

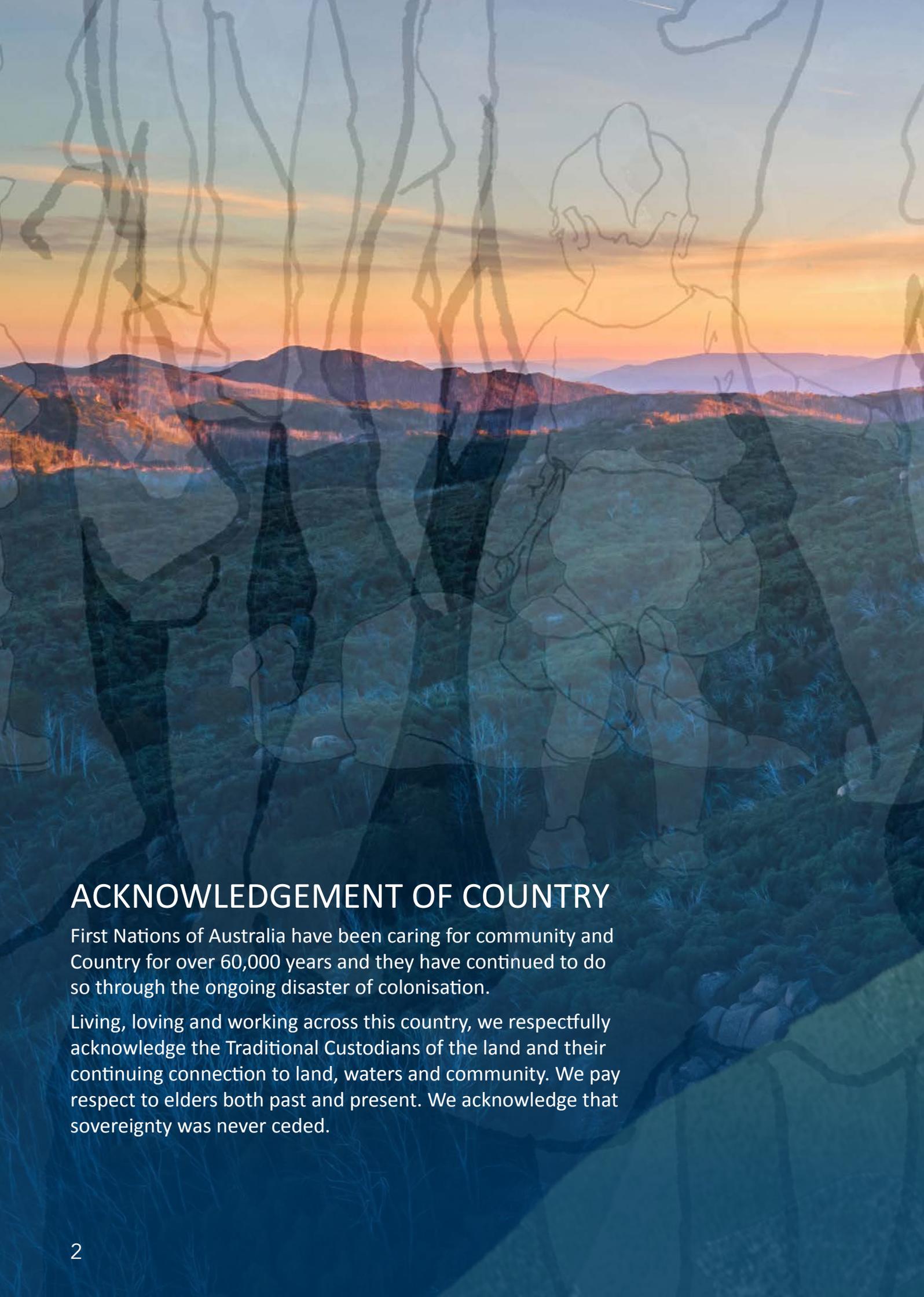
Care

through disaster

– in practice

A toolkit for leaders, from the citizen to the state



The background of the page is a landscape photograph of a sunset over rolling hills and a body of water. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. Overlaid on this image is a semi-transparent blue-tinted graphic of several traditional Indigenous Australian figures, possibly dancers or storytellers, in various poses. The figures are rendered in a dark blue color, creating a layered effect with the landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

First Nations of Australia have been caring for community and Country for over 60,000 years and they have continued to do so through the ongoing disaster of colonisation.

Living, loving and working across this country, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to elders both past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

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A follow-up to the research report, “Care through Disaster: A new lens on what’s needed to survive and thrive through tumultuous times” by Dr Millie Rooney, Rachel Hay and Lilian Spencer of Australia reMADE, in partnership with Women’s Health Goulburn North East, published 2023.

Acknowledgements from Australia reMADE

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Our gratitude to the professionals who took the time to engage and shape this work.

Our gratitude to the ordinary people and local leaders who generously shared their lived experience of care, and its absence, through disaster.

Finally, our gratitude to the countless people all across Australia, largely working humbly and behind the scenes — to prioritise care in our homes, workplaces and neighbourhoods; as well as in our policies, organisations and natural environments.

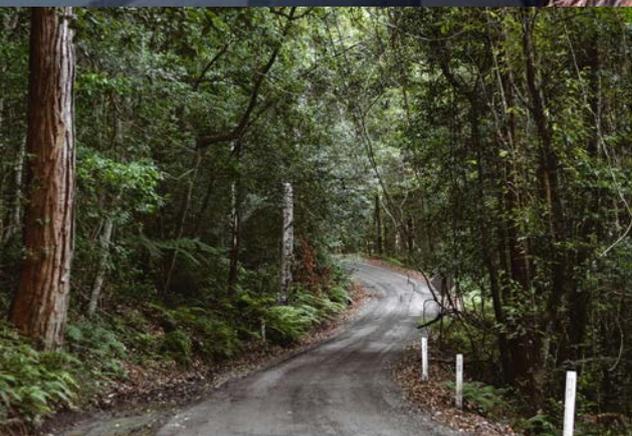
Your commitment to Care: providing it, enabling it, championing it — often in the face of bureaucracy and budget constraints, as well as a patriarchal capitalist culture that minimises, individualises and overlooks care — is not only deeply hopeful, it is downright revolutionary.

This toolkit is for you.

May, 2024

“Disaster shocks us out of slumber, but only skillful efforts keeps us awake.”

— Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The extraordinary communities that arise in disaster*, 2009.

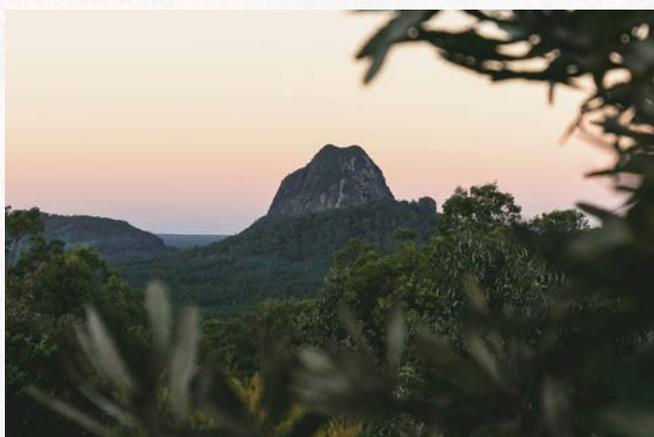


Executive Summary

For Australian communities to survive and thrive through the challenges ahead, we need to prioritise care through disaster: including prevention, preparation, response and recovery. While stronger climate action is imperative, we cannot prevent every disaster. What we can do is shape the context in which disasters occur — in our actions as citizens, through to our community organisations and various levels of government. The recommendations in this report layer up accordingly, with each section building on the last. Our goal: to ensure people are better Seen, Safe and Supported through disaster; and in the process, build the kinds of communities we want to live in permanently.

Applying a Care lens to disaster helps us to take a more collective, long-term approach, from preparation through recovery. It expands our view of what ‘disaster infrastructure’ looks like, to include the enabling infrastructure of community connection and cohesion. It compels us to prioritise the time, space and resources required for community-building and community re-building. It compels us to further our expertise in listening, in offering trauma-informed mental health support, and in structurally supporting the community to be heard at every phase in their disaster experience.

From preparation through recovery, a Care lens shifts our focus to more relational, less transactional models of education and engagement. It requires us to find innovative ways to better insulate individuals from the impacts — financial and otherwise — of the growing systemic disaster risk. It requires us to harness the power of government and the public sector to drive the public good; building the community’s capacity to help one another rise to our biggest challenges.



Summary of recommendations

CITIZENS

- **Get personally prepared.** Research is clear that having a plan makes all the difference.
- **Build relationships and capacity.** Get together with others to learn, play, give back and advocate for change — on the interests and topics most relevant and dear to your heart.
- **Build and maintain ways of keeping in touch,** getting to know your neighbours better and finding new ways to enjoy where you live in the process.

COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

- **Do education by conversation, not just broadcast.** Make it joyful where possible.
- **Learn how to listen.** Work to get to know the community in a variety of ways.
- **Accept that this all takes time** and that time needs resourcing. This likely means longer timelines for project funding and fit for purpose outcomes measures.



LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

- **Invest in connection: people, places, projects.** People need access to inviting spaces where the lights are on, the doors are open and the coffee is free.
- **Invest in safety: both physical safety and mental health.** Communities need safe places to go, trauma-informed mental health support and access to appropriate temporary housing when disaster strikes.
- **Notice when the community is ready.** Local governments are often all too aware of the costs and risks of saying 'yes' —while the risks and costs of saying 'no' are not acknowledged.

STATE GOVERNMENTS

- **Address underlying vulnerabilities.** Those who are already vulnerable before disaster strikes are hit hardest when shocks occur. We need to address these root causes of vulnerability before disaster occurs.
- **Identify gaps and amplify what's working in disaster readiness.** Bring stakeholders together to identify needs, gaps, share wins and promote best practice.
- **Build trust, cohesion and agency** in supporting communities through recovery. Enable more autonomy for the community by investing in long-term relationships that build trust.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

- **Shift from private to public disaster insurance.** Move to a universal, public model of insurance paid for by the fossil fuel industry.
- **Build the capacity of citizen disaster relief.** It's time to consider a national civilian disaster relief corps.
- **Harness government for the wellbeing of people and planet.** Bring a long-term, intergenerational lens to our challenges, focusing on prevention and the public good.

Introduction

“What have we done, and how do we live with this?”

Journalist and author Bronwyn Adcock asks these questions as she reflects on her Walkley award-winning book, *Currowan* — a moment-by-moment account of the mega fire that ripped through the NSW South Coast during Australia’s Black Summer of 2019-2020.¹ The fire, ignited by a lightning strike, would burn for 74 days, consume nearly 5,000 square kilometres of land and destroy more than 500 homes.² And the impact on human health and wellbeing, as well as wildlife? Immeasurable.

In recent years, communities long used to heat, drought, and once-in-a-generation fires, floods or heavy storms have stood on the frontlines, as ‘unnatural disasters’ have become the terrifying new normal. Today the threat of these extreme weather events is never far from our headlines or hearts.

What have we done, and how do we live with this?

When the Vermont, USA-based environmentalist Bill McKibben is asked by people where they should live to be safer from climate change, he advises them to seek and build communities with a strong sense of social trust, because we’re going to need each other.³

What if, in the context of not only a climate crisis but a housing crisis, cost of living crisis, growing wealth inequality, isolation, rising rates of anxiety and depression and more, we decided to change course?

What if we decided that the only way to survive all this was to not only rapidly decarbonise, but to prioritise Care — as an organising principle of our lives, organisations, communities and politics? What if Care for Country and each other became a key measure of our success, reflected in every choice we made?

