Evaluation

Community Sector Disaster Capability (CSDC) Project

Thank you very much, for a start - this was something that we desperately needed in our village. There should be more of it … You cannot replace a person's life – you can only save it.

Community member, Snowy Monaro

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Executive Summary

The Community Sector Disaster Capability (CSDC) Project is jointly funded by the NSW and Australian Governments through the Local and Regional Stream of the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund (DRRF), a grant funding initiative established under the National Partnership Agreement on Disaster Risk Reduction. The DRRF is administered by the NSW Reconstruction Authority (RA).

The CSDC project aims to strengthen the disaster risk reduction capability of local social service non-government organisations (NGOs) to better support the wellbeing and safety of vulnerable community members (who can be hardest hit by disasters). Place-based NGOs are often involved in meeting needs after a disaster but are rarely formally engaged in emergency management agencies' preventative action and planning to reduce risks and community-based disaster planning and risk reduction efforts go largely unrecognised.

Led by a partnership of three NSW peak bodies, the project pilots education, risk assessment and strategic planning activities in four regional locations across NSW which have recently experienced disasters and are at high risk of similar disasters in the future:

- Northern Rivers
- Hawkesbury
- Snowy Monaro
- Bega/ Eurobodalla.

Project activities had been operational in these four local areas for 7-9 months at the time of evaluation. During this time, progress has been made in joining up NGOs in local social services sectors and building NGO social services' understanding of disaster preparedness at an organisational and community level.

Where CSDC activities targeted community members, the work appeared to effectively join vulnerable groups up with each other, and with NGO social services and emergency management agencies. Outcome measurement for this group was a challenge.

Stakeholders from NGO social services reported during this evaluation that they are motivated by the project and want it to build on its networking and awareness-raising to deliver:

- further support and resources for organisation-level planning
- clearly articulated collective preparedness goals
- continuity, in a funding and service delivery space that frequently shifts as local disaster recovery projects start and end.

Local host organisations in each location have strengthened links with emergency management and other government agencies involved in disaster management. They have started to use these networks to raise awareness of community concerns and priorities and the needs of vulnerable groups when a disaster occurs. There are some examples of changed practices by individuals, teams and even local networks in emergency management to take better account of community needs and vulnerable groups. Generally, project stakeholders reported that a statewide cultural and policy shift is required across key emergency management agencies and government bodies responsible for disaster management before community input is systematically addressed.

Where the project delivered directly to community members, it was positively received by local communities. Stakeholders reported positive changes such as: better awareness of local disaster risks and how to plan for them; better understanding of emergency management and disaster recovery support; and improved neighbourhood networking and collective planning for disasters.

Project activities reached vulnerable groups within local communities, especially:

- people known to NGO social services and community-based services – capturing broad vulnerabilities such as low income or unemployment, housing insecurity or social exclusion
- people vulnerable due to age (e.g. elderly living alone, families of babies and young children) people with disability (for which P-CEP is designed)
- isolated individuals and communities, through innovative networking and collaborative event coordination.

Vulnerable groups acknowledged as not sufficiently engaged within the program's timeframe were:

- First Nations communities, at higher risk of poor outcomes in a disaster due to complex interactions of multiple vulnerabilities their communities have experienced since European colonisation
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities who can experience language barriers and vulnerabilities related to disaster relief entitlements if they are managing specific residency or permanency statuses.

The primary message of this evaluation is that the approach and intent of the CSDC project takes time to realise in communities that are often traumatised, especially the more vulnerable groups. Goals related to community capacity and collective planning build on relationships and trust. In the relatively short period of

time that this project has been active in its target locations, it has been well-received and has achieved progress towards its goals.

There is a sense from a broad range of stakeholders who contributed to this evaluation that there is more to do in this project and in the space of community development to achieve joint planning for disasters that are becoming more extreme and more frequent with climate change in Australia.

Stakeholders' motivation to continue the pilot CSDC program and develop it further comes from the positive change it has achieved in local communities and NGO social service networks. There are multiple examples of local improvements described throughout this report:

- residents in a geographically isolated community have a car-pool plan in case of bushfire, so that neighbours without vehicles can evacuate quickly
- an emergency management stakeholder knows who to ask to ensure that vulnerable groups are included in community consultations on local plans
- a new disaster management interagency network is being set up across government and non-government agencies in a regional town
- community organisations and NGO social services in a flood-prone community have developed a network so that they can communicate and coordinate in the event that they are cut off by flood.

The view that the pilot should be continued and embedded into local communities in NSW is supported by the findings of this evaluation. It is the start of an important process of building community-level disaster readiness and mutual capabilities within social service NGOs and emergency management agencies to reduce disaster risk together.

There is opportunity within this project for local needs to influence state and federal policy change, as local host and partner organisations work with the peak project lead agencies to problem solve at multiple levels. Alongside this broader scope, the local changes listed above have value on their own and can achieve the project's medium and long-term goals over time, as long as communities and organisations maintain momentum for networking and planning.

Summary of recommendations

The following recommendations are for:

- current or potential future providers of the services piloted in this project, to inform future continuation, replication or expansion of the CSDC project, or
- government and funding agencies responsible for disaster risk reduction, to progress broader lessons learned from this pilot.

1. Service providers take early account of trauma alongside vulnerability in evaluation planning, so that project partners can plan strategies in advance for consulting with target communities on project experiences and outcomes. Trauma affects the usefulness and appropriateness of the focus group format for research and evaluation around specific questions. (In the context of trauma, people's need to debrief and support each other is more immediate than a researcher's goals.) Interviews better suit this context.

   See Section 2.3.

2. Government and funding agencies consider, in the design and resourcing of evaluation frameworks for future disaster risk reduction grant programs, strategic coordination of community research or consultation in communities most affected by disasters – for example via a specific ethics panel (drawing from both community and academic expertise) – which could feasibly connect up related research projects over time. This is on the basis that many stakeholders reported that local populations were feeling "over-researched" in the wake of multiple disasters and multiple resultant strategies and agencies – and that this was not compatible with effective recovery from trauma.

   See Section 2.3.

3. Government and funding agencies address the historic level of disengagement between emergency services and social services identified in this pilot as an ongoing barrier to leveraging the assets of social services regarding vulnerable populations towards better disaster preparedness and response. This requires:

   - cultural change in emergency services' structures and practices
   - ongoing NGO social service sector development regarding disaster risk reduction
   - appropriate community-level resources and support in each of these sectors for the work of collaborating to improve community-level outcomes.

   See Section 4.

4. Government and funding agencies invest in NGO social service sector disaster risk reduction, on an ongoing basis. Social service organisations offer significant infrastructure and expertise for engaging and planning with vulnerable communities – however these NGOs are currently funded to deliver specific services and outcomes for which they are accountable.

   a. To adequately leverage their capabilities towards disaster risk reduction requires annual investment in local coordination and engagement over the long-term. As climate change brings more extreme and frequent disaster events to local communities, it is not realistic or sustainable to expect organisations to include disaster risk reduction as an unfunded component on top of their funded obligations.

b. This includes community-based health, disability, aged care and early childhood education and care services who would benefit from joining up with NGO community services and local emergency management agencies to plan for the disaster readiness of their organisations and their service users.

See Section 4.

5. Government and funding agencies incorporate community development approaches into disaster risk reduction strategy, policy and programs. There is a growing body of research evidence regarding community development. These evidence-informed approaches need to be applied towards building community disaster resilience through organisations who are already well-engaged with high-priority populations. Community development requires an investment over time and should be funded accordingly.

See Section 5.

6. Government and funding agencies continue the services piloted in the CSDC project within its current locations, and consider options to expand the program to new regional locations in NSW.

See Section 5.

7. Government and funding agencies link place-based disaster risk reduction activities with relevant peak bodies in the way they are designed and resourced. Place-based projects need to have a clear line of communication with relevant peak bodies who understand local context and can speak into relevant state or federal policy contexts. The involvement of peak organisations, whether or not as a lead organisation, is a highly effective way to ensure that lessons from local delivery are able to inform central policy, strategy and governance decisions.

See Section 8.1.

8. Service providers consider future governance arrangements – locally and project-wide – to account for key governance functions: advice and support; management of risks, challenges and barriers; and representation, stakeholder communication and advocacy.

See Section 8.2.

9. In the project establishment stage, program providers:

a. workshop with local host and partner organisations the core project activities not subject to place-based adaptation, including but not limited to reporting, evaluation and accountability activities, to create towards collective understanding and ownership of these project elements, and

b. finalise the project's program logic and evaluation plan earlier so that data collection activities can be workshopped in line with Recommendation 1(a) and built into local project planning.

It is noted that longer project timeframes are required to enable these elements to be incorporated into project design.

See Section 8.3.

PART A: BACKGROUND

1. Project Background

The full title of this project is the 'Community Sector Disaster Capability and Resilience Program', which highlights the breadth of its intended outcomes. In practice and henceforth in this report, it will be referred to as the CSDC (Community Sector Disaster Capability) Project.

The CSDC Project is jointly funded by the NSW and Australian Governments through the Local and Regional Stream of the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund (DRRF), a grant funding initiative established under the National Partnership Agreement on Disaster Risk Reduction. The DRRF is administered by the NSW Reconstruction Authority (NSWRA).

The CSDC project aims to strengthen the disaster risk reduction capability of local social service non-government organisations (NGOs) to better support the wellbeing and safety of vulnerable community members (who can be hardest hit by disasters). Place-based NGOs are often involved in meeting needs after a disaster but are rarely formally engaged in emergency management agencies' preventative action and planning to reduce risks and community-based disaster planning and risk reduction efforts go largely unrecognised.

Through its focus on strengthening place-based disaster preparedness and risk reduction among communities and non-government social service organisations, this project is an investment in social infrastructure (Infrastructure Australia, 2019). It applies evidence-informed community development approaches to the issue of building community resilience to the increasingly rapid and extreme cycle of disasters brought about by climate change.

The importance of community development in building disaster resilience is being recognised in government policy. The Australian Government's Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) recognises that "successful climate change adaptation should be place-based, community-led and values-driven – tailored to the affected areas and communities" (DCCEEW, 2024) and has an objective to drive action through collaboration with communities alongside governments and businesses (DEWA, 2021). The NSW Government's *State Disaster Mitigation Plan* recognises the importance of "an integrated and holistic approach to risk reduction" in communities (NSW Reconstruction Authority, 2024).

While the most frequently raised disasters in this project related to COVID and bushfires, floods and other impacts of extreme weather events, any disaster foreseeable for NSW communities is within scope.

1.1 Project intent and implementation design

The project aims to build a collaborative, networked approach to local disaster management, providing an opportunity for local community organisations and the communities they support to utilise their expert knowledge and connections so that disaster planning meets local needs and works for vulnerable groups in the community. It will develop their capacity to identify, assess and mitigate risks as well as strengthen ongoing interactions and exchange with formal disaster management systems.

The project pilots education and risk assessment and strategic planning activities (Section 1.1.2) in four regional locations across NSW which have recently experienced disasters and are at high risk of disasters in future (Section 1.4). As a 'demonstration project', the project includes a focus on developing and trialling new approaches, tools and ways of working to inform future effort to strengthen disaster preparedness and resilience of social service organisations and the communities they engage with and support.

In this context, the project has a strong focus on governance and reporting to ensure activities, successes and learnings were captured in real-time. Emerging evidence and practice experience has informed both the project evaluation and ongoing implementation, through the sharing of learnings and resources across local project locations, by bringing external expertise to issues and barriers through the Project Reference Group and through strategic advocacy.

