISASTER RESILIENCE HANDBOOK COLLECTION

# Community Inclusive Recovery Practice: Working with Indigenous communities in recovery from disasters

Companion to *Community Recovery* (AIDR 2018) and *Managing Exercises* (AIDR 2017)

This document complements *Community Recovery* (AIDR 2018) and *Managing Exercises* (AIDR 2017). It is available as an online resource on the Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub: [knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/recovery-exercising-toolkit](https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/recovery-exercising-toolkit)

## Attribution

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## Description

### Why run this module?

This module is designed to give participants a shared understanding of the intrinsic strengths of Indigenous peoples and the unique impacts on Indigenous communities affected by disasters.

Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by disasters. Historically, there has been a lack of emergency and recovery planning and engagement with Indigenous communities to plan for the support needs of Indigenous peoples during disasters and in recovery.

This module explains how existing recovery strategies/plans may not be fit for purpose and puts forward underlying principles that can support the effective coordination of recovery and enable Indigenous communities to lead and manage their own recovery.

### Target audience

- Emergency Management Committees/ Disaster Management Groups
- Recovery Committees
- Disaster management and recovery practitioners

### How to use this module

Working with Indigenous communities in recovery is a key consideration for Recovery Committees and in recovery planning. It is strongly recommended that the module be conducted as a whole group activity with all exercise participants.

Participants will bring a range of experiences working and engaging with Indigenous people. Some participants may identify as Indigenous, and others will bring varied levels of experience in their emergency or recovery work with disaster affected Indigenous communities. This module will be of benefit to everyone, regardless of level of knowledge and experience.

This module should be undertaken as a preparatory activity to disaster planning with Indigenous communities. The module will support emergency and recovery planners to be better informed about what needs to be considered when undertaking emergency and recovery planning with Indigenous peoples.

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**Session duration:** 60 minutes

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## Aim

The aim of this module is to promote an understanding of the unique experience of Indigenous peoples when disasters damage Country, along with the strengths and resources that Indigenous peoples and organisations can bring to enhance recovery.

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## Objectives

Increase participants understanding of the:

- intrinsic strengths and unique impacts of disasters on Indigenous communities
  - importance of connection with Country
  - need for engagement with Indigenous communities in emergency and recovery planning
  - role of Indigenous community controlled organisations in emergency management, response and recovery.
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## Pre-session planning for facilitators

The module overview, slide deck and video are designed to support facilitation of the session. You do not have to be an expert in Indigenous peoples' experiences of disasters.

If you have a strong pre-existing relationship with a local Indigenous community controlled organisation, a good option can be to talk with them about having a representative co-facilitate this module with you.

Familiarise yourself with the content of this module by reading Bhamie Williamson's paper, *Aboriginal community governance on the frontlines and faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires*.

Williamson, B (2022). Aboriginal community governance on the frontlines and faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires (CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 300/2022). Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU [Aboriginal Community Governance on the Frontlines and Faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires | Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research \(anu.edu.au\)](https://www.anu.edu.au/cepr/publications/aboriginal-community-governance-on-the-frontlines-and-faultlines-in-the-black-summer-bushfires)

Watch Bhamie's video – [An Indigenous Perspective on Disaster Recovery](#) which is included in this module.

## Indigenous peoples and Recovery Capitals (RECAP)

The 'Recovery Capitals and Indigenous Peoples' resource provides guidance for recovery workers and organisations in supporting Indigenous peoples impacted by disasters. It is a useful starting point and can be found at [www.recoverycapitals.org.au](http://www.recoverycapitals.org.au).

Undertake the following actions in preparation for this module:

Do you know the Indigenous Nations, clans and mobs in your region and the community controlled organisations that provide services?

What areas do local Indigenous peoples have formally recognised rights over Country and cultural heritage (land and resources) in your region?

Review the current level of planning and/or existing emergency/recovery plans for references to Indigenous peoples.