Here, we offer a guide for putting Care through Disaster into action, from the citizen to the state.

Background

In 2023, Australia reMADE partnered with Women’s Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) to ask communities across the Goulburn Valley and northeast Victoria what it meant to them to care and be cared for through disaster, and what support they needed to do this.

We presented the findings of this qualitative research in our report, *Care through Disaster: a new lens on what’s needed to survive and thrive in tumultuous times*.⁴ We found that for people to care and be cared for through disaster, three core needs must be met:

- **People need to be SEEN** (in their communities and by government authorities, within communities that are strong and connected).
- **People need to be SAFE** (through disaster prevention and mitigation, access to safe places and accurate, timely, accessible information).
- **People need to be SUPPORTED** (equipped to support each other before, during and after disaster).

Crucially, we found that we need a collective response, from the local to the national, to enable Care through Disaster.

We offer this as a toolkit of recommendations for putting Care through Disaster into action at different levels — from the citizen to the state.



Methodology

While this report is based on the findings of *Care through Disaster*, it has also been shaped by a process of extensive consultation with experts and practitioners from a variety of relevant sectors. Via a series of 1:1, small group and semi-structured interviews, as well as email dialogue, we spoke with representatives from state and local governments, community organisations and those with deep backgrounds in disaster response, recovery and citizen engagement. We asked what’s working well and what they would change in our current approach. We asked what gets in the way of care and connection in their work, and what enables it. We asked what is helpful to overcoming barriers and convincing others, as we tested, explored and refined ideas.

We are not experts on disaster relief or emergency management — but we are expert qualitative researchers, advocates and community listeners. We are experts at systems change thinking, looking upstream and applying values-based lenses to build new frameworks. We take all responsibility for this report and any errors therein, and we extend our deep gratitude for the time and expertise of those who made it possible.

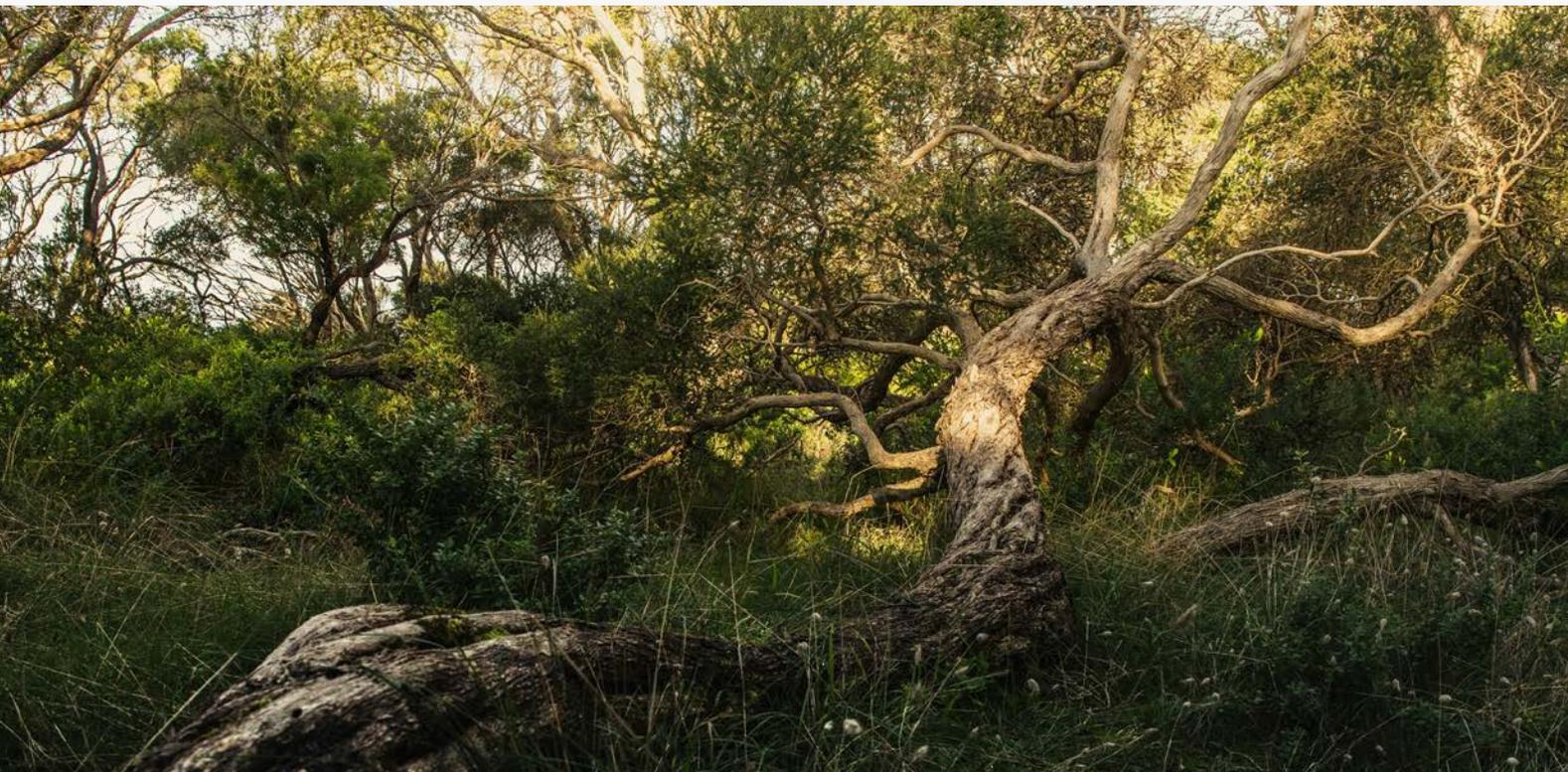
How to navigate disasters with care: from the citizen to the state

We face the moment of flood, fire or heavy storm as mere humans; individuals caught up in something greater, connected by place, doing our best to get through it. Although prevention through strong climate action is critical, we can't stop all disasters. We can shape the context in which we prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters; from the level of the citizen to the state. That is why these recommendations start at the level of the citizen, and layer up: each building on the last to enable a new approach, which we call '*Disaster 2.0: Care through Disaster.*'

Practitioner Toolkit — questions to ask when crafting policies, initiatives and responses to disaster

While this toolkit offers specific recommendations below, these questions should guide action.

1. How are we listening to community voices and expertise in preventing, managing and recovering from disaster? Who feels heard, and who feels left out?
2. Does a particular program, policy initiative or response help build community, or fragment it?
3. How are we valuing and investing in strong, connected communities equipped to care for each other over the long-term; rather than valorising community efforts while failing to support them?



Care through Disaster and the Citizen

Disaster preparation and survival information typically targets us as individuals, with messages like “prepare, act, survive,” and “if it’s flooded, forget it.”

But where are we also encouraged, much less supported, to see preparation as collective action, where getting to know the people around us is seen as strategic disaster preparation work? To find out who’s vulnerable because they don’t have a car, or their kid is in a wheelchair, or they’re elderly and living alone? To learn what to do and how we can help, before disaster strikes, so if the worst happens we aren’t relegated to passive observers and potential victims?

Of course the problem goes deeper: who can afford the time to volunteer, get to know their community, learn new skills or join community organisations these days — even if joining in is precisely what builds the relationships, skills and networks that save lives and make life better? We know that fewer Australians are joining things.⁵

Our context shapes us, and it’s unfair to expect individuals to carry the increasing burdens of disaster management alone.

But nor do people wish to be seen as helpless, mere passive recipients of care or victims-in-waiting. We know that people of all ages, genders and backgrounds want to serve, contribute, and help themselves and others where possible.⁶

As people we do have agency, and there are indeed worthwhile things we can do as community members to help each other be Seen, Safe and Supported through disaster.

Here are some key ways for citizens to Care and be Cared for through Disaster.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: Get personally prepared.

Sources like Australian Red Cross, ABC Emergency online and your local emergency services groups can help you find out how to prepare your home, how to actively shelter in place, when to evacuate, where to go and what supplies to have handy. You can also speak with knowledgeable neighbours and see what your local council has to offer. It’s scary to think about this stuff, but research is clear that having a plan makes all the difference.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: Build relationships and capacity.

Get together with others to learn, play, ask for help, give back and advocate for change — on the interests and topics most relevant and dear to your heart. Skills could be knitting, first aid or how to wield a chainsaw. Shared interests could be music, art, yoga or rugby. Causes could be championing climate action, building a community garden, mentoring local youth or ensuring everyone in your community has enough to eat. Come together to do things that are meaningful to you and spark joy, come together to face the challenges that are too big for any of us to address alone, and watch the care flow.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: Build and maintain ways of keeping in touch.

Start WhatsApp groups, telephone trees and regular social events (street parties or wine and cheese nights are popular) to share information about what you’ll do in the event of an emergency; getting to know your neighbours better and finding new ways to enjoy where you live in the process.

In the Kangaroo Valley, NSW, there are now more than 30 “Bushfire Ready” neighbourhood groups. Each group comprises between 8 to 12 property residents, who keep in touch and meet up regularly to share knowledge and skills in order to plan, prepare and assist each other in the event of a fire. Some meet up for occasional wine and cheese nights, some have a telephone tree or a WhatsApp group. They each have a coordinator and are supported by Resilient KV, a community organisation that began in 2018 as the Kangaroo Valley Bushfire Committee.

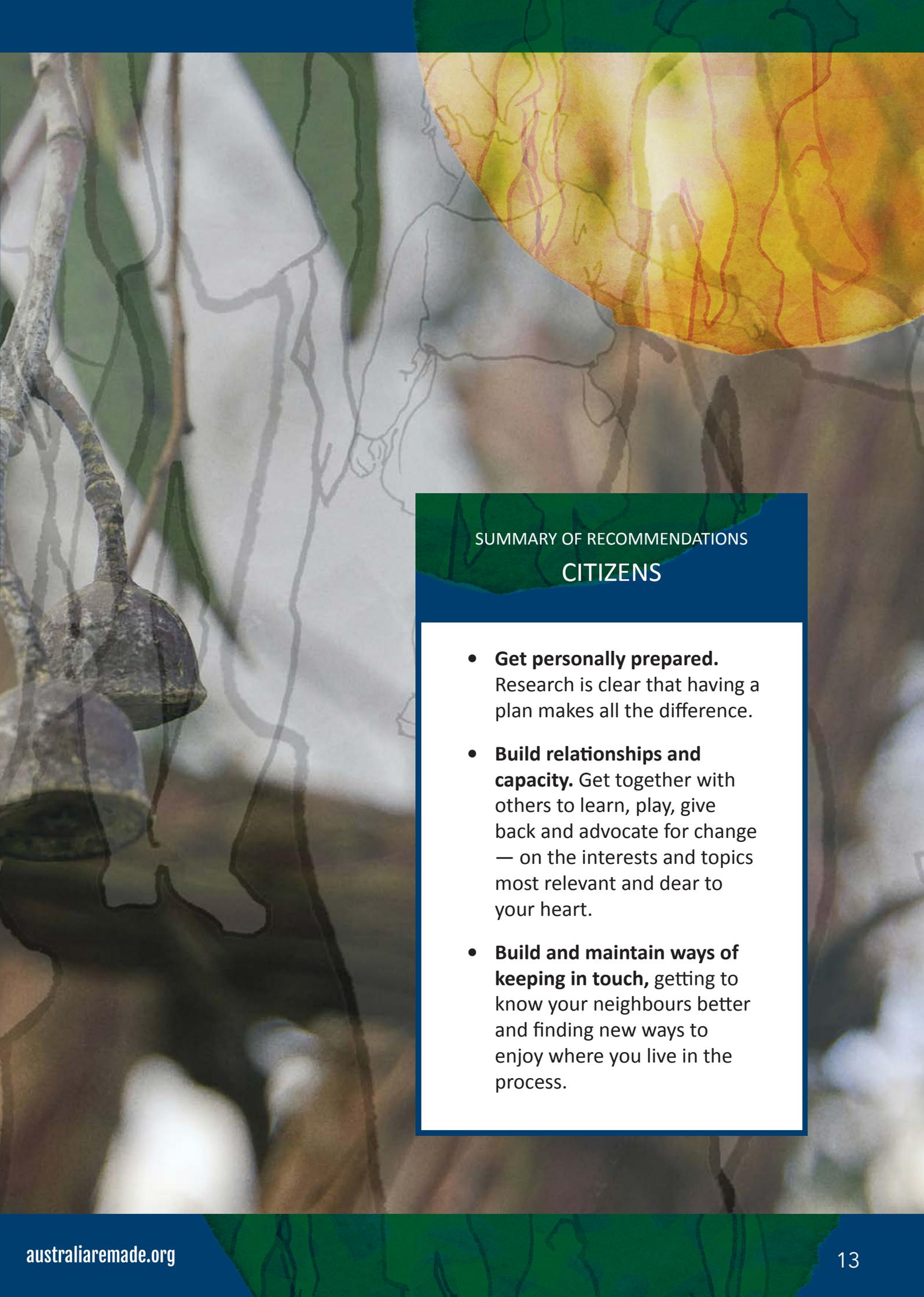
So how did they fare in the Black Summer fires? When the Currowan fire entered the Kangaroo Valley community on 4 Jan, 2020, 100 rural properties were impacted, with more than 160 buildings destroyed. Remarkably, no one in the Kangaroo Valley was killed. There were no local calls to 000 for assistance. Neighbourhood groups helped and supported vulnerable people to leave early. They made plans for pets and farm animals. The names of those who chose to stay and defend their homes were given to the Kangaroo Valley Rural Fire Service Brigade, and everyone who stayed to defend managed to save their homes (though some lost outlying structures). More people left earlier, and many well-prepared properties were saved. Groups were then able to help each other through recovery.^{7,8}