Project objectives are outlined in the Theory of Change at Section 1.1.1.

1.1.1 Theory of Change

Reducing the risk of social, environmental and economic impacts arising from disasters is a complex problem becoming increasingly difficult as the impacts of climate change take effect around the globe.

The specific problem this project is trying to address relates to the impacts of disasters on vulnerable groups and communities and the lack of integration of non-government community services into disaster management systems and plans.

Vulnerable groups are often the most impacted by disaster. Yet recent disasters in NSW have demonstrated a need for improved risk reduction and effective planning to leverage strengths, mitigate risks and better support vulnerable communities and groups when disasters strike.

Place-based community services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) support and have strong connections to vulnerable groups and households. They understand their strengths, capabilities and vulnerabilities and have provided essential support to local communities during recent disasters. With their specialist skills, strong local knowledge, trust and connections, these services should have a recognised role in all aspects of disaster management to ensure the wellbeing and safety of those most at risk. But recent events in NSW have shown that this role is often overlooked, particularly in the early stages when preventative action can be taken.

An adequately supported, well-equipped and networked community sector is well-placed to work with vulnerable communities, leveraging their experience and strengths, to reduce their exposure to disaster risks and impacts.

The project has been designed to address the gap in community-led engagement and involvement in disaster risk reduction activities and strengthen local disaster planning and risk reduction capabilities to reduce disaster related risks, particularly those impacting vulnerable groups and communities.

Project objectives

To do so, the project activities seek to:

1. Increase understanding of the strengths and disaster risks for local communities, especially people experiencing vulnerability, by undertaking engagement and mapping activities and reviewing lessons learnt during recent disasters.

2. Strengthen organisational and community capacity and networking to assess disaster risk for vulnerable population groups and work with these groups and other local partners to develop skills and reduce risks, enabling locally led and owned place-based disaster risk reduction.

3. Build relationships and promote ongoing collaboration to influence formal emergency management processes, promoting inclusion of the community sector and the vulnerable populations they support in planning and preparatory risk reduction.

As a result, the project will:

- Improve awareness of disaster risks, impacts and strengths in the target locations, particularly relating to vulnerable groups, to strengthen disaster risk reduction planning and efforts
- Support target communities take action to reduce existing disaster risk
- Increase the capability and capacity of the local social service sector to support DRR in their communities
- Increase two-way involvement of local organisations in disaster coordination and communication efforts
- Improve local disaster risk reduction coordination and effectiveness, avoiding duplication and leveraging community and social sector strengths.

These results are aligned to short-term outcomes in the Program Logic at Section 1.1.2.

This will lead to:

- Communities are engaged and equipped with knowledge and capacity to take actions to reduce disaster risk.
- Place-based community risks and needs are identified and prioritised, including for vulnerable groups and communities and those with specific needs.
- Councils and community groups factor disaster risk information into planning and decisions.
- Emergency management processes, plans and structures that are more inclusive of NGO social services sector and the vulnerable populations they support in planning and preparatory risk reduction, and shaped by an understanding of community strengths and vulnerabilities.

1.1.2 Program Logic

The CSDC Program elected to deliver against the Risk Assessment and Strategic Planning and Education outcome areas in the DRRF Program Evaluation Plan. The Program Logic at Figure 1 below describes program activities and outputs in these areas and their intended short, medium and long-term outcomes.

With program activities in place for less than 12 months, the evaluation is looking particularly at achievement or progress towards short-term outcomes.

Figure 1: CSDC Program Logic

Long-Term Outcomes (4+ Years)	Community and NGO social services sector representatives report being actively included in disaster risk recovery systems and processes	Emergency management and disaster risk reduction governance and decisions are improved for the long-term benefit of local communities	Disaster risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities are systematically embedded into local Council planning, investment decisions and business-as-usual	Disaster risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities are systematically embedded into local NGO social services' planning, investment decisions and business-as-usual	Local social sector NGOs and participating community representatives report reduced disaster risks, especially for local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk
Medium-Term Outcomes (2-3 Years)	Councils, NGO social services sector and community groups factor disaster vulnerability and risk into planning and decisions	Stakeholders report improved effectiveness of local disaster risk reduction efforts, especially for local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk	Local disaster risk reduction coordination effectively leverages community and NGO social service sector strengths	Community and NGO social services sector representatives demonstrate capability and capacity in disaster risk reduction and trial new actions to reduce risk	Local disaster management agencies and authorities demonstrate improved identification and understanding of local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk
Short-Term Outcomes (1-2 Years)	Community stakeholders report being more equipped to take action to reduce disaster risk for themselves and others		Emergency management agency and NGO social services sector representatives report improved joint networking, coordination and collaboration to reduce disaster risk	NGO social services sector representatives and emergency management agency representatives report improved NGO social services sector capacity and capability for disaster risk reduction	Community and NGO social services sector representatives report awareness of disaster risks and impacts
Outputs	Local priorities, including target cohorts, are identified to reduce disaster risks disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups and communities	Place-based mapping resources are published, used and regularly reviewed which highlight local disaster management risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacities	Local integrated strategies are established to reduce disaster risks impacting vulnerable groups and communities	Events, activities and/or products (such as tools or resources) relevant to local needs including of specific vulnerable groups	Local community events attended by community members, NGO social service sector representatives and emergency management agency representatives
Activities (Local host orgs)	Review strengths and weaknesses of past local disaster support and identify lessons learned, to inform local disaster risk reduction	Develop place-based mapping resources which highlight local disaster management risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacity	Engage with NGO social service sector and emergency management agencies, to facilitate information exchange, capacity-building and joint planning between sectors	Design and deliver capacity building activities/ approaches for local NGO social service sector	Deliver and/or participate in community engagement events and activities which drive disaster risk awareness, education, communication and/or networking
Activities (Project lead agencies)	Risk Assessment and Strategic Planning	Design and develop a mapping tool	Coordinate communication, information sharing and joint advocacy between local lead agencies	Represent project key messages in state-wide and national disaster risk reduction networks for advocacy, information sharing and problem solving purposes	Education

1.1.3 Implementation Plans

A central implementation plan was prepared in March 2023 (and updated in May) and local project-implementation plans were finalised from August to December 2023. These implementation plans were aligned with the activities and deliverables set out in the funding agreement between NCOSS and the NSW Reconstruction Authority.

Milestones

Project milestones described in the central CSDC Project Implementation Plan are at Table 1 below.

Table 1: Project Milestones and activities

	Milestone	Activities
1	Jun 2023 – 31 Jul 2023	• Project team recruitment and formalisation of agreements with local partner organisations • Adopting a community engagement approach which aligns with project principles, able to capture a diversity of perspectives (including those of community service organisations and vulnerable population groups) and enabling articulation of the community's aspirations, main concerns and specific issues relating to disaster resilience.
2	1 Jul 2023 – 30 Nov 2023	• Stakeholder mapping and engagement. • Activities to map disaster-related strengths, assets, risks, and vulnerabilities in the location in conjunction with local NGO services, local government, and other community members and stakeholder representatives, with a focus on vulnerable population groups and communities. Working with NCOSS CSDC Program Officer to compile results. • Engaging with local NGO services and other stakeholders to identify and deliver DRR activities aimed at building service resilience and that of the vulnerable population groups. • Reviewing past disaster support for lessons learned to inform DRR for vulnerable groups. • Collecting and reporting monitoring and evaluation data.
3	1 Nov 2023 – 30 April 2024	• Delivering the Program of activities including capacity building activities, tools and resources. • Strengthening community sector engagement and linkages with Emergency Management sector. • Providing advice on the development of a mapping tool developed through the project and assisting the Central Project Team in translating local mapping information to the tool. • Collecting and reporting monitoring and evaluation data.
4	1 May 2024 – 30 June 2024	Activities: • Final implementation of capacity building activities, resources, approaches and tools and project transition planning. • Final evaluation data collection and evaluation draft report review/ feedback. • Final project report • Financial Acquittal (July 2024)

1.2 Project terminology

To assist with the project-related language and terminology in this report a glossary of terms and acronyms is at Appendix 2 – Glossary of terms and acronyms.

A descriptive term in this report that requires upfront definition is 'vulnerable', as the CSDC project aimed to improve identification and prioritisation of vulnerable groups in local disaster risk reduction. In the context of this project and evaluation, 'vulnerable groups' refers to people or groups within the community for whom disasters pose the greatest risk, due to factors such as age, disability, income or cultural background.

Vulnerability is not inherent in these life circumstances or experiences – it is a term to describe the structural/ social inequalities and subsequent poorer outcomes that these people are at higher risk of experiencing during or after a disaster.

Outcome measures in this evaluation are for "community stakeholders", "NGO social services sector" and "emergency management agencies". These are defined at Appendix 2 – Glossary of terms and acronyms.

1.3   Project governance and reporting

In the context of the 'demonstration' nature of the CSDC project, reporting and meeting requirements reflected the need to capture project successes, learnings and issues as soon as possible to inform ongoing project delivery, to enable resources and strategies to be shared across locations, and to inform strategic advocacy.

1.3.1 Governance

The governance structure of the CSDC project comprises:

- Project Reference Group (PRG) of stakeholders with broad interests and expertise, offering diverse project connections, advocacy networks and advice sources. The purpose of the PRG in its Terms of Reference, is to provide: practice guidance and advice; a networked approach to implementation; and support to achieve intended project outcomes.
- Local Reference Groups were a recommended governance structure for CSDC locations. One pilot location – Northern Rivers – established a Local Reference Group for high-level local advice and guidance on project directions and implementation.
- Project lead agencies were responsible for: supporting program establishment; addressing emerging implementation issues; providing project delivery advice and guidance; sharing information and lessons learned across pilot locations; and 12 other responsibilities outlined in their Tripartite Agreement.

1.3.2 Reporting

NCOSS led delivery of the following project reporting to NSWRA in line with contract requirements:

- Central (project) and local (sub) implementation plans
- Risk Management Plan, including Risk Register
- Monitoring and Evaluation Plan
- Milestone Reports (a report was submitted for each of the three project milestones)
- Final Report and Evaluation Report
- Financial reporting and final Financial Acquittal.

Other reporting led by NCOSS included:

- Local host organisations' monthly progress reports to NCOSS
- NCOSS progress reports to the PRG
- CSDC project reports to the NCOSS Board.

1.4   Project delivery organisations

The CSDC project implements a place-based approach within the parameters of the partnership structure required under the DRRF Pathway 2, "for the purpose of maximising the reach and efficacy of strategic, targeted, place-based risk reduction projects" (Resilience NSW (now NSW Reconstruction Authority), 2022).

Project Leads	Local Host Organisations	Local Partner Organisations	
State-wide **LCSA**	Northern Rivers **Resilient Lismore**	Northern Rivers **Kyogle Together**	Northern Rivers **Rekindling The Spirit**
State-wide **NCOSS**	Snowy Monaro **Monaro Family Support Service**	Northern Rivers **Mid- Richmond Neighbourhood Centre**	Northern Rivers **Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre**
State-wide **AbSec**	Hawkesbury **Peppercorn**	Hawkesbury **Bligh Park Community Centre**	
	Bega/ Eurobodalla **Katungul Aboriginal Corp.**	Bega/ Eurobodalla **Eden Community Access Centre**	

1.4.1 Project lead agencies

The CSDC project is led by a partnership of three NSW peak bodies highly experienced in providing support and advocacy for local NGO social services.

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS)

NCOSS is the peak body for the social services sector in NSW. NCOSS undertakes research and policy analysis and advocates on behalf of over 280 member organisations and the broader social service sector for policy and service reform to alleviate poverty and disadvantage in NSW.