- How are Indigenous peoples referenced? In what context?
- Are cultural heritage sites included in planning documents?
- How are Indigenous communities currently represented and/or linked in regional/local emergency management committees and recovery committees?

Use this information to set the local context for this module and include information on the slide deck.

The Readings and Resources section at the end of this module provides further information to expand your knowledge of this topic.

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### Topic overview - facilitator presentation

Supported by facilitator guide and slide deck

### Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the First Peoples of Australia and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners who have occupied and cared for the lands and waterways on which we depend for thousands of years. We acknowledge the *[insert local Indigenous peoples]* and pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

### This module covers:

#### Unique impacts of disasters on Indigenous peoples

Historical and intergenerational trauma, unresolved legacies of colonisation and pre-existing inequalities result in additional vulnerabilities for Indigenous communities in times of disaster. Indigenous peoples have experienced a unique trauma associated with racism and discrimination and damage to the land.

When disasters damage Country, the harm felt by Indigenous peoples can be particularly profound due to the deep connections between land, culture, history, colonisation and identity. Trauma can also arise from needing to relocate and losing or being separated from loved ones and community.<sup>1</sup>

## Connection with Country

For Indigenous peoples, Country is more than a landscape. Indigenous peoples tell and retell, stories of how Country was made, and continue to rely upon its resources — food, water, plants and animals — to sustain traditional ways of life. Country also holds important heritage, including scarred trees, stone arrangements, petroglyphs, rock art, tools and much more.

Indigenous people talk of, and to, Country, as they would another person. They see the land as a life-giving sentient being with a consciousness, not a commodity or economic asset. Relationship with the land is fundamental to the identity and way of life for Indigenous peoples.

Recovery of the environment and recovery of the community are the same thing for Indigenous communities. “Healing Country, healing culture really matters. Until you heal Country and heal culture you can’t heal people”.<sup>2</sup>

Talking with local Indigenous communities about cultural heritage sites that may have been damaged by disaster, or new sites that have been uncovered (often by fire) is an important step in working together to inform priorities in environmental restoration and the ongoing care of the local environment.

## Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by disasters

The demographic profiles of Indigenous communities are characterised by a youthful population with a large age cohort of infants and young children. It is important to incorporate the needs of families with young children into emergency and recovery planning for Indigenous communities.

Indigenous communities have distinct risk factors that are compounded in a disaster:

- overcrowded and multigenerational households and poor quality housing
- lack of access to health services
- lack of appropriate infrastructure
- lack of access to transport
- poor access to roads to evacuate.

These health and social inequalities place Indigenous peoples at a higher risk of being more greatly impacted by a disaster and having to face more complex issues in their recovery.

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<sup>1</sup> Recovery Capitals and Indigenous Peoples Resource.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Riley, MINGAAN Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation (Lithgow Mercury 12 November 2021).

## Lived experience of Indigenous peoples in disaster

In recent years, there have been many documented examples in post disaster inquiries, reports and research papers, which highlight how Indigenous peoples have not been supported during emergencies and evacuations, or in recovery.

There have also been many accounts from Indigenous people about their experiences after disasters that highlight that the way that people have been treated after disaster can be very harmful. This includes experiences in evacuation centres where Indigenous people have been subject to racism, felt unwelcome and have been refused service.

Trauma can be worsened by disaster response and recovery services, including through racist encounters and culturally unsafe processes. Mainstream services and grants often fail to account for the particular experiences of Indigenous peoples.<sup>3</sup>

## Creating culturally safe places in evacuation and recovery centres

Supporting Indigenous peoples in culturally appropriate and culturally centred ways is incredibly important so that Indigenous people can have the same access to safety and services as everyone else.

Some simple ways to make culturally safe spaces that will help Indigenous people to feel welcome are:

- publicly acknowledging the local Traditional Owners of the land, the centre is located on
- creating a separate and safe space for Elders
- having adequate facilities for families with children and babies
- inviting the local Indigenous organisations to be present in evacuation and recovery centres
- providing staff and volunteers who will be working in evacuation and recovery centres with cultural safety training.