Know that the work of building community and connection is real work, that it takes time, and that this time isn't frivolous or wasted. Part of what we're advocating for here is reclaiming community care and connection-building as real work. It's what earlier generations, especially women, did — before the pressure to always be earning or spending was so intense. These forms of work weren't necessarily more fair, equal or valued then than they are today, but there was time for them. Community care and connection happened, and still does, through churches and associations; through schools, clubs and

Neighbourhood Houses; through cups of tea and chats over the back fence.

However in this day and age of two-income households, skyrocketing costs and loneliness epidemics, taking time for care, connection and community is harder than ever. **We can no longer rely solely on the unpaid labour of women to build, maintain and care for community.** If we are to change course to build the kinds of communities capable of surviving and thriving through the challenges ahead, we are going to need new foundations of structural support and enabling infrastructure — from organisations and governments alike.





SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

CITIZENS

- **Get personally prepared.** Research is clear that having a plan makes all the difference.
- **Build relationships and capacity.** Get together with others to learn, play, give back and advocate for change — on the interests and topics most relevant and dear to your heart.
- **Build and maintain ways of keeping in touch,** getting to know your neighbours better and finding new ways to enjoy where you live in the process.

Care through Disaster and the Community Organisation

As a community group, there are so many different roles to fill, budgets to wrangle and stakeholders to serve; all while keeping the organisation's core purpose firmly in sight. The challenges we heard from those working in non-governmental organisations in the disaster space are myriad: how to recruit and train enough volunteers, how to build trust, how to raise more money and how to keep the focus on the mission instead of just fundraising and governance. An emerging area of focus is how to design for complexity.

We know that many organisations are shifting from seeing themselves primarily as the doer of deeds, broadcaster of information and keeper of answers, to more enablers and facilitators of actions and answers that are led by, or grounded in, the community – offering structure, expertise and support as required.

There are real tensions here: between creativity and control, agency and risk. It's not that organisations should just step back and leave it all to community to figure out (community has had quite enough of being valorised without being supported), but organisations do need to learn how to operate more relationally, rather than merely transactionally, as they grapple with systems under strain as well as people keen to be involved in more meaningful ways.

Here are the top recommendations to apply a Care through Disaster approach, that while aimed at community organisations in particular, really do apply more broadly.

RECOMMENDATION ONE:

Do education by conversation, not just broadcast.

People need information on how to prepare and they need it in a form that leads to action. In a world of busyness and information overload, even when the information is out there, people will report not knowing the details of how to prepare.

Fortunately, real life conversations still work. So rather than merely broadcasting generic information at people in a town hall, online ad or via a pamphlet, make it a real-life, ultra place-based conversation. Get hyper local. Sit with people in an actual circle. Invite them to share their own emergency plan, and show them yours.

Ask people specifically what they already know and what they have questions about. Move beyond general statements from officials, and make room for real one-on-one conversations where fears and concerns can be aired, strengths canvassed, and very specific information relevant to that locality shared.

Make it joyful where possible: a good chat over a sausage sizzle, knitting circle or community fair. Get the local fire truck to visit every street,



delight the kids and have a yarn. Thinking about disaster provokes anxiety, so we need gentle encouragement in the form of social connection, fun and community to face these fears. In this way, the process itself becomes part of the solution, helping people to ultimately be better Seen, Safe and Supported.

“The men want to have rules and procedures and documents, and the women just want to talk to people... Many of the neighbourhood coordinators [in Kangaroo Valley, NSW] now are women, and they make really good coordinators because they ring people up and talk to people. Whereas a guy is more likely to send an email, document a process or create a bunch of rules.” - Mike Gorman, Kangaroo Valley

The creation of paid, permanent local Community Resilience Officers is gaining traction, especially in Victoria, where there’s also been some government funding for these roles.⁹ These facilitators can serve as point people: locals who know their community well, and are able to interface between community members, service providers and government — sharing information, bringing people together, building trust and familiarity; and supporting greater community agency in recovery. They can also make sure lessons and ideas are shared across networks of different towns and regions. What’s important is their local legitimacy. They must be ‘owned’ by the community, not seen as government box-tickers, outsiders or representatives for someone else’s agenda. And they must be a permanent fixture — not rolled in and out whenever disaster strikes.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: Learn how to listen.

When you come into a community, the temptation is to ‘do and direct’. The challenge is learning how to also listen and understand. Locals want to feel seen for their needs as well as for their expertise, and we heard from those who’ve come through disaster that not enough is being done right now to listen to, and learn from, community. But it also could be quite extractive to suddenly have ten different service providers coming to the same key community members wanting information after a flood, so we need to be thoughtful and deliberate about this.

Work to get to know the community in a variety of ways. Information around how a community functions, where its main gathering spots are, the key languages spoken, key networks, who might be experiencing homelessness or at risk of gender-based violence, main tourism locations where people are likely to be in from out of town: these are all invaluable in helping people to be Seen, Safe and Supported through disaster, but it takes time, attention and intention to prioritise them.

**RECOMMENDATION THREE:
Accept that this all takes time and that time
needs resourcing.**

When it comes to the moment of disaster, we need things to be efficient. People need to quickly and safely evacuate, hazards need to be swiftly cleared, threats neutralised, repairs managed and order restored. The paradox is that the deep, slow work of relational organising and information sharing — the often slow and hard-to-measure work of care, connection and community capacity-building — is precisely what enables things to function more smoothly, quickly, safely and efficiently in those peak times of crisis. We move at the speed of trust.

Make and defend the time required for more relational ways of engaging, in all their complexity. This likely means longer-term timelines for project funding and not expecting instant, easy-to-measure outcomes.

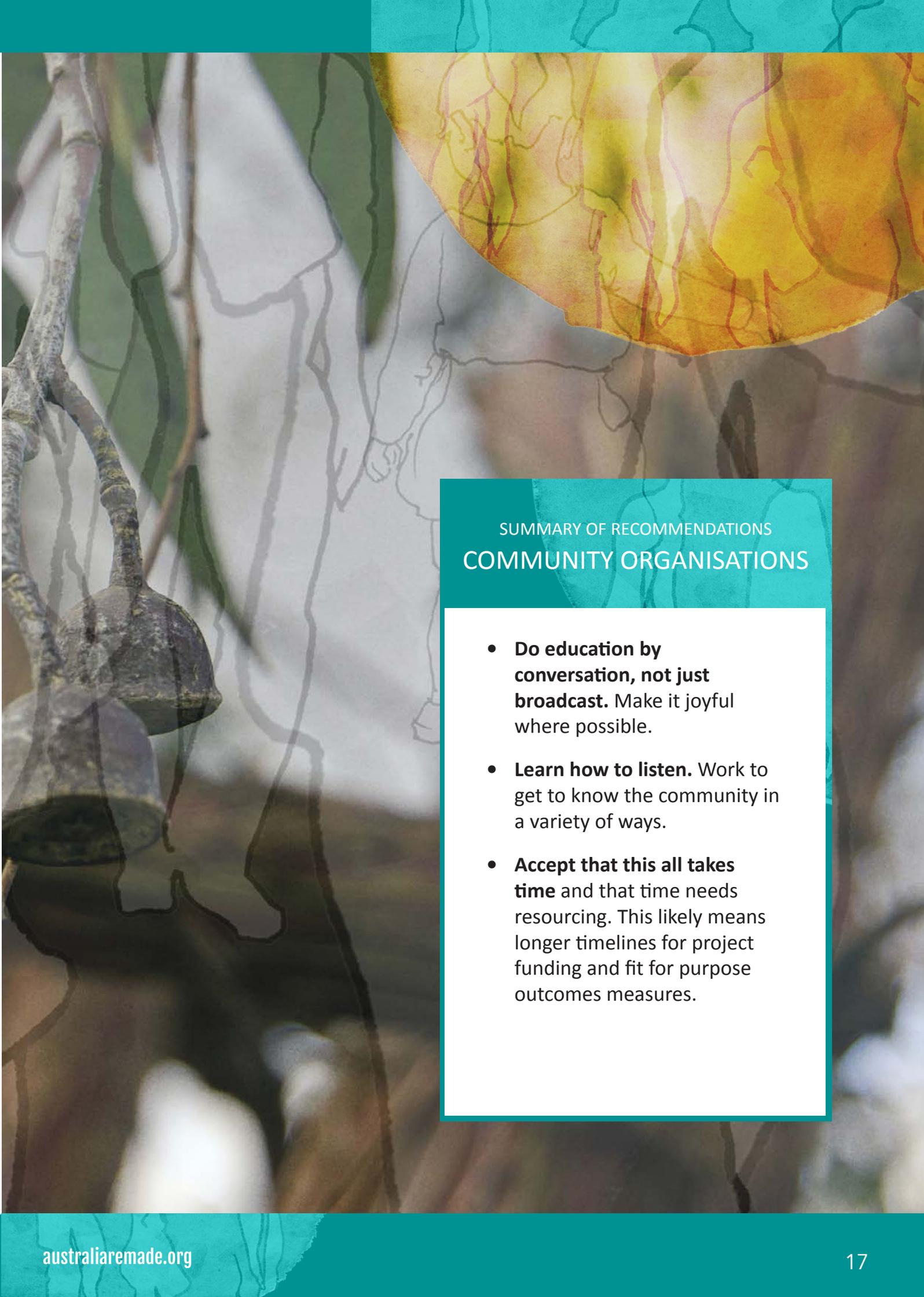
“I think in this sector, the bigger the organisation, the more of a challenge it is to master how to do trust in a way that allows for flexibility and adaptability. We know that community leaders have expertise and want to lead their own initiatives, it’s just not always clear what role larger organisations can play in facilitating that type of on the ground self-organised community action.” - Hannah Millar, Senior Specialist, Innovation at Australian Red Cross

This is not new information. Since the Royal Commission into the 2009 Black Saturday fires in Victoria, governments have been recommending involving the community more deeply in disaster planning and preparation.¹⁰ Communities that do this, such as the Kangaroo Valley example discussed above, achieve higher rates of survival, lower loss of life, faster recovery and stronger community cohesion.¹¹

Knowing the benefits doesn’t mean we don’t still run into structural, as well as cultural, barriers and biases. Programs work on budgets, timeframes and KPIs. It’s far easier to measure clicks than community conversations. Waiting for local leaders to emerge and share information in neighbourhood groups of 10-12 takes a lot longer than broadcasting information to 300 people in a town hall or publishing some newspaper ads and calling it ‘job done’. Broadcast information has its place, but the challenge is to resist the pull of transactional ‘engagement’ because it presents as less risky, easier, cheaper or faster.