NCOSS has been the CSDC project lead and commissioning organisation, hosting a two-person central Project Team. Responsibilities have included: implementation design; central project governance and reporting; identifying, engaging and supporting suitable local host organisations; evaluation and monitoring; and strategic advice and engagement to support local projects and systemic change.

Local Community Services Association (LCSA)

LCSA is the peak body of Neighbourhood and Community Centres in NSW. It represents around 200 locally managed neighbourhood or community centres and not-for-profit organisations that share a community development and socially inclusive approach to the delivery and provision of services, as well as activities for socially isolated and disadvantaged local communities.

LCSA responsibilities in the CSDC project included: helping with the selection of local host organisations; cultural advice and guidance; identifying and helping to develop disaster risk reduction resources; assistance with coordinated processes to review previous disaster service delivery and lessons learned; and participation in project governance, monitoring and evaluation.

NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation (AbSec)

AbSec is the peak organisation for Aboriginal children and families in NSW. It is an Aboriginal controlled not-for-profit organisation that works to support a quality Aboriginal community-controlled child and family

sector to deliver needed supports in communities. Their advocacy to ensure that Aboriginal perspectives are included in government policy and reform directions is informed by their membership base.

AbSec responsibilities in the CSDC project included: helping with the selection of local host organisations; cultural advice and guidance regarding Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and Aboriginal communities' disaster risk reduction; identifying and helping to develop disaster risk reduction resources; assistance with coordinated processes to review previous disaster service delivery and lessons learned; and participation in project governance, monitoring and evaluation.

1.4.2 Local host organisations

Local host organisations were identified through an Expression of Interest (EOI) process commenced by Project lead agencies in March 2023 for the Northern Rivers, Hawkesbury and South Coast regions. The EOIs received were assessed in each target location by panels comprising representatives from each Project Lead Organisation and one local independent government representative for each location.

During the EOI process, the EOI Assessment Panel for the Southern Region (which included the Reconstruction Authority Local Regional Manager) made the decision to split the Southern Region into two target areas – Snowy Monaro and Bega/ Eurobodalla – to account for geographic distribution of diverse small communities across a large area, with different vulnerabilities, disaster risk reduction priorities and community service networks.

Local Host Organisations were selected based on their demonstrated skill in building community capacity, collaboration with local services and leadership on disaster recovery and preparedness.

Resilient Lismore – Northern Rivers

Resilient Lismore is a community-run organisation that formed during the 2017 floods in Lismore, NSW. Its aims are to:

- support community-led disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience
- help Lismore and surrounding communities develop their capacity to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from crises and disasters;
- build community resilience to prevent the impact of poverty, disadvantage and suffering that results from natural disasters;
- mitigate the impacts of poverty, disadvantage and suffering that results from natural disasters through the mobilisation of spontaneous offers of help (volunteers, financial, material) in the recovery effort.

Peppercorn Services – Hawkesbury

Peppercorn Services (Peppercorn) delivers services to people in the Hawkesbury Local Government Area (LGA) and surrounding areas. Peppercorn has a vision and mission that emphasise connection and social inclusion. Its services target vulnerable groups in the local community, towards:

- stronger, inclusive and cohesive communities
- flexible services that adapt to changing community needs
- encouragement of participation in community, cultural and civic life
- access and equity to services that strengthen wellbeing.

Monaro Family Support Service – Snowy Monaro

Monaro Family Support Service (MFSS) delivers services to individuals, children, young people and families in the Snowy Monaro region. Comprehensive services, local relationships and representation/ advocacy are three of seven core pillars of the organisation's work.

Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health and Community Services – Bega/ Eurobodalla

Katungul Aboriginal Corporation Regional Health and Community Services (Katungul) is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) that provides culturally appropriate health care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on the Far South Coast of NSW from Batemans Bay to Eden. Its vision is for Aboriginal people to live healthy lives enriched by a strong living culture, dignity and justice and for Katungul's work to be recognised as a driving force in achieving this.

1.5 Location based design and intent

1.5.1 Northern Rivers

Resilient Lismore focused on local social service NGOs and consulted with, rather than worked directly with, community members (Resilient Lismore is a direct provider of disaster recovery services outside of the project). This 'help the helpers' approach was a place-based response to the unique circumstances of the Northern Rivers region:

- A large number of community service organisations and community representative groups – some that have been active for a long time, and some that were established as a direct response to the 2022 flood event and its aftermath

- A community services sector highly disrupted and impacted by recent disasters, with significant challenges to staffing, changing or repairing premises and organisational resilience

- A project footprint which required mapping, linking and profiling community services across three LGAs for the first time

- An identified need in local services, especially in Lismore, for inter- and cross-organisational disaster risk reduction, capacity-building and preparedness work, with intended flow-on effects for the communities they work with

- A high level of trauma in the community, especially within vulnerable cohorts, with individuals and communities at varying stages along the pathway of disaster recovery and many not ready to consider future disasters – as revealed through the engagement phase of the project.

Northern Rivers focused project resources into bringing the NGO social service sector together, linking up local government, community sector and academic disaster preparedness initiatives through awareness raising and network (e.g. via their Summit and regular newsletter) and making inroads into engaging community and social service sector representatives in emergency management planning.

1.5.2 Hawkesbury

Peppercorn's project focus was to:

- build disaster awareness and capability in vulnerable groups and communities

- research local disaster risk reduction strengths and gaps across the NGO social services and emergency management sectors.

They had an existing collaborative relationship with Council and local stakeholders in emergency management and were already delivering recovery support and the Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) service model in the community.

Through the CSDC project, Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services delivered joint community workshops and undertook qualitative research on the disaster readiness capacity and needs of community representative groups and social services NGOs in the Hawkesbury, which was the foundation for strengthened relationships and engagement in the latter stages of local project implementation.

1.5.3   Snowy Monaro

MFSS made an early decision to focus their work on community and NGO social service sector capacity building and building strategic connections between emergency management authorities and the social services sector. Risk assessment activities related to mapping local vulnerabilities, needs and strengths and to establishing lessons learned from previous disaster events were less of a focus within the limited funding envelope (within Southern region funding split between Snowy Monaro and Bega/ Eurobodalla) and delivery timeframes. This was partly because the local service delivery environment was less complex to map compared with other locations, with a smaller network of local community services, and partly because the activities could be informed by previous work by MFSS especially lessons learned from previous events.

1.5.4   Bega/ Eurobodalla

Alongside the broad project structure of delivering workshops and activities to build up community capacity and establishing ways of working with local emergency management agencies, Katungul started engagement to develop a regional program of cultural burning in the south coast, focusing in the first instance on Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) and key government stakeholders. This was in the context of some active cultural burning programs in the region that Katungul sought to join up, expand across LALCs and link with contemporary scientific research evidence so that benefits and outcomes could be articulated in a comprehensive way to relevant decision makers. Establishment of cultural burning was seen by Katungul to have bushfire risk reduction benefits for the local environment and communities, and seen to address vulnerabilities in local First Nations communities by creating more opportunities for meaningful employment and connection to culture and Country.

Eden Community Access Centre (ECAC) commenced work in December 2023 to deliver community and NGO social service sector networking and capacity-building towards improved risk assessment and planning.

2. Evaluation

2.1 Purpose

Project evaluation objectives specified by the DRRF are to assess:

1. The extent to which the project has been implemented as intended, and whether intended outputs have been or are expected to be delivered

2. Assess the project effectiveness in achieving its objectives, outputs and outcomes

3. Assess the project appropriateness in meeting the stakeholder needs, and

4. Assess the replicability and scalability of the project model to other regions

2.1.1 Key evaluation questions

In line with DRRF Monitoring and Evaluation requirements, Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) for this CSDC project evaluation are:

1. Does the project deliver its intended short, medium or long-term outcomes?
   a. Specifically, for 'Education' activities:
      - Participating organisations and communities have increased understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk impacting vulnerable groups
      - Risk, strengths and capability information is shared and provides the basis for appropriate and coordinated DRR strategies and planning locally
      - Participating organisations and community groups factor disaster risk information into their work and trial new risk reduction actions
   b. Specifically, for 'Risk assessment and strategic planning' activities:
      - Hazards, vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations in communities are identified and prioritised.
      - Risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities are systematically embedded into business as usual practices
      - Socially inclusive stakeholders and beneficiaries' engagement in risk identification and management.

2. What were the barriers in implementing the project? What are the future issues, uncertainties, interdependencies, and risks in upscaling and replicating the project?

3. What lessons can we learn for future work in disaster risk reduction:
   a. for participating NGO social services?
   b. for Project Partners and funders?
   c. for Emergency management and other local disaster management stakeholders?

This evaluation addresses the following additional KEQs:

4. What (if any) working relationships and/or networks are newly active or strengthened as a result of this project?

5. What (if any) local innovations and positive changes to disaster risk reduction can be described from this project?

2.2 Methodology

This is a mixed-methods process and outcomes evaluation comprising: desktop review of relevant project documentation; and collection of qualitative data – via online survey, qualitative interviews and focus

groups – from target local areas, including from lead local agencies, NGO social service sector representatives, emergency management agency representatives and community representatives.

The CSDC Project – while focused on core aims, outcomes and deliverables – is designed to be adapted to meet local disaster risk reduction needs in its selected locations. Evaluation approaches were adjusted locally to take account of local deliverables, implementation approaches and factors which may impact data collection (such as geographical remoteness, and the presence or absence of local networks through which to recruit community stakeholders).

2.2.1 Process Evaluation

Desktop review

A desktop review of key project documents was conducted as part of process evaluation. Documents reviewed are at **Appendix 3** – List of documents, desktop review.

Workshop

A workshop was convened on 13 February 2024 with key project stakeholders from NCOSS, AbSec, LCSA, local lead NGO representatives and the NSW Reconstruction Authority to test findings emerging from the desktop review related to project implementation and explore implementation strengths and barriers, project sustainability and lessons learned.

A summary slide deck of process evaluation and workshop findings was submitted as an interim evaluation report on 26 February 2024. Findings informed project implementation for the remaining period of the project as well as NCOSS's application to the Disaster Ready Fund for a project to extend and build on project achievements.

2.2.2 Outcomes Evaluation

An outcomes evaluation was conducted in April and May 2024 comprising surveys, focus group and interviews, detailed below. Evaluation periods were staggered across locations to co-ordinate in-person interviews and focus groups and take account of culminating project events in each location as described below.

Project activities continued after the evaluation data collection periods in each location. These are described as far as possible but stakeholder experiences and outcomes are not measured for post-evaluation activities.

Surveys

Online project evaluation surveys were conducted in each location. With the exception of the Hawkesbury, the survey process that was developed to complement final project activities was:

- following each location's culminating event (summit or workshop) a combined event and project evaluation survey was circulated to attendees, with a discrete project evaluation survey sent to project stakeholders not on event circulation lists, and

- surveys gave the option for stakeholders to volunteer their contact details if they wished to be approached to participate in an evaluation interview or focus group, and interview visits to locations were timed to be at least one week after surveys were circulated so that these volunteers could be followed up.

In the Hawkesbury a project evaluation survey was circulated by the local host organisation independent of their culminating symposium, and event feedback survey results from both sector events (Community Organisations Breakfast and Dismiss the Myths Disaster Scenario Symposium) were analysed.

Event feedback survey results for the Bega/ Eurobodalla's Important Document Storage information sessions for community members were also analysed for this evaluation.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews

Interviewees were asked open questions about their perspectives of project's successes, challenges and also about their particular roles in the project.