Include these practical considerations in evacuation and recovery centre planning and audits.

## Intrinsic strengths of Indigenous communities

Indigenous communities are often referred to as 'vulnerable', however these 'vulnerabilities' are not inherent characteristics of Indigenous peoples, but stem from systems of inequity.

There are many strengths that exist within Indigenous communities. These include having:

- extensive familial and cultural networks that can be mobilised in times of crisis
- advocates that are quick to bring attention to community needs
- healing frameworks that are called upon to support communities in times of hardship
- community-controlled organisations that have well-established and trusting relationships with communities.

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<sup>3</sup> Recovery Capitals and Indigenous Peoples Resource

These strengths are a powerful resource that are often overlooked. These strengths must be recognised and embedded within larger disaster response and recovery efforts.

Indigenous peoples are resilient, demonstrating the ability to withstand extreme events and adjust to new norms over thousands of years.

### **Community controlled and representative Indigenous organisations are assets in disaster recovery**

Indigenous community controlled organisations are governed by their communities. They provide critical information about local populations such as distribution, families (large, small, size structure), visitors (such as families visiting in school holidays) health of local people, number and location of Elders, mobility (who does and does not have access to transport), and avoidance relationships (AVOs).

There is a level of trust, or at least familiarity between Indigenous peoples and the organisation. This means that Indigenous community members are more likely to access these organisations before accessing non-Indigenous organisations or government agencies.

It's important to remember that disasters also directly impact on the capacity of Indigenous controlled community organisations to continue their services, often when demand from community has greatly increased. Recovery Committees should consider what extra resources and additional funding support can be provided.

### **Emergency and recovery planning with Indigenous People and Indigenous community controlled organisations**

Exercising self-determination in recovery from disaster is vital for Indigenous communities. However, historically there has been limited engagement with Indigenous peoples in the development of emergency and recovery plans and the specific needs of Indigenous peoples have not been well considered in response and recovery programs.

Indigenous community controlled and representative organisations have a critical role to play in disaster planning and preparedness, response and recovery. These organisations can provide a vital conduit between Indigenous communities and emergency management structures. They know and understand the impacts on their community, they have important knowledge and resources to contribute and must be included/linked with formal recovery plans, structures and arrangements.

Local emergency and recovery planners must take into consideration the unique impacts of disasters on Indigenous communities and work alongside Indigenous communities to identify what support is needed and how this support will be organised and delivered in emergencies and in recovery.

The only way this planning can be effective is to include Indigenous leaders and Indigenous community controlled organisations in the planning process and trust that they are best placed to know and provide advice about what their communities need. Inclusion and collaboration with Indigenous peoples will help to ensure access to the same level of recovery support as the rest of the community.

Indigenous art and storytelling provide a powerful avenue for Indigenous communities to express identity and culture, self-determination and understanding. Indigenous art can be incorporated to support community planning for disasters and planning for recovery, as well as being a powerful healer for community expression of grief and hope after disaster.

## Engaging with Indigenous communities

Engaging and planning with Indigenous communities can occur at any time, but it is best to engage early, before a disaster hits to establish relationships and plan for how the community will respond and recover.

There are some simple things that emergency and recovery planners can do to facilitate engagement with Indigenous leaders and groups:

- Be aware of and participate in significant Indigenous days/events, such as NAIDOC week activities and other opportunities to meet with and get to know Indigenous peoples in your community.
- Invite Indigenous leaders and organisations to come to an overview of emergency management and disaster recovery arrangements. Use everyday language, not emergency management jargon or acronyms.
- Invite Indigenous leaders and organisations to participate in emergency and recovery planning days so that their voices, knowledge of community, and advice about what their community needs are included in planning and arrangements.

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### Video: An Indigenous perspective on disaster recovery

Bhiamie Williamson

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University

Bhiamie Williamson is a Euahlayi man from north-west New South Wales with familial ties to north-west Queensland. Bhiamie is an academic who focuses on the impacts of disasters on Indigenous peoples including conducting case studies of both the 2019-20 bushfires and 2022 northern NSW floods.