“How do you measure the unmeasurable in this space? It’s bloody tough, because we can absolutely measure the people that live in our community, but how do we measure the ones that didn’t die as a result of our work?” - Bek Nash-Webster, Grit and Resilience Program Coordinator, Wangaratta Council, Victoria.

“We rush too much,” says Sally McKay, a specialist in disaster recovery with more than 25 years’ experience across Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. “That high-arousal state makes us as recovery workers think we have to rush out the door and fix everything. And you’ve got the media and the donors screaming at you. We’re not educating the broader public or the donors to understand that this is going to take time.... It’s often women who hold their communities together doing their family and community work and then we expect them to do even more in recovery, and do it at speed! If we could just accept that it’s going to take the time it takes.”



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS
COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

- **Do education by conversation, not just broadcast.** Make it joyful where possible.
- **Learn how to listen.** Work to get to know the community in a variety of ways.
- **Accept that this all takes time** and that time needs resourcing. This likely means longer timelines for project funding and fit for purpose outcomes measures.

Care through Disaster and the Local Government

Like community organisations, local governments are also grappling with when to lead and when to follow: how to move from ‘action on’ to ‘action with’, from ‘doer of deeds’ to a partnership with community. **So all of the recommendations above still apply here: do education by conversation, not just broadcast; learn how to listen; accept that it all takes time.**

In terms of the particular challenges at the level of local government, we heard from council professionals that prioritising Care, including through disaster, is a lot like trying to get money for prevention — there’s recognition that it matters, but it’s so difficult to measure, takes time and resources to implement, and isn’t actively owned by anyone in government. Budgets, capacity constraints, bureaucracy and insurance (so much insurance!) get in the way; as do risk-averse cultures where it’s safer to simply say ‘no’ than to try, fail and learn. We also heard in our consultations with women on councils that roles focused on community care and outreach are still seen as “fluffy” internally, particularly by some of the senior male leaders and CEOs. “We’ve come a long way, but there’s a long way to go,” one woman told us.

Certainly councils can’t do everything; they are shaped and constrained by forces above and around them (which is why these recommendations layer up, and we encourage State and Federal governments to make structural support changes too). However, research finds communities do want their local governments to focus on the bigger issues, not just the ‘3Rs’ of roads, rates and rubbish.¹² And there is so much creativity, care and connection that happens at this level of government, the level of power closest to community, when leaders with passion and credibility are truly supported.

Here are the top recommendations for local governments to apply a Care through Disaster approach.

RECOMMENDATION ONE:

Invest in connection – people, places, projects.

To be cared for through disaster, including being Seen, Safe and Supported, communities need time and space to get to know each other before disaster strikes. That includes access to inviting spaces where the lights are on, the doors are open and the coffee is free. Places where people can get to know others at similar life stages, or with similar interests, or just generally bump into their neighbours without having to open their wallets all the time. It’s particularly challenging to build connection locally when you don’t have school-aged children, you work from home, have mobility issues or have recently moved into a new area, to name but a few barriers. Getting to know your neighbours over a friendly chat is also harder when everyone lives on large, rural blocks and the fence might be a kilometre from your house.

“Accessible community spaces are becoming harder to find, and by ‘accessible’ I mean ‘unlocked’. Where would you go when you’re having a hard time and you just want to bump into another mum? A lot of the youth spaces don’t exist anymore. You have to have them staffed. Libraries still exist, but they’re 9-5 Monday to Friday and they’re not for everyone. We don’t have a food court to go bump into people.” - Local council worker, regional Victoria

Individuals need to connect with others in their community, but they also need government support to make it possible. Government-funded and supported institutions, such as local libraries, Neighbourhood Houses, maternal child health centres, parks, playgrounds, skate parks, men’s sheds and seniors’ centres

are essential infrastructure for community connection. Projects and groups that bring people together — be they festivals, art classes or community gardens — are equally worthwhile. More affordable, community-based transport is needed. We heard how helpful it would be to have transportation that could take the elderly to social activities, for instance, not just medical appointments.

All of this maps to what government is already doing and trying to do better. Notably, Victoria's new Social Inclusion Action Groups (SIAGs) are investing in community connection and funding a range of wonderful programs and groups, starting in five Local Government Areas (LGAs) across the state.¹³ We list more great examples at the end (see Appendix). We know this works, keep going!

RECOMMENDATION TWO:
Invest in safety – both physical safety and mental health.

When disaster strikes, communities need safe places to go, trauma-informed mental health support and access to appropriate temporary housing. Expecting each and every local council to provide all of the above directly might not be practical, but local councils can join together to meet these needs in a more networked approach, and generally be good drivers of ensuring these needs are met (including for their own staff) one way or another.

In our consultations we learned about a local high school in the Indigo Shire of Victoria that received funding from the Department of Education to refurbish its gym. Instead of just

thinking about the school community, the principal, who had previously been through a fire, decided to make the gym suitable as an evacuation and recovery centre for the wider community as a whole — complete with accessible showers, separate male and female spaces and a separate building where children can sleep. This kind of approach could be replicated, with councils taking the lead to map community assets and needs; connecting stakeholders to make the most of existing assets and exploring sources of funding for potential upgrades and refurbishments. The challenge is coordinating this, to speak with a more unified voice.

We also learned about an excellent example of government investing in mental health in the Grit and Resilience project, a suicide-prevention and community wellbeing initiative of Wangaratta Council in Victoria.¹⁴ This year, thanks to ongoing SIAG funding, they will be training all area relief centre staff and volunteers in psychological first aid: helping the helpers, and equipping them to better support others in times of distress and uncertainty.

And we would love to see more local governments investing in housing, following the example of Yorke Peninsula in South Australia, where council directly owns and manages six caravan parks.¹⁵ These assets generate money for the council as holiday lets during normal times, but stand ready to be repurposed as free or affordable temporary housing for local community members in the event of an emergency.



RECOMMENDATION THREE:

Notice when the community is ready.

“The right community conditions and a community readiness to do something different are necessary.” -Council worker, regional Victoria

You can't just throw money and programs at the community and expect results if the community isn't ready to act. Those with long-term experience in local government say that success often starts from a critical group of people who say, 'enough's enough, we need change' and a local government that says 'ok'.

Fortunately, there is no shortage of ideas from within the community on how to build connection, capacity and resilience: ideas for programs, groups, technology and tools, refurbishing halls, creating multi-use spaces, buying up assets and bringing people together. Yet we also heard that local governments are often all too aware of the costs and risks of saying 'yes' — while the risks and costs of saying 'no' are not acknowledged.

One council worker specialising in recovery and resilience told us: *“The community are tired of all of the blocks that are going to be put in their way if they try to do a good thing. How do we start to push for ‘yes, and?’ Yes, it’s a risk, and the implication for the community in not having this is also a real risk.”*

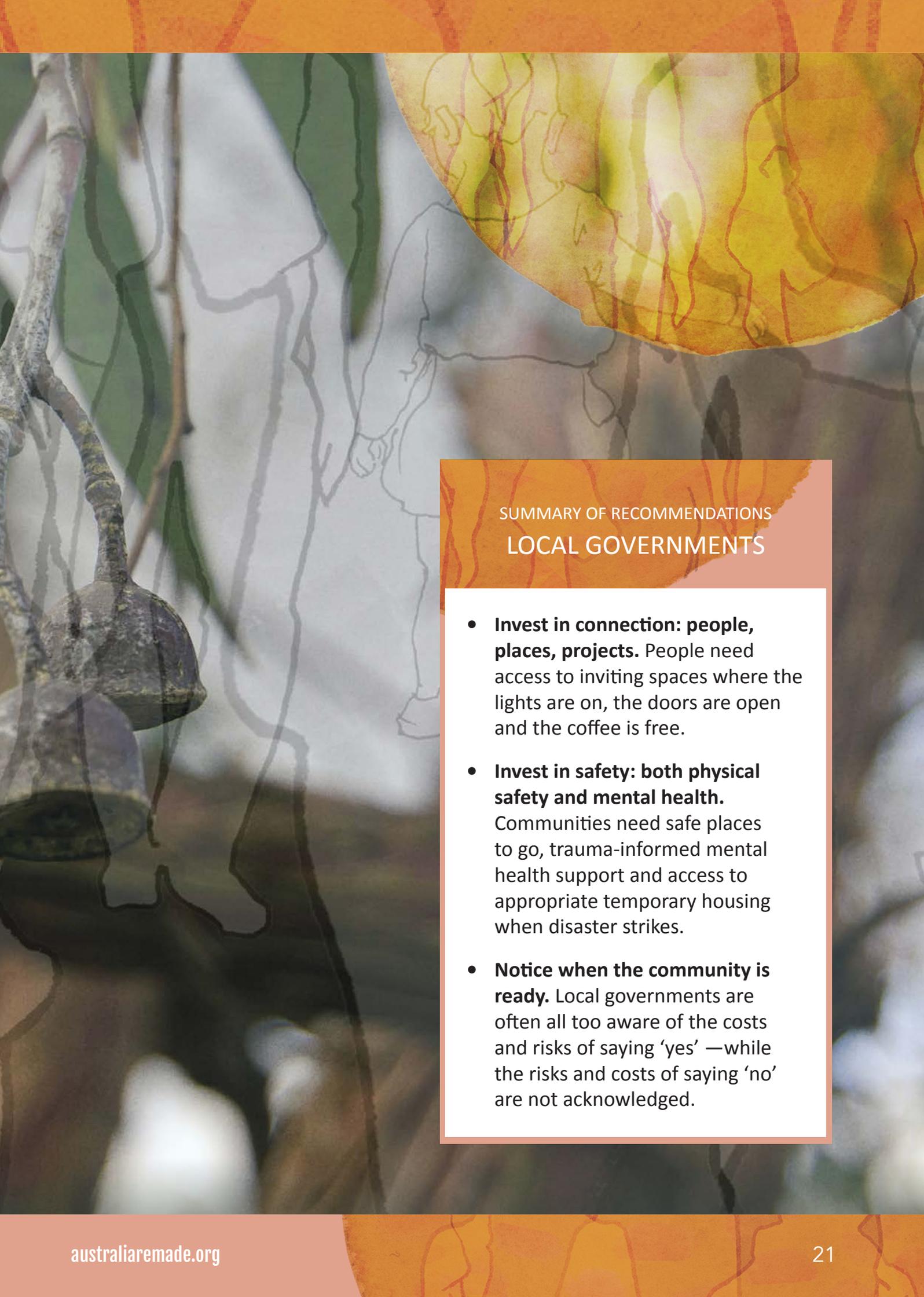
Another council worker, specialising in community outreach, said: *“Often we look at risk from a financial, asset or insurance perspective. What’s the risk from a care perspective? How disconnected are they going to be? How disempowered are they going to be? Looking at those things as equally important, but they’re not seen as equally important. Inter-generationally, what does that look like when you’ve got a whole community who feel like they’re being told no all the time?”*

Building on what’s working well and what people want to see more of, we recommend:

- Create a 'care/risk' assessment, that balances the legal or financial risk of doing something with the care risk of not doing something.
- Have a 'safe to fail' framework and culture that wraps around people and genuinely supports them to try new things.
- Recognise when local leaders in the community emerge — people who are actually taking action and mobilising others, not just talking. At that point, look at how to facilitate, enable or at least get out of the way of good ideas with their own momentum.