Interviews were conducted in person or online as suited the interviewee.

This evaluation report is informed by 46 qualitative interviews held with community members, NGO social service sector representatives, emergency management agency representatives and other disaster management stakeholders including in local government, and other stakeholders as locally or centrally relevant. In line with a plan to hold at least nine interviews in each project location and 4 interviews with central project stakeholders:

- 13 interviews were held with Northern Rivers stakeholders
- 9 interviews with Hawkesbury stakeholders
- 10 interviews with Snowy Monaro stakeholders
- 9 interviews with Bega/ Eurobodalla stakeholders
- 5 interviews with central project stakeholders across project lead agencies and the Project Reference Group.

Focus groups

Four semi-structured focus groups were intended – one in each of the four locations to explore emerging issues, challenges and opportunities. These were to target the same stakeholder groups as the qualitative interviews, bringing them together in a focus group setting for cross-sector or diverse group discussion.

One focus group was convened in the Northern Rivers. Focus groups did not progress in the Hawkesbury, Snowy Monaro or Bega/ Eurobodalla for reasons outlined at Sections 2.3.4 and 2.3.5.

2.3   Limitations

2.3.1 Timing

Delayed project timeframes (described at Section 9) have impacted evaluation activities.

Finalisation of the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan took place after central and local implementation plans were finalised, reducing opportunity to integrate program logic elements and data collection strategies into program implementation.

Local host organisations had been operational for 7-12 months at the time that data collection activities commenced for the final evaluation report. These relatively short operation periods combined with the project purpose of achieving change through effective local networks and relationships, built by developing trust over time, are important context for findings on the program's short-term outcomes (1-2 years) and progress towards medium-term outcomes (2-3 years).

2.3.2 Project lead agency roles

The full scope of project lead agencies' activities were not anticipated in the initial contract schedule and implementation plan, particularly regarding their level of engagement with government agencies interested in local disaster risk reduction approaches and outcomes. As a result, the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan has not fully measured the extent or impact of project lead agencies' work in this project.

2.3.3 Population size

The volume of survey responses in each project region was roughly in line with population size of the target LGAs – that is, higher numbers of survey responses were received from higher-density locations.

2.3.4 Measuring program impacts and outcomes for community members

Direct engagement with community members for evaluation surveys, interviews and focus groups was limited, and less than planned. Barriers to direct data collection with community members included the following.

Nature of project engagement

In some locations, there was little if any direct work with community members, for place-based reasons outlined in respective sub-sections of Section 3 above.

Where direct community engagement was undertaken with vulnerable communities, the work was often integrated with regular service activities or community events as a way to gradually introduce ideas about disaster readiness in the context of trauma and ongoing disaster recovery, as described below. For example, local host organisations engaged via:

- 'pop-up' information stalls at community festivals, shows and events
- leveraging other social service programs and established groups to engage vulnerable cohorts (e.g. disability, parents and babies, Aboriginal, people in remote locations) and volunteers, including P-CEP activities, where P-CEP was being delivered under a separate program
- in the Snowy Monaro region, the CSDC project was implemented in close alignment with another DRRF-funded project being delivered by the local Council – integrated as seamlessly as possible in terms of community members' experiences of support.

This is an appropriate community development approach but means it would have been difficult for community members to articulate a direct program experience and/or personal impact.

Vulnerability, trauma and disaster recovery

The project targeted people in local communities at highest risk of trauma and prolonged disaster recovery experiences. In line with their duty of care, local host organisations were careful not to refer individuals or groups for whom interviews or focus groups might raise difficult memories or ongoing struggles.

Trust

A strong value underpinning the work at every level of this project is that individual and community disaster risk reduction is best achieved through the establishment of effective local relationships. In the event of a disaster, people collaborate better and more quickly when they already trust each other.

In order to maintain the trust and respect that their communities invest in them, local host and partner organisations are careful not to draw too heavily on vulnerable community groups. They are conscious of the volume of people and organisations who visit their local community with the intent of collecting qualitative data by asking community members to repeat, reflect on and explore their experiences of, or closely related to, the trauma of previous disaster events. As independent program evaluators, we were in the position of highlighting this shared value as a program strength and also recognising that we were making the kind of request that required local host organisations to draw careful boundaries.

2.3.5 Trauma

In each location to a greater or lesser extent, trauma from previous disaster events impacted data collection activities not only with community members but with a broad range of stakeholders. Data collection took

place in the context of some participants' active, ongoing recovery from previous events. This limited the usefulness and appropriateness of focus group data collection in particular.

2.3.6 Recommendations

The following recommendations are to inform future continuation, replication or expansion of the CSDC project, or to progress broader lessons learned from this pilot for government and funding agencies responsible for disaster risk reduction.

1. Program providers take early account of trauma alongside vulnerability in evaluation planning, so that project partners can plan strategies in advance for consulting with target communities on project experiences and outcomes. Trauma affects the usefulness and appropriateness of the focus group format for research and evaluation around specific questions. (In the context of trauma, people's need to debrief and support each other is more immediate than a researcher's goals.) Interviews better suit this context.

2. Government and funding agencies consider, in the design and resourcing of evaluation frameworks for future disaster risk reduction grant programs, strategic coordination of community research or consultation in communities most affected by disasters – for example via a specific ethics panel (drawing from both community and academic expertise) – which could feasibly connect up related research projects over time. This is on the basis that many stakeholders reported that local populations were feeling "over-researched" in the wake of multiple disasters and multiple resultant strategies and agencies – and that this was not compatible with effective recovery from trauma.

PART B: KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS

3.   Outcomes

Key Evaluation Question 1

Does the project deliver its intended short, medium or long-term outcomes?

   a.   Specifically, for 'Education' activities:

- Participating organisations and communities have increased understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk impacting vulnerable groups

- Risk, strengths and capability information is shared and provides the basis for appropriate and coordinated DRR strategies and planning locally

- Participating organisations and community groups factor disaster risk information into their work and trial new risk reduction actions

   b.   Specifically, for 'Risk assessment and strategic planning' activities:

- Hazards, vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations in communities are identified and prioritized.

- Risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities are systematically embedded into business as usual practices

- Socially inclusive stakeholders and beneficiaries' engagement in risk identification and management.

The CSDC project was structured to encourage place-based project design and responsiveness to the needs identified in target communities. As a result, local host and partner organisations focused project resources into different outcome areas. Focus areas for each location are highlighted throughout Section 3 below, as relevant.

As a broad measure of initial project impact, survey respondents in each region were asked their level of satisfaction with the project in their area. Results at Table 2 below suggest the project was well-received especially in the Snowy Monaro region where outward-facing activities were prioritised (see Section 1.3.3). The low number of survey responses limits the weight that can be given to these indicative responses. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that no-one responded to express dissatisfaction.

Table 2: Stakeholder level of satisfaction with project

Satisfaction rate	Northern Rivers	Hawkesbury	Snowy Monaro	Bega & Eurobodalla
	N=20	N=10	N=8	N=4
Very satisfied	30%	30%	62.5%	25%
Satisfied	65%	40%	25%	75%
Unsure	5%	30%	12.5%	0
Dissatisfied	0	0	0	0
Very dissatisfied	0	0	0	0

Summary outcome finding

In its short period of operation the CSDC project:

- delivered on education outcomes especially with regard to participating organisations' and groups' understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk impacting vulnerable groups (Section 3.1)

- initiated the sharing of risk, strength and capability information to inform local disaster risk reduction coordination and planning especially in the second half of the project, noting that at the time of evaluation stakeholders in every location were ready for further work in this area (3.2)

- supported participating organisations and community groups to factor disaster risk information into their work and trial new risk reduction actions, and introduced new ways of working in their local areas, notably joint social sector and emergency management agency capacity-building events for vulnerable community groups and introduction of P-CEP service model for vulnerable people especially people with disability (3.3)

- conducted research and analysis into the disaster-related hazards, vulnerabilities, needs and priorities in their community and took actions based on that information (3.4)

- took steps to embed risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities into local stakeholders' business as usual, with outcomes data on these activities limited at the time of evaluation (3.5)

- supported socially inclusive stakeholders and beneficiaries' engagement in risk identification and management to the best of their ability, with some local progress, in the face of complex systemic barriers to community involvement in formal risk identification and management activities (3.6).

3.1 Understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk for vulnerable groups

	Key Evaluation Question	**Does the program deliver its intended short, medium and long-term outcomes?** **Specifically, for education activities, that:-** • **participating organisations and communities have increased understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk impacting vulnerable groups?**
Program Logic	**Relevant service activities**	• Deliver and/or participate in community engagement events and activities which drive disaster risk awareness, education, communication and/or networking. • Design and deliver capacity building activities/ approaches for local NGO social service sector.
	Relevant outputs	• Local community events attended by community members, NGO social service sector representatives and emergency management agency representatives • Events, activities and/or products (such as tools or resources) relevant to local needs including of specific vulnerable groups
	Short-term outcomes	• Community and NGO social services sector representatives report awareness of disaster risks and impacts • NGO social services sector representatives and emergency management agency representatives report improved NGO social services sector capacity and capability for disaster risk reduction.
	Medium-term outcomes	• Community and NGO social services sector representatives demonstrate capability and capacity in disaster risk reduction and trial new actions to reduce risk. • Local disaster management agencies and authorities demonstrate improved identification and understanding of local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk.

3.1.1 Overall project

The project aimed to engage community and NGO social services to improve their understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk, especially for vulnerable groups, measurable at 12 months of service delivery. None of the four locations were operational for 12 months at the time of evaluation.

Internal project stakeholders spoke highly of early guidance from project lead agencies on scoping local engagement and defining 'community', including local stakeholder contact details, a stakeholder analysis tool and a workshop on the 'Harwood' community engagement method. This support assisted local host and partner organisations to target organisations with service users who are vulnerable to poor outcomes in a disaster which may not traditionally have connected to their service. In this way, childcare services, health, aged care services and disability services were brought into project activities.

Activities

In addition to the events and activities described in each location in Sections 3.1.2 to 3.1.5 below, local host and partner organisations carried out continuous engagement with local social service organisations, individually and via local network meetings. This work was resource intensive and critical to the project's community development approach to progressing project outcomes. External stakeholders raised this continuous engagement in evaluation interviews as something they appreciated. They reported that it served a range of purposes beyond project awareness and recruitment to project activities, including

fostering a sense of collective ownership for the project and its purpose, and re-instigating local networking on shared goals that had reduced in recent years due to factors including COVID-19. There were place-specific challenges and also shared challenges, outlined in Section 4 below.

Engagement and capacity-building of community members was a particular focus for the Snowy Monaro region. MFSS delivered a broad range of community-based activities and workshops, and community stakeholders spoke in evaluation interviews about changes they saw in the short time the project had been active in their area (see Section 3.1.4).

Culminating project events for NGO social service sector

In each location, community sector engagement and consultations culminated in a sector workshop or summit on disaster preparedness. While these events were significantly different in their size and format, they shared the purpose of building on each project's engagement to identify local issues, risks and strengths and awareness-raising activities. Each contributed to steps towards collective action on disaster readiness planning for vulnerable groups in the community. Event feedback survey results outlined at Table 3 below indicate that these events were well-received. Event satisfaction rates are not compared in detail across regions, given differences in local timeframes, approaches and use of project resources.