In this video Bhiamie talks about how disasters disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples, the importance of building relationships with Indigenous communities before disasters hit and working with Indigenous communities to prepare for and plan for recovery from disasters.

[An Indigenous Perspective on Disaster Recovery](#)

Video Length: 5:30 mins

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## Group discussion questions

How can you strengthen partnerships with local Indigenous leaders and Indigenous community controlled organisations?

How can recovery be enhanced by listening to Indigenous people's experiences and deep knowledge of resilience, healing and how to live with Country?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> RECAP Guide: Indigenous Peoples and Recovery Capitals

What can you do in your role, in your organisation, to work with Indigenous communities in planning for recovery?

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## Take away messages

- Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by the impacts of disasters due to existing structural and financial inequalities.
  - Indigenous communities have intrinsic strengths that are often overlooked in recovery.
  - Culturally informed approaches for recovery and healing are essential for Indigenous communities affected by disaster.
  - Indigenous community controlled organisations have an important role to play in planning for responding to and recovering from disasters.
  - Understand and plan for the unique impacts of disasters on Indigenous communities and work alongside community members to identify support they need and how this support will be organised and delivered in emergencies and in recovery.
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## Suggested next steps and actions

- Review your emergency and recovery plans. How do your planning processes include local Indigenous communities? How do your plans reflect:
    - the strengths and assets of Indigenous peoples
    - the unique needs of Indigenous peoples in evacuation and recovery
    - the Indigenous community controlled organisations who can provide information and support
    - the formal recognised rights over Country and cultural heritage of local Indigenous peoples.
  - Meet with local Indigenous Elders and community controlled organisations to plan together how local Indigenous communities can best be supported through an emergency and in recovery.
  - Establish formal mechanisms of engagement such as a community organisations recovery reference group that includes Indigenous community controlled organisations.
  - Encourage recovery practitioners from government and non-government agencies to undertake Indigenous cultural awareness training.
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## Module evaluation question

Include this question in your Recovery Exercise Participant Feedback form.

The recovery exercise has increased my understanding of the importance of emergency and recovery planning with Indigenous communities and Indigenous community controlled organisations.

| Strongly Disagree        | Disagree                 | Neutral                  | Agree                    | Strongly Agree           |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> |

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## Module development

The Recovery Exercising Toolkit and accompanying Modules have been developed by the National Emergency Management Agency.

Modules are developed with the expert advice, content and support of subject matter experts. The Coordinating Recovery Support for Indigenous Peoples Module was developed in partnership with Bhamie Williamson.

Bhamie Williamson is a Euahlayi man from north-west New South Wales with familial ties to north-west Queensland. Bhamie is an academic who focuses on the impacts of disasters on Indigenous peoples including conducting case-studies of both the 2019-20 bushfires and 2022 northern NSW floods.

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## Readings and Resources

**Williamson, B (2022). Aboriginal community governance on the frontlines and faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires** (CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 300/2022). Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU

[Aboriginal Community Governance on the Frontlines and Faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires | Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research \(anu.edu.au\)](#)

**Recovery Capitals (ReCap)** supports wellbeing after disasters with evidence-based resources for people and organisations engaged in recovery.

Quinn P, Williamson B, Gibbs L. Recovery Capitals and Indigenous Peoples Resource. Melbourne, Australia: Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre. April 2021. [Recovery Capitals](#)

### **Indigenous Peoples and Recovery Capitals Resource**

[Indigenous Peoples and Recovery Capitals - Phoenix Australia Disaster Mental Health Hub](#)

### **ABC Podcasts – After the Disaster, Episode 12 – Communities with trauma**

[Ep 12 | Communities with Trauma - ABC](#)

### **Community Recovery Handbook, AIDR (2018)**

[Community Recovery Handbook \(aidr.org.au\)](#)

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**Other modules that link to this topic can be found on the AIDR [Recovery Exercising Toolkit page](#)**



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