“The big challenge right now is there isn’t one issue local governments should be dealing with and if they get on top of that the pressure will be removed. It’s all macro — access to health, access to childcare, housing, big ticket things. Local government isn’t powerless but we’re limited in what we can do in relation to those macro issues. That makes me feel like ‘resilience’ is the right word [to describe what we’re trying to achieve], because it’s the ability to deal with the shocks on top of the normal stresses, but the normal stresses seem to be quite high at the moment.”

- Sally Rice, Director of Community and Economic Development, Indigo Shire, Victoria



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

- **Invest in connection: people, places, projects.** People need access to inviting spaces where the lights are on, the doors are open and the coffee is free.
- **Invest in safety: both physical safety and mental health.** Communities need safe places to go, trauma-informed mental health support and access to appropriate temporary housing when disaster strikes.
- **Notice when the community is ready.** Local governments are often all too aware of the costs and risks of saying ‘yes’ —while the risks and costs of saying ‘no’ are not acknowledged.

Care through Disaster and the State Government

State and territory governments have the most ownership of our physical institutions of Care, as the level of government most responsible for our hospitals and education, as well as our housing policy and keeping the community safe.

State governments also hold the primary responsibility for coordinating emergency services during a disaster, but their role is obviously even bigger: funding community organisations and programs; liaising with federal government (for example, requesting support from the Australian Defence Force); and shoring up local governments, communities and residents through the long process of recovery.

Going deeper, states have a role in disaster prevention and mitigation: through strong state-based climate policies, appropriate planning laws, protecting the environment and investing in disaster-ready infrastructure (from roads and bridges to power supply). Especially when there's been a lack of federal government leadership, it's fallen to states to drive the transition to a low-carbon economy, which reduces disaster risk while fostering resilience and building our shared prosperity.

Prevention partnerships occur between state governments and community organisations as well. Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is helping Victoria to centre primary prevention across its focus areas of climate justice, gender justice, prevention of gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health.

Like local governments and community organisations, states face big challenges of knowing when to lead and when to follow; how to operate more relationally, not just transactionally inside of bureaucracy; and how to empower agency and build trust, not just deliver services. (In Australia reMADE's public service work, we've been exploring the idea of a more 'collaborative state,'

and a public service built around the principles of Care, Connection and Contribution, which we encourage you to read more about on our website if interested.¹⁶) Of course, states have bigger forces shaping their context as well, which is why the federal government must lead ambitious structural change. More on that in the next section.

Here are the top recommendations for state governments to apply a Care through Disaster approach.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: Address underlying vulnerabilities.

We know that people in the community who are already vulnerable before disaster strikes are hit hardest when shocks occur, and we need to address these root causes of vulnerability before disaster occurs. Governments can't wave a wand and make homes cheaper, make more people go into essential jobs in medicine or teaching, or end loneliness. But they can better shape the context in which choices are made, seeing themselves as market-shapers, not just market-fixers. All good policy starts with getting clear on purpose: is the goal of our housing policy, for example, to help investors make money, or to ensure that every person who needs a home



has one? It progresses with the development of wellbeing goals and frameworks, created with deep community involvement. These must be used to guide budgets, incentives, taxes, regulations and policies; not just tick boxes.¹⁷

It is heartening that most states and territories in Australia now have some form of wellbeing indicators or emerging frameworks in place,

guiding decisions as well as measuring progress on a range of fronts that matter to the community. How healthy are we? How safe do we feel? Can we afford good homes? Can we access good education? What is the quality of our natural environment? Do we have enough time? Can we get around easily to the places we want to go, and do we feel connected?

In Victoria, in addition to the Health and Wellbeing Outcomes Frameworks, State Treasury has a world-leading Early Intervention Investment Framework.¹⁸ ¹⁹ This allows policy makers to ‘bank’ savings and measure the benefits of early intervention across government departments and silos.²⁰ Prevention is even better than early intervention: Health and Wellbeing Queensland says its role as “to empower and activate people, organisations, communities and governments to...create the conditions that will prevent people getting ill in the first place and keep people healthy.”²¹ South Australia has its Economic Statement arguing its government exists to “govern for the benefit of future generations,” while NSW has recently announced its own Performance and Wellbeing budget framework to “drive positive social outcomes.”^{22 23} The ACT is doing great work with a well-established wellbeing framework “helping the ACT Government and community work in partnership to lift the quality of life of all Canberrans.”²⁴

RECOMMENDATION TWO:

Identify gaps and amplify what’s working in disaster readiness.

While there is excellent work being supported and funded by state governments on many fronts, efforts can still come across as disjointed: crisis-by-crisis, grant-by-grant. We encourage state governments to lead proactive, holistic conversations with councils, communities and organisations to better understand needs and gaps, and then act on them, together.

We heard that many programs simply need more funding and support to scale. There are a number of programs doing great work, funded

in part by government, which could be ripe for further expansion: such as the Red Cross’ ‘RediCommunities’, and the Resilience Action Plan in Tarnagulla, which allows community leaders to come together to identify strengths and goals for developing resilience.^{25 26}

Disasters also spark innovations. Two examples that grew out of recent disasters in QLD alone include FireTechConnect, created to accelerate the adoption of promising bushfire technologies; and FloodMapp, which offers street-level intelligence as a live mapping feed before, during, and after a flood.^{27 28} These could be adapted and used around the country.

State governments don't always have to provide the answers or even the money, but they do have a core role to play in ensuring the system as a whole works as well as it can. That includes bringing stakeholders together to share wins, promote best practice and build trust. Where are local volunteer emergency services brimming with volunteers, and how have they done this? Where are First Nations knowledge and leadership helping to manage fire risk more effectively? What innovative local approaches and programs do others need to hear about?

People also want state and territory governments to work together better to share knowledge and resources across borders. However those with experience on the inside tell us parochialism and a sense of competition often remain as barriers, especially in male-dominated fields like emergency management. Multiple male experts told us that more women in positions of leadership is key to overcoming this.

**RECOMMENDATION THREE:
Build trust, cohesion and agency in supporting communities through recovery.**

"You have too much impost at times from national and state agencies coming in and doing their thing. There's lack of clarity over their roles and responsibilities. We get in communities' way. Many communities will say, 'the second disaster was the recovery.' It's horrible, especially when you work in it and

you're trying to make it as flexible and effective as possible for people." - Sally McKay, disaster recovery specialist

No surprises here, but the consensus is that doing funding well in disaster recovery is really hard. We heard from communities that funding is often withdrawn too soon — with counsellors leaving schools just as kids were starting to open up about their experiences of trauma. We heard from organisations that competitive grants take time, expertise and resources to apply for, then pit groups that are already struggling financially against each other. We heard from former government officials that a lack of transparency, toxic media narratives or even a political staffer more concerned with protecting their boss' image than serving the community can all derail community goodwill and cohesion following a disaster event.

"There's a genuine interest in supporting community-led models inside government, but understanding of how to do this can be limited," according to a former state government worker involved in disaster recovery. *"An example of this is when government talks about prioritising community-led and then releases a three-year funding program that prioritises the requirements of state government over community. Governments can play an important role in community-led outcomes, but can undermine their own intentions when a policy change, funding deadline or political priority changes the goalposts and erodes*



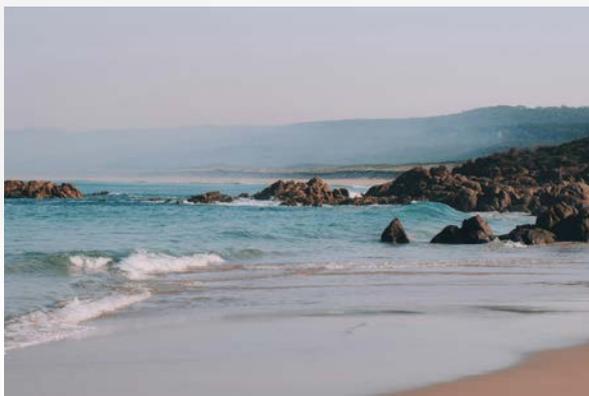
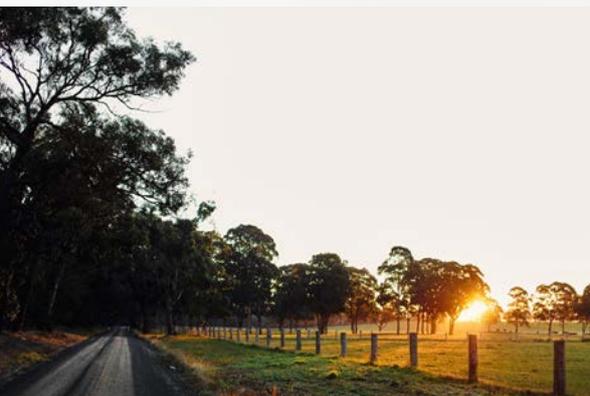
the trust and connection being built with that community.”

Enabling more autonomy for the community ultimately requires trust, and that goes back to relationships and how we support and value them. In our original research, Betsy, a Neighbourhood House leader in a small town in Victoria, told us how she applied for a state government grant after her town was flooded. This grant allowed her to give vouchers to anyone in need — to be used on food, petrol, power, equipment, while also supporting local business. Someone in government decided to trust Betsy, and so did her community. The

model of local Community Resilience Officers mentioned above also lends itself well to this approach.

Locals want their expertise to be seen and respected, and they want some agency over decisions about how to restore and renew their communities. Government-run processes should support and facilitate where necessary, rather than replace, community-run efforts. There is an in-built legitimising effect when efforts are community-owned.

Lake Tyers is an Aboriginal community in regional Victoria with a long history of trauma from colonisation and forcible displacement. It is a distinct geographic community, isolated (one road in, one road out), prone to fire, with an escape route backing onto a lake. In the aftermath of the 2019-2020 Black Summer Fires, the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust has worked with Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV) and other state government bodies to build relationships, trust and determine joint plans for what the community needs to keep safe. The Trust has now applied for funding for a dedicated community evacuation and relief centre, “a safe, relaxed building that mob, the community could come and feel safe,” according to community member Terylene Hood, quoted in an online government case study.²⁹ The community has also secured funding for a couple of boats, and they’ve been able to work more closely with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and others — advising on local knowledge and burning practices.