Table 3: Participant level of satisfaction with culminating project event

Satisfaction rate	Northern Rivers	Hawkesbury*		Snowy Monaro	Bega & Eurobodalla
	N=74	N=18	N=7	N=17	N=27
Very satisfied	62%	50%	29%	59%	26%
Satisfied	35%	39%	71%	41%	59%
Unsure	3%	11%			11%
Dissatisfied	1.4% (1)				
Very dissatisfied					3% (1)

Combined results of regional surveys at Figure 3 and Figure 4 below suggest a moderate improvement in awareness of disaster risk management and increased self-reported expertise.

Survey results show that the rate of awareness of disaster risk management generally improved for project stakeholders (Figure 3). On a scale of 1-5 from 'not at all improved' to 'greatly improved', 40% of project stakeholders and 44% of event attendees gave an answer of 4 or 5 (improved or greatly improved). The most frequently selected response across project and event respondents was 3 (somewhat improved). Only a small number of stakeholders indicated that the project overall or culminating sector events had not at all improved their awareness of disaster risk management (this could represent stakeholders in NGOs or emergency management agencies working directly in disaster preparedness).

Figure 3: To what extent has awareness of disaster risk management improved from the project/ culminating sector event (combined)
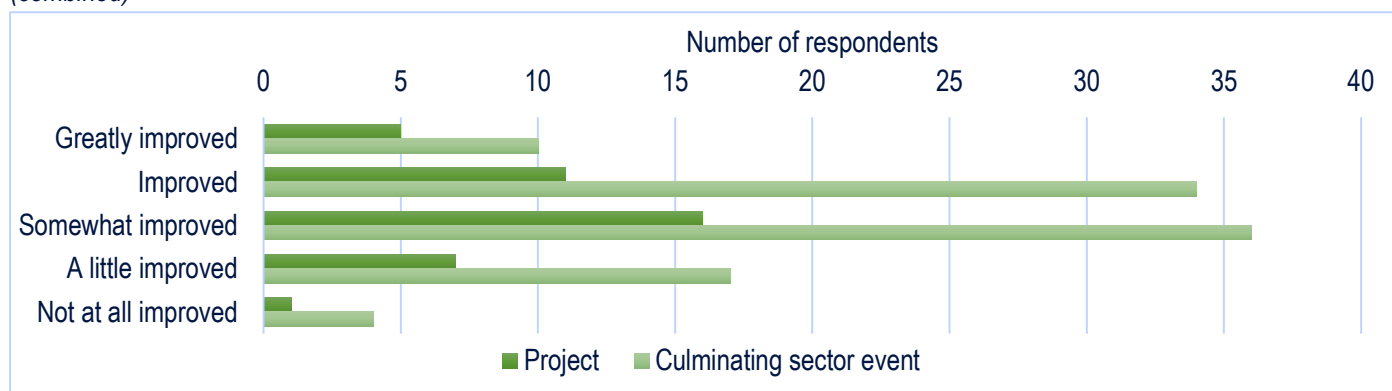
Survey respondents in each region were asked to rate their expertise in disaster risk management, before and then after their involvement with the project. Overall, respondents' self-reported expertise increased from a median level of 'competent' to a median level of 'proficient' and the 4 stakeholders who identified a 'novice' level of expertise indicated an increase in expertise as a result of the project, meaning that no stakeholder rated their expertise as 'novice' after their project involvement. Project involvement did not impact the number of stakeholders who identified as expert in disaster risk management. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: How respondents rate their level of expertise in disaster risk management, before and now (combined)
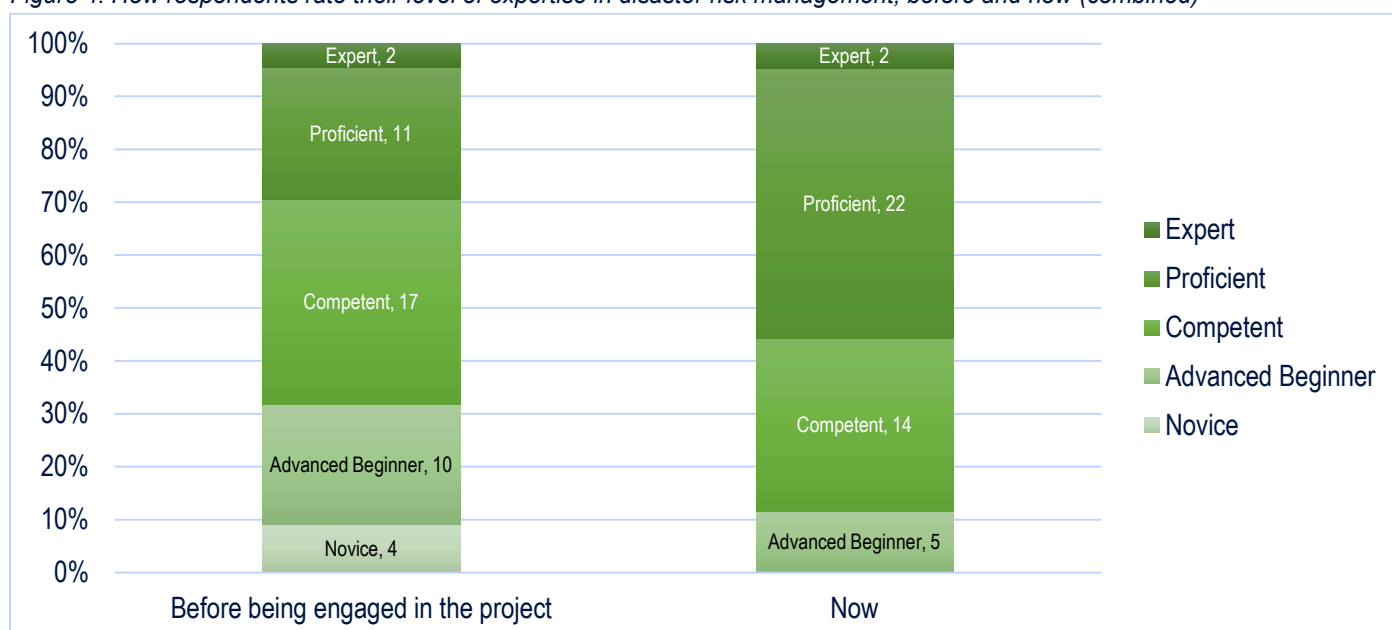
Part of evaluation of improved capacity for this project is whether emergency management agency representatives report improved capacity and capability within the NGO sector for disaster risk reduction. Most emergency management agency representatives interviewed for this project worked on the community capacity-building project activities in the project. Some of those who attended the culminating workshops and summits commented positively on the network building and collective momentum for disaster readiness that took place in those events. One was confident in reporting that the local culminating project event in their area had improved NGO social sector capacity and capability in disaster risk reduction, and also noted that concrete actions had been established from that event towards improved capability in the longer term, with commitments made to implement regular communication and information sharing between emergency management and NGO social services going forward. Some (from different locations) had a sense that not enough concrete actions or future plans had come from their local event, due to the end of project funding.

3.1.2 Northern Rivers

NGO social services sector understanding and capacity

Capacity building activities targeting the NGO social services sector in the Northern Rivers location led by Resilient Lismore were:

- establishment of a database of social service NGOs in the project footprint
- initial sector workshop to identify disaster vulnerabilities, strengths, needs and priorities
- Disaster Ready Together Summit, on disaster recovery and preparedness, informed by sector engagement and findings of previous workshop on local needs and priorities
- monthly sector newsletter to raise awareness of local preparedness work and initiatives
- post-Summit check-in workshop (post-evaluation)
- commencement (post-evaluation) of a Lismore Floodplain NGOs Evacuation project for collective disaster readiness planning
- region-wide Disability Inclusive Emergency Planning (DIEP) Forum to initiate a social services sector roll-out of Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) training
- leading the establishment of a P-CEP network and fostering P-CEP training within the sector.

In line with trends in combined survey findings, Northern Rivers survey responses suggest that stakeholders' awareness of disaster risk management was mostly improved by project involvement (Figure 5). One-third of project respondents and 38% of event respondents from the target LGAs rated their improvement as 4 or 5 (improved or greatly improved). As most survey respondents rated their improved awareness as 3 or higher, this suggests that the Northern Rivers generally targeted the right stakeholders and improved their engagement with disaster risk management.

This is reinforced by the project evaluation survey finding that most respondents reported an increase in their expertise in disaster risk management as a result of project involvement (Figure 6).

Figure 5: To what extent has awareness of disaster risk management improved from the project/ Summit? (Northern Rivers)
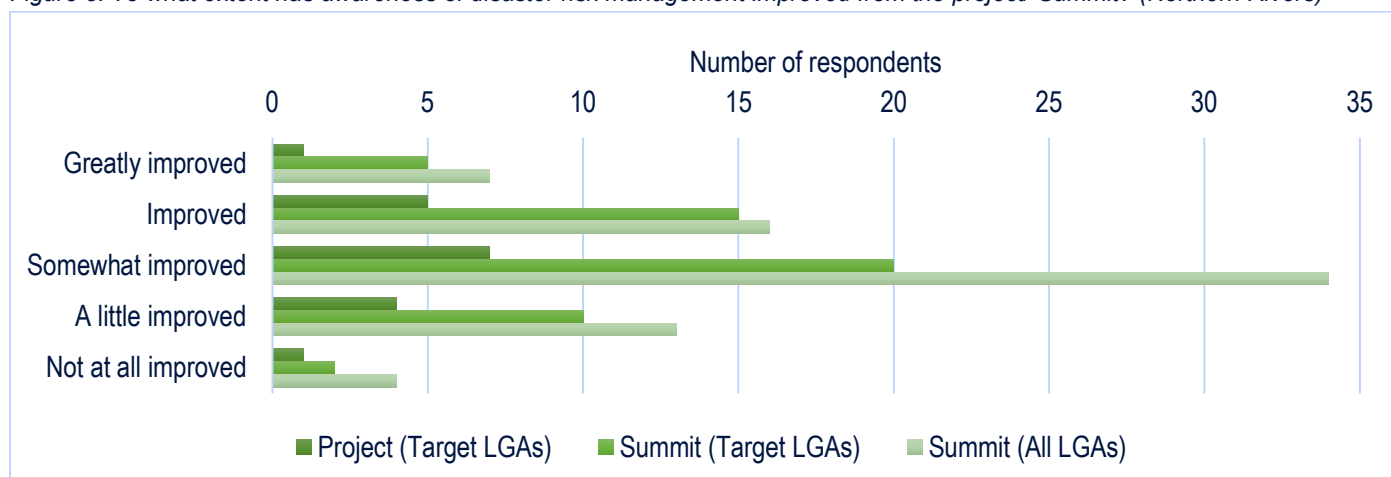
Figure 6: How respondents rate their level of expertise in disaster risk management, before and now (Northern Rivers)

In survey feedback from the Northern Rivers Disaster Ready Together Summit on what about the event was valuable to their organisation, 60% of respondents from the target LGAs nominated 'knowledge about disaster risk reduction' and 25% nominated 'awareness of local risks'. Recognition of knowledge about disaster risk reduction from this event, involving 22 sessions and 60 presenters over two days, was higher than in other project locations.

In interviews, NGO community sector stakeholders stated that project activities – especially the Summit and its preceding sector workshop to identify disaster risks, needs and priorities – improved their understanding of the disaster risks in their local area and how the risks are experienced by vulnerable groups such as First Nations communities. They also reported a more comprehensive understanding of the different facets of disaster-related vulnerability for the cohorts they worked with (eg social isolation, economic vulnerability, navigating legal and insurance systems), and how they might work together to address these. They highlighted the presentations by local universities as valuable in helping them understand the evidence base for local disaster experiences and disaster management initiatives, which they hope to utilise in the future.