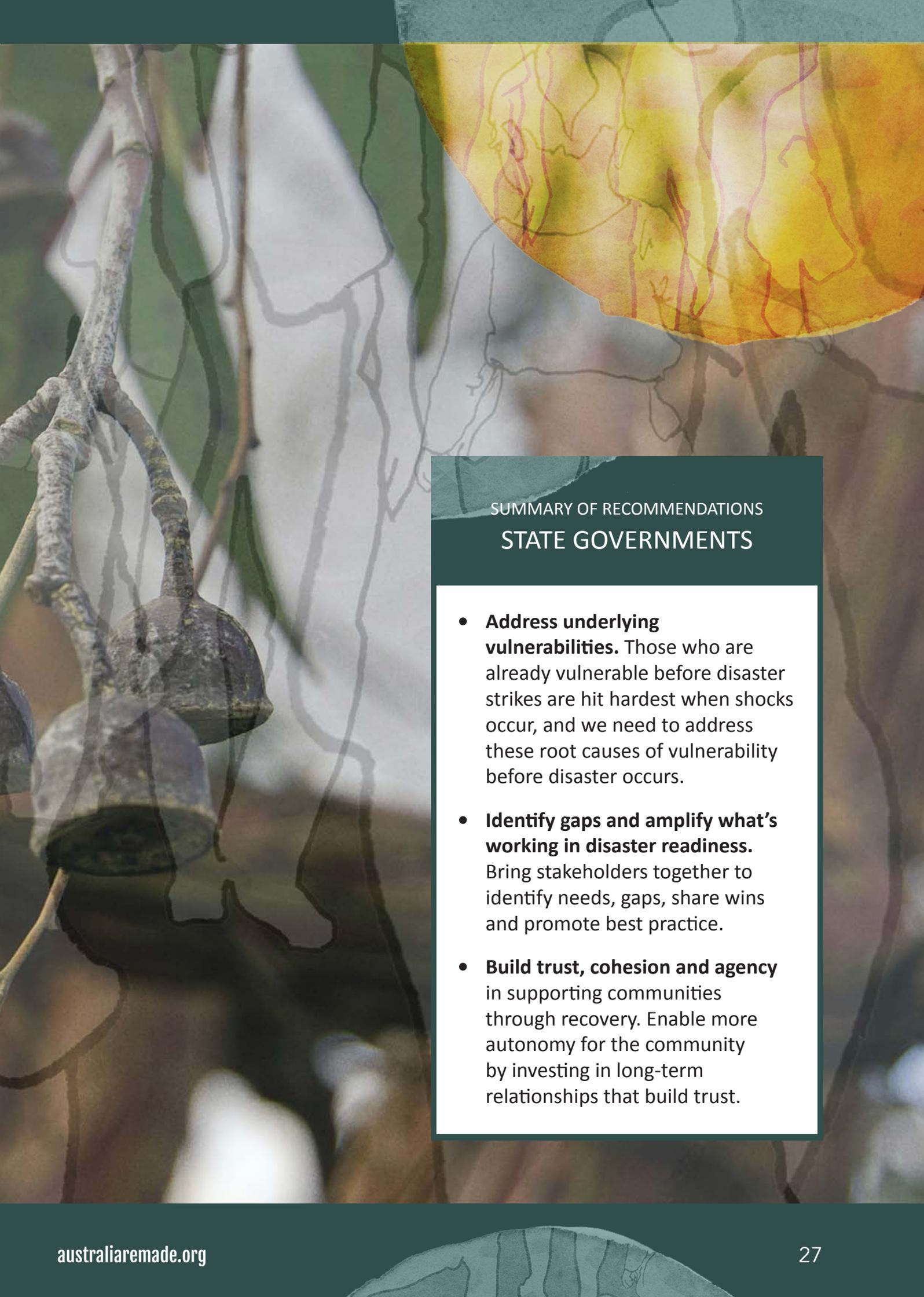
State governments need to contribute resources, expertise and information, without taking over. Sometimes local groups emerge organically and then apply to states for funding and support. Where this doesn't happen, the Victorian State Government's Community Recovery Committees offer a model.³⁰ These committees seek to engage local voices and expertise during recovery, and have been rolled out across Victoria following the Black Summer fires.

Disaster recovery specialists we consulted say that state governments are getting better at supporting communities in recovery.

As practitioner Sally McKay told us:

"It's one thing to engage, ask community groups and voices to take part, but how do you resource that work on the ground? You sit in the room and 9/10ths of those people aren't being paid to be there. These are often the same local voluntary community leaders who are involved in the fire brigades, Landcare, Lions and the [Country Women's Association] CWA, etc. And now we're asking these same people to do more, so we need to question, 'how do we resource and support that work at the real local level?' These considerations are just starting."





SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS STATE GOVERNMENTS

- **Address underlying vulnerabilities.** Those who are already vulnerable before disaster strikes are hit hardest when shocks occur, and we need to address these root causes of vulnerability before disaster occurs.
- **Identify gaps and amplify what's working in disaster readiness.** Bring stakeholders together to identify needs, gaps, share wins and promote best practice.
- **Build trust, cohesion and agency** in supporting communities through recovery. Enable more autonomy for the community by investing in long-term relationships that build trust.

Care through Disaster and the Federal Government

The Australian Government is aware of our growing disaster risk, vulnerabilities and costs (human, not just financial); and the grossly unfair burden this is placing on those with the least culpability for the problem, including younger generations. The scientific consensus is that damage to earth's climate systems pose a grave threat to human wellbeing and the health of our planet.³¹ Governments need to respond with conviction.

It's one thing to face such a threat believing one's leaders are doing absolutely everything in their power to stop it; quite another to believe they are largely in denial, impotent or making the problem worse.

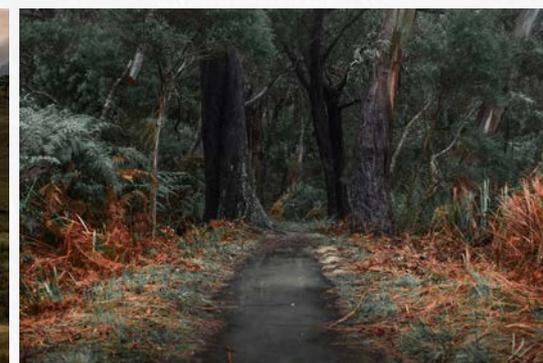
Flood and fire-ravaged communities know why disasters are getting worse, and they're angry. The Australian government must heed calls to end subsidies to the fossil fuel industry, as well as the approval of new coal and gas mines, now. The climate crisis is a fossil fuel crisis, which is causing a disaster crisis. While climate action has many benefits, it can also rightly be framed as disaster prevention action.

The Australian Government can't solve climate change alone, but as one of the largest energy exporters in the world, Australia has a huge responsibility to lead, and act.³² The government also has great responsibility and power to transform the context in which Australians experience climate-fuelled disasters: shifting from a market-based, individualised and

privatised response, to one that is collective and led by the civilian public sector. Here are the top recommendations for the federal government to apply a Care through Disaster approach.

RECOMMENDATION ONE: Shift from private to public disaster insurance.

Whether it's increasingly unaffordable costs, excessively long wait times for payouts or an adversarial approach to claims, the private insurance model is clearly failing Australians.³³ Underinsurance is entrenching poverty, as those who are already vulnerable are hit hardest by disasters.³⁴ An estimated 1 million Australians are already under extreme 'insurance stress', unable to afford their premiums, while 75% are concerned that climate change will result in more expensive insurance premiums.^{35 36} Insured Australians can wait 18 months or longer to receive a payout following a disaster event.^{37 38} The model has been described as 'privatising climate adaptation', and has been shown in academic research to weaken community solidarity in recovery.³⁹ Indeed the insurance industry's response to the 2022 floods along Australia's east coast was so poor that the federal Parliament launched an inquiry, which is due to report by 30 September, 2024.^{40 41}



“The problems of underinsurance and lack of insurance are growing, because with every disaster the cost of insurance goes up,” says disaster recovery specialist Sally McKay. *“More and more people in hazard-prone localities for bushfire and flooding, etc, such as in Northern NSW, simply can’t afford it. All that’s happening now is people are starting to opt out more.”*

How will Australians be able to obtain mortgages in 2030 when the Climate Council predicts 1 in 25 homes will become ‘uninsurable’? ⁴² This isn’t a case of a few expensive premiums needing to be brought down, or a few bad apples in need of better

regulation. This is a clear case of market failure. We need a fundamental overhaul of disaster insurance in Australia, to make it truly universal, equitable and sustainable against a rising tide.

“I would prefer to deal with Satan [than the insurance company] because it’s like dealing with the devil. Mentally, I just cannot do it.” - Shellei Sibberas from Rochester, Victoria, quoted in an interview with the ABC ⁴³

A universal, public insurance model should minimise additional cost-of-living pressures on ordinary Australians, who are not responsible for the worsening systemic crisis, and put the cost onus onto the fossil fuel industry, a fair approach with widespread public support. ⁴⁴

Options for public disaster insurance funding include:

- redirection of existing fossil fuel subsidies (estimated to cost the federal budget \$41 billion between 2023-2027)⁴⁵
- an additional export tax on fossil fuels (\$1/tonne of CO2 emissions would raise around \$1.3 billion annually)⁴⁶
- further reforms of the Petroleum Resource Rent Tax ⁴⁷
- an expansion of the remit of the Disaster Ready Fund.

Behind the scenes, financial bodies, national governments, NGOs and others can help the Australian government mitigate its own financial exposure to increasing disaster costs, as is being done in the Caribbean with The Caribbean Catastrophic Risk Insurance Facility.⁴⁸

New Zealand’s Earthquake Commission (EQC) provides residential property owners with insurance for earthquakes and a range of other events.⁴⁹ It operates independently of government, but receives government backing in the event that claims exceed its financial reserves. The program also promotes risk reduction and resilience through research funding and mitigation.⁵⁰

The National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) in the United States is another example, administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It provides flood insurance coverage, both directly and indirectly via private insurers, to property owners, renters and businesses in almost 23,000 participating communities across the country.⁵¹ The program aims to offer affordable insurance rates for properties located in flood-prone areas, as well as floodplain management and mitigation efforts. However it lacks an adequate funding model and still relies on individuals purchasing insurance.⁵² Australia can learn from and improve upon these examples.

**RECOMMENDATION TWO:
Build the capacity of civilian citizen disaster relief.**

Reliance on the Australian Defence Force (ADF) for disaster aid to the community is unsustainable, according to the independent findings of the 2023 Defence Strategic Review.⁵³ The Review recommended that the ADF should only be used as the last resort for domestic aid to the community during and following disasters, except in extreme circumstances.⁵⁴

Our research echoes this finding. In our *Care through Disaster* report we argue that over-reliance on the ADF increases the militarisation of society, is unsustainable and should be balanced with more nimble, flexible and community-led approaches to disaster response. Yet we also heard that civilians need more time, training, resources and coordination to be able to offer the right help, in the right way, at the right time.

“With spontaneous volunteering you get community members asking, ‘What can I do? How can I help?’ But they’ve never been included

beforehand and when they rock up at the door people don’t know what to do with them. That is changing, but the community are very unsure about what their place is in disaster response and recovery, where they can fit and what role they can play.” - Jessica Oldmeadow, Community Outreach Officer, Indigo Shire, Victoria

We suggest a nationally-coordinated effort to further strengthen, resource and expand existing state and community-based emergency services, often volunteer-powered; while also exploring the best model for a permanent, federally-funded, national Civilian Disaster Relief Corps.

A national civilian disaster corps would provide external support, reduce reliance on the ADF and build the permanent capacity of civilians able to assist with speciality knowledge, skills and equipment when and where they’re required.

The Australian government is already helping to fund Disaster Relief Australia (DRA), a charity composed of volunteer veterans, emergency responders and motivated civilians leading relief missions in Australia and overseas. Since 2016, DRA has grown to an Australia-wide group of more than 2,500 volunteers and ten local Disaster Relief Teams, covering all states and territories — which serve in communities before, during and after disasters.⁵⁵ The Australian government could work with DRA and other stakeholders to determine whether it can become Australia’s official national civilian disaster relief corps, or whether we need a new federally-funded civilian agency that can enable Australians of diverse backgrounds, genders and skills to contribute wherever they are needed.

RECOMMENDATION THREE: Harness government for the wellbeing of people and planet.

The inaugural 2024 *Purpose of Government Pulse*, conducted by the Centre for Policy Development, finds that four in five people want the wellbeing of the population to guide our leaders' decision-making, above other concerns.⁵⁶

Wellbeing government is government driven by purpose, powered by people and focused on prevention: working to build an economy that serves people and planet, not the other way around. It brings a long-term, intergenerational lens to our challenges. It shifts from market-fixing to market-shaping: incentivising business activities and structures that have a social and environmental dividend; while taxing, regulating and otherwise restricting those that cause harm.⁵⁷

“Wellbeing is about how we are doing, as individuals, as a community, and as a place to live. It’s about having the opportunity and ability to lead lives of personal and community value – with qualities such as good health, time to enjoy the things in life that matter, in an environment that promotes personal growth and is sustainable. Measuring wellbeing is about having a sense of our progress around the things that matter to our quality of life, and help us to live our lives well.” - ACT Wellbeing Framework website⁵⁸

It is still early days in Australia's national wellbeing government journey, but we have begun. Notable steps forward include Treasury's Measuring What Matters framework, tracking our progress towards a healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous country.⁵⁹ Equally, the inaugural National Health and Climate Strategy acknowledges the health and wellbeing impacts of climate change — setting a vision for healthy, climate resilient communities and a sustainable, resilient, high-quality, net zero

health system.⁶⁰ Various states and the ACT have made their own strides, as discussed in the state government section above.

In the 'citizen' section earlier on in this report, we talked about how society can no longer rely solely on the unpaid labour of women to build, maintain and care for community; that if we are to change course to build the kinds of communities capable of surviving and thriving through the challenges ahead, we are going to need new foundations of structural support and enabling infrastructure. **From our research and extensive consultation of wellbeing economists, advocates, academics and policy-makers, there are three transformative enablers the federal government can drive: time, money and pathways.**⁶¹

- Time poverty is harmful to our health and wellbeing, as well as a genuine barrier to community connection and resilience-building.⁶² Yet under neoliberalism, time poverty (particularly its impact on caring) is treated largely as a private challenge for individuals to navigate in isolation, with market-based solutions, rather than structural or policy support.⁶³ Encouragingly, leadership is gathering momentum in the form of organisations and now governments testing out a four-day standard working week. Trials have occurred in more than 21 countries around the world so far, including Australia.⁶⁴ In 2024 a big one is kicking off in Germany, Europe's largest economy.⁶⁵ Major companies trialling this in Australia include Bunnings, Medibank, Unilever and the charity Oxfam.⁶⁶ Engaging in a widescale government trial was also a key recommendation of the Australian Senate's inquiry into Work and Care.⁶⁷ While we wholeheartedly support progress towards a 4-day standard working week, how we go

about it matters. This change should not be achieved merely through longer hours across fewer days, or unrealistic expectations of speeding up productivity at the expense of relationships.⁶⁸ Our goal is to serve care, not squash it.

- **Income can be provided through a Universal Basic Income (UBI), an idea a majority of Australians consistently support.**⁶⁹ In trials around the world, a basic income (sufficient to “sustain a person at a modest minimum, leaving sufficient incentives to work, save, and invest”) has been shown to boost happiness, health and trust in social institutions, a valuable proposition indeed.^{70 71} The Australian Basic Income Lab is a collaboration of three leading Australian universities currently modelling how a UBI could work here.⁷²
- **Pathways can be provided by expanding the public service, to offer meaningful jobs contributing to the public good to everyone who wants one** — including work in disaster preparedness, community-building and resilience. Building on their commitment to full employment, Australia’s government could inspire and equip a new generation

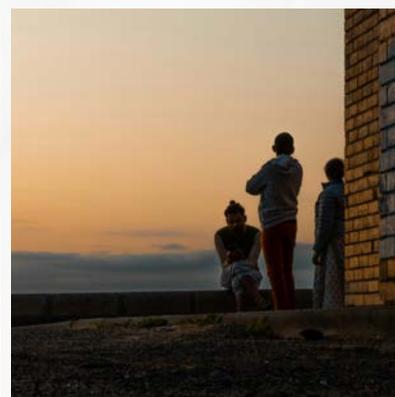
of workers to find good jobs addressing some of our biggest challenges, while also caring for and contributing to our communities.⁷⁵

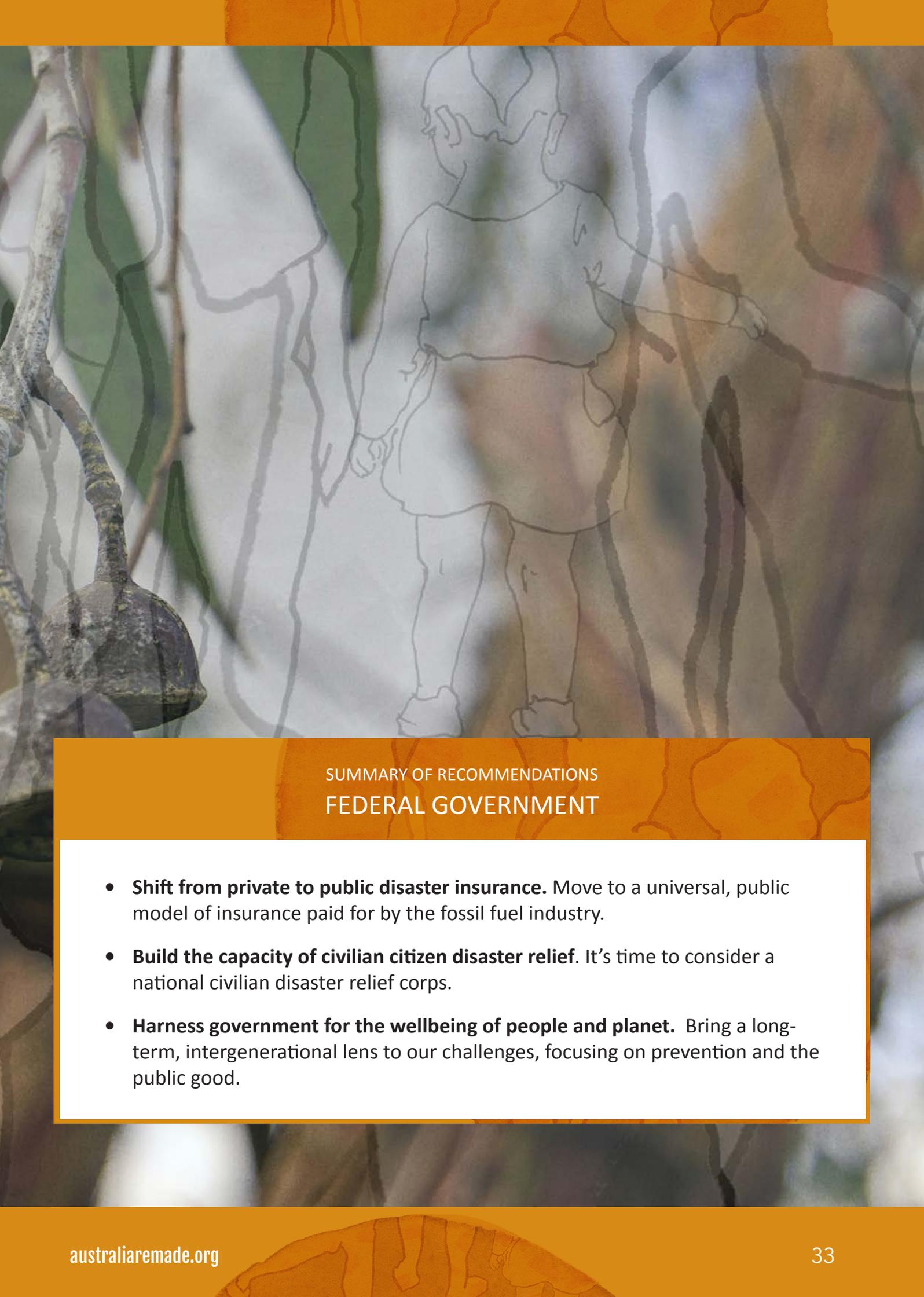
In the US, President Biden has announced Climate Corps, a new national service program to train young people in high-demand skills for jobs in the clean energy economy.

“The American Climate Corps will put a new generation of Americans to work conserving our lands and waters, bolstering community resilience, advancing environmental justice, deploying clean energy, implementing energy efficient technologies, and tackling climate change,” according to the White House.⁷⁶ This, combined with America’s Inflation Reduction Act shows a way forward similar to the sort of Climate Jobs Guarantee program youth leaders are calling for in Australia.^{77 78}

These ideas are ambitious, but entirely achievable, and with huge potential to galvanise the nation around a positive sense of our future and what we can be.

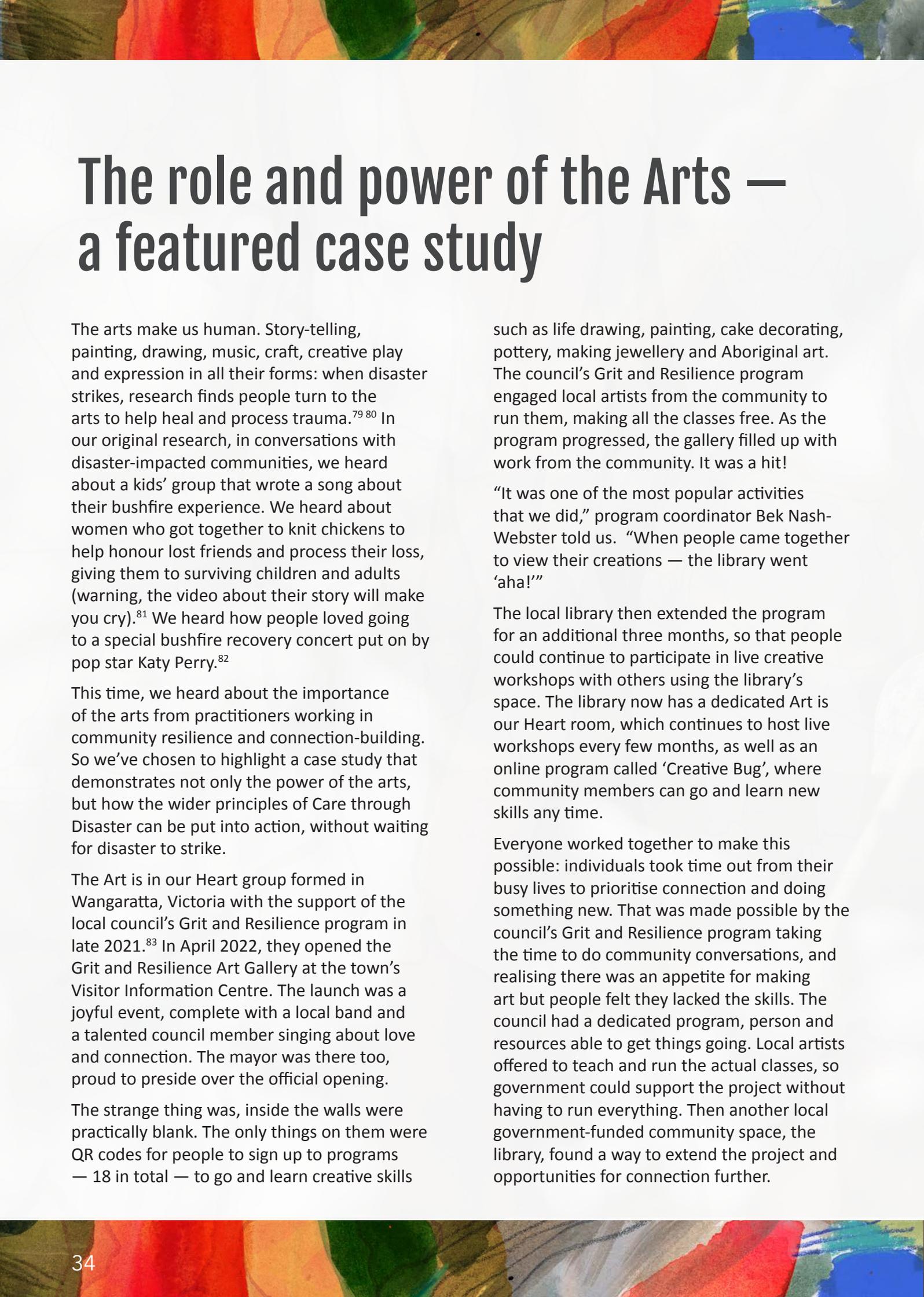
A 2022 trial in Austin, Texas, gave 135 low-income households \$1,000 USD each month for a year, and found that one year later, families had mostly used the money to cover housing costs.⁷³ This helped them catch up on rent, reduced the likelihood they would be evicted and generally enabled them to substantially improve their housing situation.⁷⁴





SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

- **Shift from private to public disaster insurance.** Move to a universal, public model of insurance paid for by the fossil fuel industry.
- **Build the capacity of civilian citizen disaster relief.** It's time to consider a national civilian disaster relief corps.
- **Harness government for the wellbeing of people and planet.** Bring a long-term, intergenerational lens to our challenges, focusing on prevention and the public good.