Community understanding and capacity

The Northern Rivers project did not focus project resources to risk reduction capacity-building aimed at community members, for reasons outlined at Section 1.5.1. Five focus groups were convened with community members at the start of the project, with a focus on vulnerable cohorts as part of assessing community disaster risk related needs, strengths and vulnerabilities. Important information was gained from some of these focus groups, with two reportedly less productive as a result of vulnerable community members' trauma from previous disaster events, and poor (ongoing for some) disaster recovery outcomes.

The Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) presentation at the Summit, the region-wide DIEP Forum and leadership in establishing networks, encouraging training and supporting practitioners, was generally positive received by stakeholders including those from disaster management agencies and authorities. Stakeholders considered this model to be a practical tool for supporting vulnerable community members to prepare an individualised disaster management plan. It was seen to improve NGO social services' capacity to work directly with their service users on disaster risk reduction, and to directly improve individual community members' capacity for disaster risk reduction. As in other locations, P-CEP was a central element of delivering outcomes related to disaster risk capability improvement in vulnerable groups.

3.1.3 Hawkesbury

NGO social services sector understanding and capacity

Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services delivered NGO social service sector capacity building through:

- Community Organisations Breakfast comprising disaster preparedness presentations and small-group workshops
- 30 qualitative interviews with local NGO social service organisations
- 'Dismiss the Myths' Disaster Knowledge Symposium event for emergency management agencies to respond to issues and questions raised through the engagement phase of the project
- final project event at Hawkesbury Connect Interagency to present project report, tools and resources and provide opportunities to explore collaborative action beyond the project.

A higher proportion of event and project evaluation survey respondents in the Hawkesbury reported improved awareness of disaster management (Figure 7). 70% of project participants (N=10) rated their awareness improvement as 4 or 5 out of 5 – 'greatly improved' or 'improved', compared to 40% of overall project participants (Figure 3).

Event feedback on the Disaster Knowledge Symposium was more in line with overall project results for culminating sector events, with 4 out of 7 respondents rating their awareness improvement as 'somewhat improved'.

Figure 7: To what extent has awareness of disaster risk management improved from the project/ Symposium? (Hawkesbury)
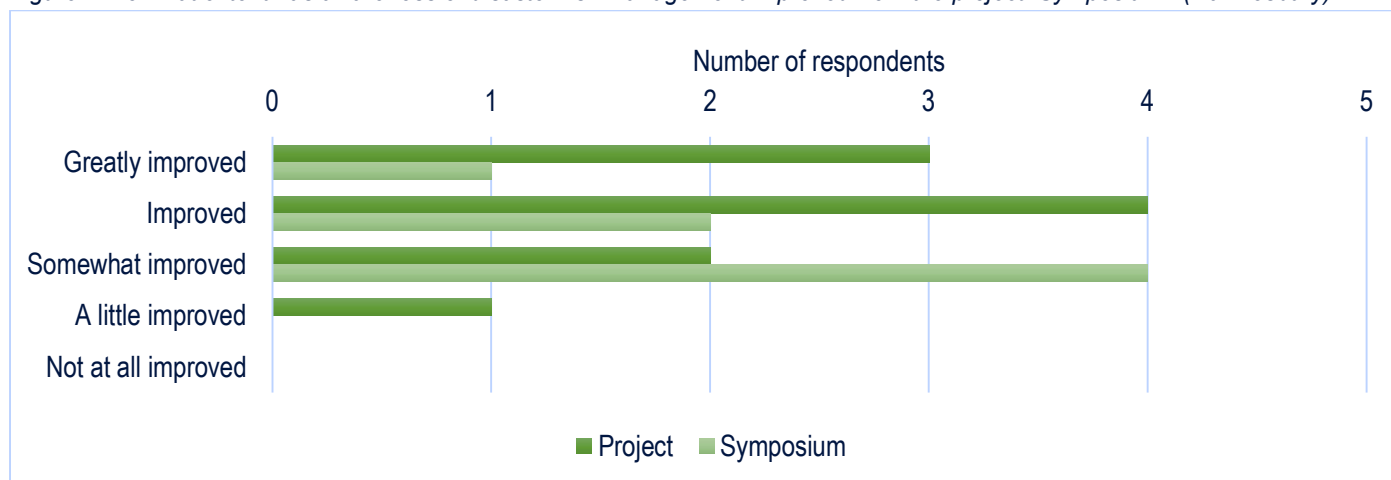
When asked what about the event was valuable to their organisation, 2 of 7 respondents nominated 'knowledge about disaster risk reduction' and 3 nominated 'awareness of local risks'.

In line with overall project trends (Figure 4), respondents' self-reported expertise increased from a median level of 'competent' to a median level of 'proficient'. The 2 stakeholders who identified an 'advanced beginner' level of expertise indicated an increase in expertise as a result of the project, meaning that no stakeholder rated their expertise below 'competent' after their project involvement. See Figure 8.
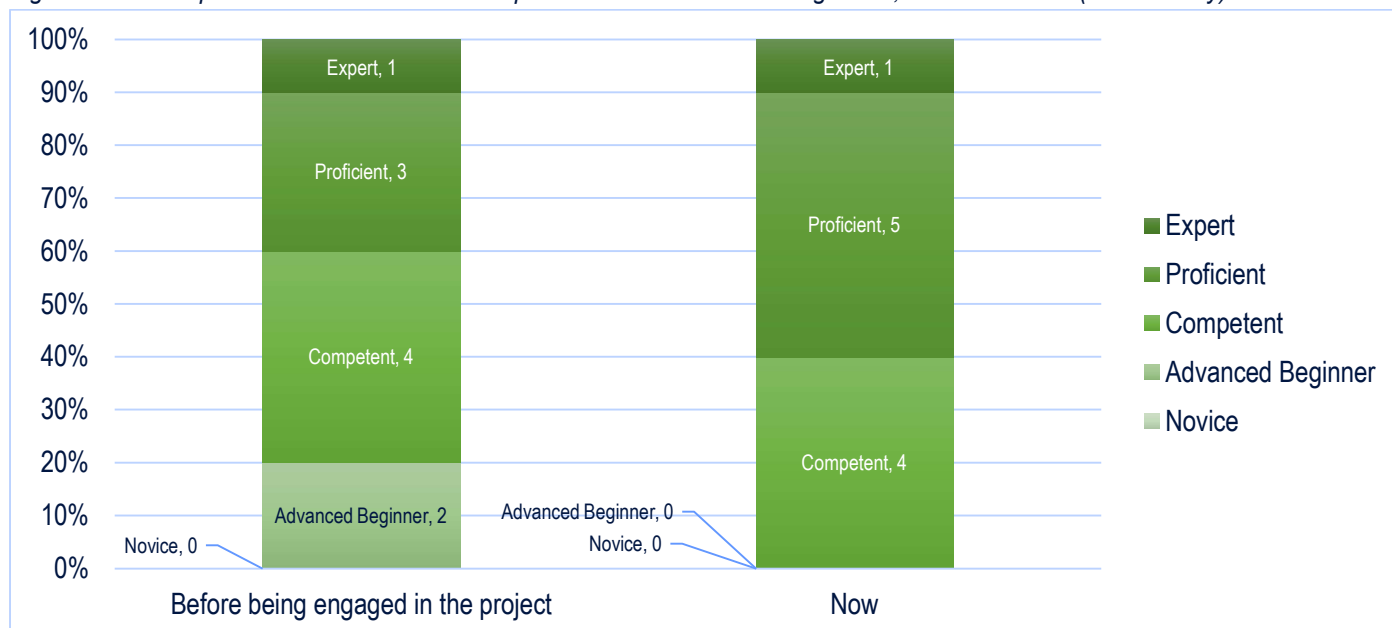
The Hawkesbury project's qualitative interview process (part of the local project engagement phase and mapping of local disaster risks, vulnerabilities and strengths), was identified in project evaluation interviews as also improving NGO social service sector understanding and capability in disaster risk management. Internal and external project stakeholders said that it built the capacity of organisations because communication channels were strengthened and needs were identified and met where possible.

> What they have potentially formed now, through their research, they have strengthened relationships with those community groups and ways to pass up future issues.

> For example, information from the Vision Support group went back to the SES. We also found some braille resources to take back to them.

An internal stakeholder described in interviews the challenge for Peppercorn staff of shifting to sector support in order to deliver education and capacity building project activities. The organisation observed through project activities a gap in the provision of sector development for disaster preparedness especially in aged care and in community services. In response, Peppercorn has assumed a local role as a sector support organisation, primarily through P-CEP train-the-trainer activities and by sharing information and resources in response to needs identified during interviews.

Community understanding and capacity

To engage community members and build community capacity, Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services:

- engaged with isolated communities jointly with the Rural Fire Service (RFS), Council and other stakeholders to deliver disaster readiness information and planning advice using the P-CEP model, presentations by emergency management agencies and question and answer sessions

- had an active presence at community events with disaster readiness information and resources, e.g. at Get Ready Weekends, Hawkesbury Show, Windsor Preparedness Day

- published a resource card of Hawkesbury area emergency and community contacts.

While community stakeholders in the Hawkesbury were not interviewed for this evaluation, external organisational stakeholders who were interviewed and who delivered community activities jointly with Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services spoke positively about the high rate of community turn-out to project activities, in communities described as traditionally resistant to engagement with emergency management agencies as a result of their experiences during previous disaster events.

> Sixty-five people turned up. I couldn't have done all of that on my own.

Some stakeholders highlighted in evaluation interviews that there is more work to do to improve local understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk, especially for First Nations and CALD communities. The project is considered to have had good reach especially into remote and disadvantaged communities, elderly people living at home and people with disability.

3.1.4 Snowy Monaro

NGO social services sector understanding and capacity

In the Snowy Monaro, MFSS delivered NGO social services sector capacity building through:

- P-CEP train-the-trainer session

- Disasters Are Our Business workshop – disaster scenario on community preparedness

- Informal feedback to NGOs following community disaster awareness and preparedness engagement e.g. International Day of People with Disability

- Follow-up session at the quarterly Monaro Regional Interagency, to report back on the CSDC Project and develop a sector plan for disaster resilience and preparedness.

Survey results show that the rate of awareness of disaster risk management generally improved for project stakeholders. On a scale of 1-5 from 'not at all improved' to 'greatly improved', 25% of project stakeholders (N=8) and 70% of workshop attendees (N=13) gave an answer of improved or greatly improved. The most frequently selected response by project respondents was 'somewhat improved', and by workshop respondents was 'improved'. All project stakeholders considered the Snowy Monaro to have improved their awareness of disaster risk management at least 'a little'. One stakeholder thought that their awareness had not been improved at all by the Disasters Are Our Business workshop. See Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: To what extent has awareness of disaster risk management improved from the project/ workshop? (Snowy Monaro)
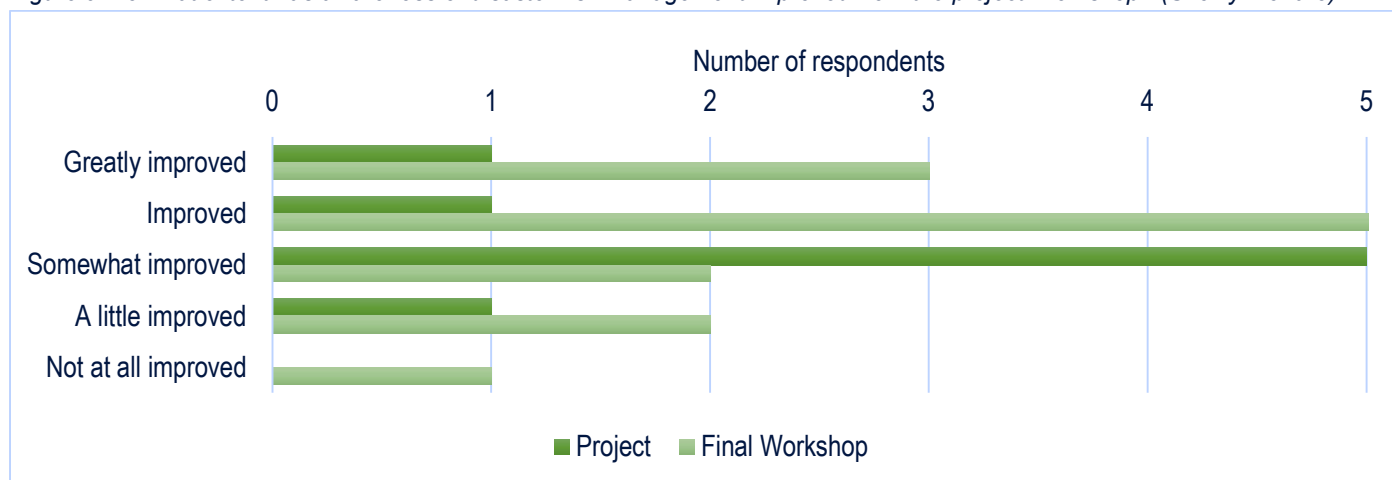
When asked what about the workshop was valuable to their organisation, 47% of 17 respondents nominated 'knowledge about disaster risk reduction' and 59% nominated 'awareness of local risks'.

Generally, respondents' self-reported expertise (Figure 10) increased by one rating level, with one respondent's self-rating remaining as 'proficient' before and after the project. None identified as 'expert' in disaster risk management, before or after their involvement in the project.

Figure 10: How respondents rate their level of expertise in disaster risk management, before and now (Snowy Monaro)
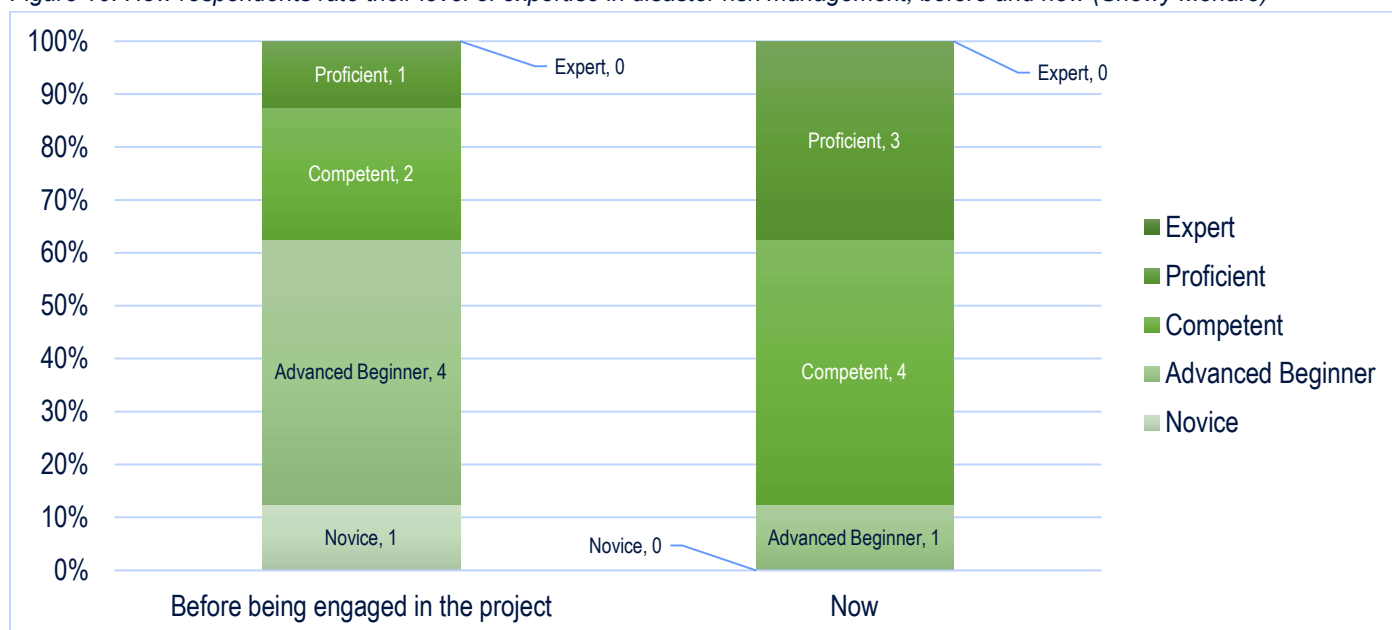
Interviewees discussed the impact of the Disasters Are Our Business workshop on their individual and collective understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk impacting vulnerable groups.

Key learnings raised in interviews were:

- identifying and properly understanding the need for organisational readiness, and what 'readiness' looks like
- better understanding of the roles of emergency management agencies
- 'myth busting' about what to do and what not to do in an emergency
- the diversity of NGO social services and how they might work together to reduce disaster risk.

Community understanding and capacity

Community capacity-building activities were:

- community meetings with individuals and small groups
- community P-CEP and preparedness information and training events, and follow-up events
- community event and local street pop-up stalls, eg at Cooma International Day of People With Disability and Berridale School Wellness Day
- Let's Get Packing community resource including document list and storage guidance.

In the Snowy Monaro, the local host organisation MFSS delivered P-CEP workshops to small groups of community members in partnership with local emergency management agencies including the RFS, Police and/or the Red Cross. These workshops were designed to be community forums that combined P-CEP with information sharing about disaster response and recovery.

These workshops were highly valuable to stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation, whether they attended as presenters or as community members.

> People have typically already done some planning, but the workshop helped them to make sure those plans are comprehensive and practical, and communicated to neighbours and extended family members, make sure they've thought of everything.

Community stakeholders said in evaluation interviews that they came away with practical information about disaster readiness and risk reduction. Interviewees provided examples of the practical steps they learned, such as how to:

- store important documents (including which documents)
- plan together to overcome evacuation challenges such as transport access
- regularly review, update and share the household or local community plan with others
- think through different disaster scenarios, eg power outage, road closures.

These events also clarified the roles and responsibilities of emergency management agencies and what to expect from disaster response infrastructure such as evacuation centres.

Stakeholders all raised the importance of regular follow-up to capture new community members, update information, keep up community plans and discussions, and ensure that people's disaster readiness plans are active and fresh in their minds.

As in other locations, P-CEP was consistently raised by both internal (local host organisation) and external stakeholders as a valuable tool for structuring these conversations for individuals and also for communities.

3.1.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

NGO social services sector understanding and capacity

Building on continuous community engagement and some early workshops on community resilience and preparedness in vulnerable populations, ECAC and Katungul convened Vulnerable Communities Emergency Preparedness Workshops in two locations, Bega and Moruya. ECAC is initiating a series of informal networking events (post-evaluation) towards network sustainability after the project concludes at end June.

Survey results show that the rate of awareness of disaster risk management generally improved for project stakeholders. On a scale of 1-5 from 'not at all improved' to 'greatly improved', 36% of workshop attendees gave an answer of 4 or 5 (improved or greatly improved). The most frequently selected response across project and Summit respondents was 3 (somewhat improved). Only one stakeholder indicated that the Bega/ Eurobodalla project or final workshops had not at all improved their awareness of disaster risk management. See Figure 11.

Figure 11: To what extent has awareness of disaster risk management improved from the project/ workshop? (Bega/ Eurobodalla)
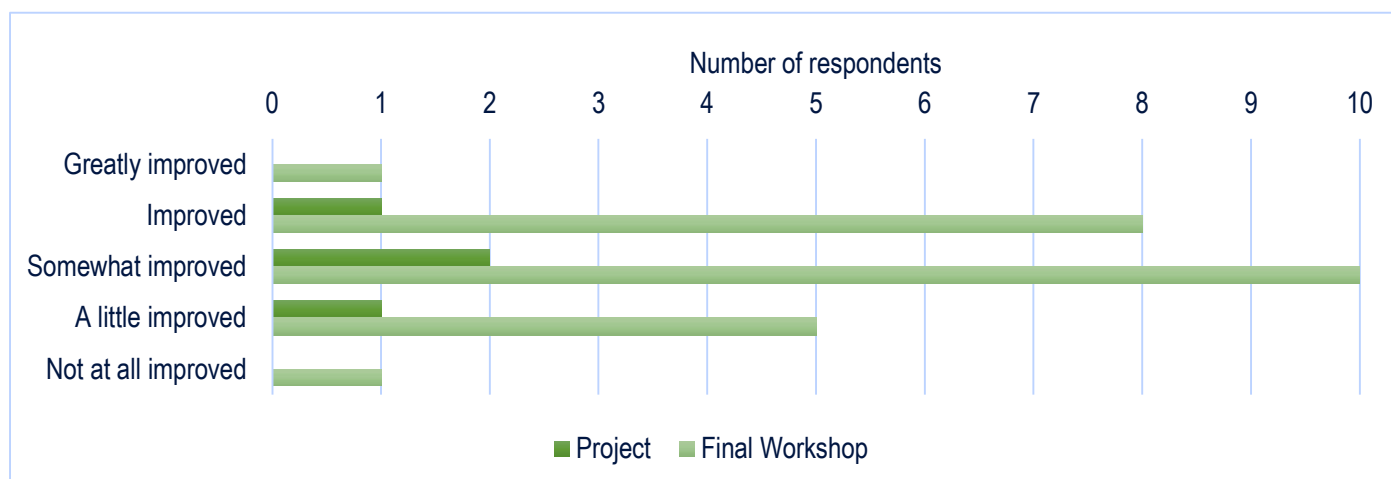
When asked what about the workshop was valuable to their organisation, 31% of 26 respondents nominated 'knowledge about disaster risk reduction' and 27% nominated 'awareness of local risks'.

Four project stakeholders responded to the project evaluation survey. For the most part, these stakeholders rated themselves as proficient before and after project involvement. One stakeholder indicated that their expertise increased from competent to proficient as a result of their project involvement.

Figure 12: How respondents rate their level of expertise in disaster risk management, before and now (Bega/ Eurobodalla)

During interviews, stakeholders described insights gained from the Vulnerable Communities Emergency Preparedness Workshops including:

- understanding the network of local services and agencies for disaster readiness planning and also disaster management – and the strengths and hurdles they share
- tools and resources for individual disaster planning
- ideas for organisational emergency planning.

Community understanding and capacity

Eden Community Access Centre has commenced networking and engagement with a broad range of community groups since it commenced project activities in December 2023. In May 2024, ECAC held

Important Document Storage information sessions as disaster preparedness capacity building for community members who needed education on digital document storage.

Stakeholders within and outside the local host and partner organisations recognised that there had been limited time in the Bega/ Eurobodalla area to engage and build the understanding and capacity of community groups, especially vulnerable community groups. This was particularly the case for First Nations people and representative groups, despite being a target cohort. Reasons drawn from local and central interviews include:

- insufficient time in the region to build engagement with engagement and capacity-building activities commencing in earnest in January 2024, less than six months prior to the evaluation period
    - reflecting on the CSDC project's overall challenges in engaging with First Nations communities, a stakeholder said that "organisations work at the speed of trust" and projects need to plan for time to build that trust – this did not occur in the Bega/ Eurobodalla region
- shift in project focus by Katungul as the local host organisation due to staff and leadership changes and reduced capacity within the team to deliver the project as initially planned – this saw Katungul focus project resources on the cultural burning program and local partner organisation ECAC, which is not an ACCO, take up community and NGO social service sector engagement and capacity building activities
- difficulties in engaging ACCOs and First Nations communities that arose in every location related to trauma and ongoing disaster recovery in First Nations communities
    - a central project stakeholder emphasised that disaster-related trauma in First Nations communities compounds other traumas related to historic and current acts of systemic and personal racism and violence.