The role and power of the Arts — a featured case study

The arts make us human. Story-telling, painting, drawing, music, craft, creative play and expression in all their forms: when disaster strikes, research finds people turn to the arts to help heal and process trauma.^{79 80} In our original research, in conversations with disaster-impacted communities, we heard about a kids' group that wrote a song about their bushfire experience. We heard about women who got together to knit chickens to help honour lost friends and process their loss, giving them to surviving children and adults (warning, the video about their story will make you cry).⁸¹ We heard how people loved going to a special bushfire recovery concert put on by pop star Katy Perry.⁸²

This time, we heard about the importance of the arts from practitioners working in community resilience and connection-building. So we've chosen to highlight a case study that demonstrates not only the power of the arts, but how the wider principles of Care through Disaster can be put into action, without waiting for disaster to strike.

The Art is in our Heart group formed in Wangaratta, Victoria with the support of the local council's Grit and Resilience program in late 2021.⁸³ In April 2022, they opened the Grit and Resilience Art Gallery at the town's Visitor Information Centre. The launch was a joyful event, complete with a local band and a talented council member singing about love and connection. The mayor was there too, proud to preside over the official opening.

The strange thing was, inside the walls were practically blank. The only things on them were QR codes for people to sign up to programs — 18 in total — to go and learn creative skills

such as life drawing, painting, cake decorating, pottery, making jewellery and Aboriginal art. The council's Grit and Resilience program engaged local artists from the community to run them, making all the classes free. As the program progressed, the gallery filled up with work from the community. It was a hit!

"It was one of the most popular activities that we did," program coordinator Bek Nash-Webster told us. "When people came together to view their creations — the library went 'aha!'"

The local library then extended the program for an additional three months, so that people could continue to participate in live creative workshops with others using the library's space. The library now has a dedicated Art is our Heart room, which continues to host live workshops every few months, as well as an online program called 'Creative Bug', where community members can go and learn new skills any time.

Everyone worked together to make this possible: individuals took time out from their busy lives to prioritise connection and doing something new. That was made possible by the council's Grit and Resilience program taking the time to do community conversations, and realising there was an appetite for making art but people felt they lacked the skills. The council had a dedicated program, person and resources able to get things going. Local artists offered to teach and run the actual classes, so government could support the project without having to run everything. Then another local government-funded community space, the library, found a way to extend the project and opportunities for connection further.



The Art is in our Heart workshops and gallery bringing the community together. Funded by the Grit and Resilience Project, Wangaratta Council, Victoria.

Conclusion

In 2023, amidst a global onslaught of ‘unnatural disasters’ the UN Secretary General warned world leaders that “humanity has opened the gates of hell.”⁸⁴

Yet humanity has a track record of surprising itself in precisely these circumstances — as Rebecca Solnit catalogues so brilliantly in her 2009 book, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The extraordinary communities that arise in disaster*.

“Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise.... If paradise now arises in hell, it’s because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way.”

- Rebecca Solnit

This work asks: knowing that the fires will burn, the storms will rage and the waters will rise, how do we build the portal to paradise now? Rather than being flattened and fractured by escalating and overlapping crises...how do we rise, too?

Care through Disaster doesn’t offer a simple program or a single policy fix, but a lens that helps us to prioritise Care in everything we do, from the citizen to the state, to equip communities to survive

and thrive through perilous times. It broadens the definition of ‘disaster infrastructure’ — compelling us to invest in the infrastructure of care, connection and community over the long term.

We’ll know we’re succeeding when we take Care as seriously as we take defence. When we measure the success and health of our cities and regions not by the size of their economies alone, but by their capacity to care and be cared for through good times and through hard times.

We’ll know we’re succeeding when people have the time, support and resources to care for each other and their communities, including through disaster: when they know what to do, have built up some trust and feel confident they can manage. When governments are looking hard at how to reduce risk and address underlying vulnerabilities, as well as build on strengths, amplify what’s working and deliver surge capacity. When we take time poverty seriously — not just as a private challenge or gender equity issue, but as a threat to wellbeing and community resilience.

We’ll know we’re succeeding when we’re doing everything we can to prevent disaster in the first place; while ensuring communities are Seen, Safe and Supported when they do happen.

No one wants to live in a more disaster-prone world. Fortunately, we do want to live in the kinds of communities that can thrive before, during and after disaster. We have the will, the know-how, the people and resources to centre Care as an organising principle. There are bright spots and evidence of this approach working, everywhere. Let’s build the paradise now, ready and rising.

Further recommended reading

This work builds on *Care through Disaster: A new lens on what’s needed to survive and thrive through tumultuous times*. The full report, summary and e-learning module are available at australiaremade.org/care-disaster.

Appendix: Additional Case Studies

All over the country there are inspiring examples of Care through Disaster in action. Here we've highlighted a few more stand-outs, some specifically disaster-related and others more broadly supporting care and connection: from local communities through to regional and national programs.

Local community examples

- **Indigo Shire in Victoria** has implemented a recovery network of local practitioners, so that people working in recovery agencies can build relationships year round, rather than waiting until an emergency to get in touch and start conversations.
- The community of **South Hobart in Tasmania** runs community resilience fairs, with people sharing cakes, food and vegetable swaps alongside information on disaster preparation and organising practice evacuations.⁸⁵
- In **Dundas Shire in West Australia**, the council recently purchased the Norseman IGA and post office — ensuring the continuity of vital local goods, services and jobs; while turning a six-figure monthly profit to reinvest back into the community.^{86 87}
- **KeoRide** is offering affordable, community-based on demand transportation in parts of South Australia and NSW, connecting people to key community locations and bigger public transportation hubs.⁸⁸
- The **Jamieson Police Paddock Community Hub** in Mansfield, Victoria is a community-led project building a multi-use community hub on Council-owned land.^{89 90} During disasters, it will serve as a command post and emergency centre. Outside of emergency situations, the facility will be a multifunctional community

space – supporting local community groups, events, providing extra storage capacity for community and emergency services, as well as a community garden.

- During the **2022 Lismore floods in NSW**, locals shared their knowledge of how rain and stormwater behaved on social media, allowing flood levels to be predicted when gauges were inaccurate.⁹¹ It also allowed the coordination of the “Tinnie Army”, where residents with boats were able to rescue those stuck in rising floodwaters.⁹²
- In our first round of research we learned about the **Lighthouse Project**, which also had success during the Lismore floods providing the most vulnerable with information through door knocking. Community members assisted in providing translations of information for those whose first language was not English.
- The **Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub (NRCHH)** continues to offer a healing space to support flood recovery, complete with “trauma-informed counsellors, bodyworkers, weaving circles, yarning circles, group activities, free tea, coffee, food and a friendly chat.”⁹³ It’s a self-organising network run by Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members and practitioners, offering trauma-integrated and culturally-informed healing practices to all.

Regional, state-based and national examples

- **Fire to Flourish** is a transdisciplinary program led by Monash University, helping communities to lead their own recovery, and co-creating the foundations for long-term resilience and wellbeing.⁹⁴ The five-year program works at the intersection of disaster resilience and community development, with four fire-

impacted communities in New South Wales and Victoria (all affected by the 2019/20 Black Summer Fires). Its motto is “strength through community led action.”⁹⁵

- In Queensland, a state-funded “**EV CREW**” (Emergency Volunteering Response to Extreme Weather) links spontaneous volunteers with councils and community organisations in times of natural disaster. It allows people who might not have the desire or capacity to volunteer permanently with their local fire or state emergency services to still pre-register for training, get some support for disaster preparation, then wait to be called upon.⁹⁶
- **Gender and Disaster Australia** are training local councils and others nationwide on how women, men and LGBTQIA+ people experience disaster differently, and how best they can be cared for throughout.⁹⁷ They are also supporting stakeholders across every state and territory to embed gender-informed disaster preparation, response and recovery in practice. They won the Resilient Australia Award in 2019 for Nationally Significant Projects, for their work on the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines.⁹⁸
- **Firesticks** is a First Nations non-profit working across Australia to promote cultural burning practices and learning pathways to fire and land management. Recognising that Aboriginal fire management has become a priority for community, cultural, social and environmental wellbeing, Firesticks is supporting communities to share Traditional Knowledge, in order to activate the reimplementation of traditional cultural fire knowledge practices upon the Australian landscape.⁹⁹
- **The Possibility Lab** is a community of practice supporting people working in disaster recovery nationwide. It offers supportive community and professional development tailored to people working for government, funded by government, or who have recovery in their job remit. Partners include the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, the Australian Red Cross, Reconstruction New South Wales and the Social Recovery Reference Group.¹⁰⁰
- **The Social Recovery Reference Group** itself is worth a shout out. It’s our national government’s community of practice for human and social recovery; set up to “drive the human and social perspective in emergency management”, and “promote the centrality of community in all recovery efforts following a disaster and in preparing for future events.”¹⁰¹ Practitioners across States, Territories and relief organisations collaborate to share best practice, evaluation and knowledge of international issues; as well as to provide policy advice and operational support for improved relief and recovery outcomes for people and communities.¹⁰²
- **Regional University Study Hubs** are another positive, relatively new example of the infrastructure of care and connection. In this time where remote learning is the most practical choice for many, federally-funded hubs are helping to make studying online a bit easier and less isolating for students in rural and regional areas. Each hub provides students free access to facilities with technology, study spaces, high speed internet; as well as academic, pastoral and administrative support and, critically, students in similar situations. Starting with 16 centres in 2018, there are now 34 across Australia and the Australian government recently announced funding for 20 more.^{103 104}
- In the **Empowered Communities program**, Aboriginal leaders from across Australia are working together with government and other stakeholders to shape how Aboriginal policies and programs are designed and delivered in ten diverse Aboriginal communities.¹⁰⁵ It’s not ‘consultation’, but real place-based, community-led partnership. The federal government sees its role not as the primary driver, but as an enabling partner.¹⁰⁶ Its job is to find out what communities really want, listen, co-design, act and be held accountable; the opposite of the historic ‘top-down’ bureaucratic approach. It began as a gathering of 25 Indigenous leaders in 2013, and continues to demonstrate a model of partnering with community and bolstering capable community leadership.¹⁰⁷

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ABOUT AUSTRALIA REMADE

Australia reMADE exists to support ambitious, collaborative, and transformative change-makers to reMAKE more of the world we want. We are independent, not-for-profit and here for anyone who aligns with our vision and values.

More information about this project and the work of Australia reMADE is available online: www.AustraliareMADE.org.

ABOUT WOMEN'S HEALTH GOULBURN NORTH EAST

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is a feminist organisation, leading change towards women's empowerment, women's health, the prevention of violence against women and ultimately, gender equality, in rural and regional Victoria. More information about WHGNE is available online: <https://www.whealth.com.au>.

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