Event feedback survey results from the CSDC project's Important Document Storage Information Sessions were that session participants:

- found value in the event's capacity building in relation to: ability to take action (4 of 5); knowledge about disaster risk reduction (2 of 5); and awareness of local risks (2 of 5)
- reported new actions related to important document identification and security including back-up
- had an improved (2 of 5) or much improved (3 of 5) awareness and understanding of relevant disaster risk and risk reduction needs
- were satisfied (2 of 5) or very satisfied (3 of 5) with the information sessions.

Some stakeholders observed a low representation of community representative and community development groups at the project's sector workshops, such as local Men's Sheds, Lions Clubs and Country Women's Association (CWA) branches. They wanted to see these groups engage with the project to improve local community members' understanding and capacity to reduce disaster risk. They pointed out that some vulnerable groups such as people who are elderly and living alone, and/or experiencing relative socio-economic disadvantage, may be accessing these kinds of local groups while falling under the radar of NGO community service, aged care or disability organisations.

3.2 Sharing and using risk, strengths and capability information strategically

	Key Evaluation Question	**Does the program deliver its intended short, medium and long-term outcomes?** **Specifically, for education activities, that:-** • **risk, strengths and capability information is shared and provides the basis for appropriate and coordinated DRR strategies and planning locally.**
Program Logic	**Relevant service activities**	• Deliver and/or participate in community engagement events and activities which drive disaster risk awareness, education, communication and/or networking • Represent project key messages in state-wide and national DRR networks for advocacy, information sharing and problem-solving purposes (Project Lead Agencies) • Coordinate communication, information sharing and joint advocacy between local leads (Project Lead Agencies)
	Relevant outputs	• Local integrated strategies are established to reduce disaster risks impacting vulnerable groups and communities • Events, activities and/or products (such as tools or resources) relevant to local needs including of specific groups • Local community events attended by community members, NGO social service sector representatives and emergency management agency representatives
	Short-term outcomes	• Emergency management agency and NGO social service sector representatives report improved joint DRR networking, coordination and collaboration
	Medium-term outcomes	• Local disaster risk reduction coordination effectively leverages community and NGO social services sector strengths • Local disaster management agencies and authorities demonstrate improved identification and understanding of local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk

3.2.1 Overall project

This outcome measure looks at how the capacity building activities described at Section 3.1 above lead to collaborative disaster management planning in the community, and achieve an eventual influence on emergency management agencies' planning and strategy in disaster risk reduction. Of interest is how the project activities have fostered a collective message about disaster risk reduction priorities, especially for vulnerable groups, and how these messages inform the strategic work of emergency management agencies locally. Also of interest is the work of project lead agencies to amplify local priorities at the state and national policy level where needed.

Social service NGOs were starting to network with each other especially at capability summits, symposiums and workshops taking place in the second half of the project.

There were some place-based progress in activating local community service networks in emergency management agencies' disaster preparedness work, and there was motivation in every location for further work to determine local NGO social service sector and community priorities and to progress those priorities.

Examples were emerging of strategic sharing of information between these NGOs and local emergency management authorities:

- local host organisations have gained a place on most of their Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs) as observers
- in the Hawkesbury and Snowy Monaro, SES, RFS, Police and/or Red Cross have worked collaboratively with local host organisations to deliver disaster preparedness training with local host organisations
- in the Snowy Monaro the LEMC has established a Vulnerability Sub-Committee, and MFSS is on that committee.

Case study – Influencing Emergency Management Governance

Monaro Family Support Service (MFSS) has been working collaboratively with Snowy Monaro Regional Council (SMRC) to provide NGO Disaster Support since the Black Summer Bushfires.

Pauline Cook, CEO of MFSS, gained a place as an observer on the Council's Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) Meeting.

The LEMC had commenced a process of mapping the assets in the region that are vulnerable to disasters, starting with infrastructure. Pauline was able to highlight that community vulnerability (and strengths) are much more complex to map and the knowledge and expertise of local NGOs can increase the vulnerability literacy of Emergency Management personnel.

The LEMC now has a Vulnerability Sub-Committee to start this work.

MFSS is an ongoing observer at the LEMC meetings and advises and supports the Vulnerability Sub-Committee on their vulnerability mapping process.

In each location, social service NGO stakeholders expressed a desire for further collaborative work within the sector to determine local priorities and advocate for change.

Stakeholders representing a cross-section of social service NGOs, emergency management and government agencies saw a need for emergency management agencies to make better use of local social service NGO knowledge of vulnerable groups in the community, and their role as trusted organisers.

A key strength of the program design is that the project's lead agencies are well-positioned as peak bodies to escalate local issues that require change at a state or federal government policy level. Outside of advocating on specific issues raised by local host and partner organisations, there was a high volume of work in advocating for the broad project goal of investing in place-based disaster management capability, especially for vulnerable groups in the community. There is a high level of interest in government and non-government agencies in how to effectively mobilise local communities and project lead agencies gave considerable time to providing written and verbal advice on these broader matters. This was a valued outcome of having peak organisations lead the project.

Examples of project lead agencies' information sharing towards coordinated disaster risk reduction strategy include:

- Membership of the awareness and preparedness working groups developing the NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan, and related written input to the plan.
- Collaboration with Services NSW to build team understanding of issues and barriers experienced by vulnerable cohorts in accessing disaster assistance, information and support and the role of local social service NGOs in connecting residents to this support.
- Input into proposal for a NSW Premier's Department Resilience Framework and Data Metric .

- Panel member at the ADAPT NSW Conference 2023 panel discussing 'applying a diversity lens to adaptation' and follow-up relationship development.

- Relationship development with Inter-governmental Social Recovery Reference Group.

- Input into the ACOSS Blueprint for Fast, Fair and Inclusive Action on Climate Change and a submissions to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding.

- Engagement with key non-government projects and organisations (e.g. Fire to Flourish, Australian Business Volunteers, Red Cross) to strengthen alignment.

In this way, the advocacy work of project lead agencies (NCOSS in particular, per division of project resources) appeared to be driven by 'top-down' demand. Three central project stakeholders observed that the project did not fully realise its potential to take up strategic advocacy regarding the shared and complex issues that local host organisations were identifying. This was also a matter of timing, as the production of local risks, strengths and capability information in project activities gained momentum in the later stages of the project.

Project governance and support functions led by project lead agencies, e.g. Project Reference Group meetings and All Teams Catch-Ups, helped local host and partner organisations to share information and recognise shared disaster risk reduction experiences, strengths and challenges across their communities. This was highlighted by local host and partner organisations as a project strength (see Section 8.1).

3.2.2 Northern Rivers

Two-thirds of respondents in the event feedback survey on the Summit (66%) nominated 'collaboration' as something about the Summit they found valuable to their organisation.

Social service NGOs reported the value and importance of sharing their recovery experiences and expressed an intent to take more steps towards collaborative advocacy and action towards community disaster risk reduction.

> One of the biggest problems with trauma is how isolating it is. It [the project] was a safe space for collective response to recovery.

> At the Summit we saw how much amazing sector knowledge there is to harness, not always in the places you would expect it to be. It would be great if that networking and connection with local initiatives can continue in some way.

> People could come together bi-monthly – meet and connect in their field or on a project. They could look at a particular initiative. Something more than occasional, one-off, large events.

Stakeholders are ready to collaborate more closely and share their expertise and knowledge.

> There is a long way still to go. A collaborative approach is uncommon – it's not something organisations do naturally in a competitive funding environment. New ways of working are emerging, partly as a result of this project, but they are definitely not yet established.

There was a general sense from the interviews and focus group that the local collective capacity to reduce disaster risk for vulnerable groups (building on the individual/ organisational capacity described at Section 3.1.2 above) is something that the CSDC Project in the Northern Rivers was ready to deliver – just as the project was coming to an end. More time was seen to be needed to maximise the return on investment.

Joint advocacy and campaigning was raised by multiple stakeholders as a goal for local strategic action on the shared understanding that is developing about local disaster management risks, strengths and capabilities.

Community Resilience Networks (CRNs) are a recovery funded mechanism (separate from this project) for sharing information and coordinating disaster risk reduction strategies and planning locally. Resilient Lismore is a member of the Lismore CRN. Stakeholders had differing views on the relationship of the CSDC Project with CRNs in the Northern Rivers:

- some saw the two initiatives as integrated and complementary, with the CSDC activities focused on ensuring that vulnerable groups are prioritised, and their needs are actioned in networks such as CRNs

- some saw the projects as duplicative and/or dividing scant resources, especially for organisations participating in meetings for both

- some highlighted broader issues with CRNs and other planning mechanisms such as Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs) and how the NGO community services sector – uniquely broad in the Northern Rivers, with a lot of large and small social services organisations – can have a voice, collective or otherwise, in local disaster planning.

Another broader issue not unique to the Northern Rivers is that many disaster recovery and risk reduction projects are wrapping up at the end of the 2023/24 financial year including funded positions within organisations – meaning that the disaster planning space is dynamic and subject to fluctuating resources. The purpose of this project is to invest in community capacity and networks for long-term gain. One local external stakeholder said that the answer is to connect more, not less.

> Connect face-to-face and learn what each other is doing. That's how you reduce duplication and help each other with projects.

Resilient Lismore has worked with the LEMC from 2023 to develop a governance structure allowing information exchange during emergencies and disasters, and also to facilitate networking and preparedness activities across NGO social services and emergency management sectors.

3.2.3 Hawkesbury

Stakeholders in evaluation interviews raised the value of CSDC events in the Hawkesbury for professional networking and collective disaster readiness within the NGO social services sector.

> Because of Peppercorn's events I've now become a familiar face in the community and started to be a lot more invited to events … Whereas before I had a small voice going around to a lot of places, now I've been introduced to the interagency sort of connections, and that's allowed [NGO social sector organisation] to foster good business relationships.

Stakeholders also said the qualitative interview process undertaken by Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services helped build a collective understanding of the Hawkesbury communities' strengths,

risks and capabilities. Strategic use of this new information is seen to be at its earliest stages. After interviews were completed, Peppercorn finalised the Leading Themes Analysis of these interviews.

Four of 7 respondents in the event feedback survey on the Symposium nominated 'collaboration' as something about the event they found valuable to their organisation.

Internal stakeholders said in evaluation interviews that there were issues to progress via strategic advocacy to government and emergency management agencies, not yet resolved within the CSDC project's timeframe. A broad range of stakeholders articulated in interviews the need for collective, coordinated action on one or two priority areas for change in the local area, such as evacuation of pets, early opening of evacuation centres for vulnerable people, and early and coordinated evacuation of geographically remote communities.

For internal CSDC project stakeholders, their ability to advocate to government agencies, via project lead agencies, to address needs identified in project activities including interviews and local community events, was a highlight of the CSDC Project. Specifically, an issue of how relief grants were administered, resulting in inequitable distribution, was taken up by NCOSS with Service NSW, and change was achieved.

> It's usually, you look back in a couple of years and you see some changes but getting that feedback from [NCOSS project team] that action was taken, and there was actually a real outcome with the grants.

While Peppercorn has a highly collaborative working relationship with local emergency management agencies including Hawkesbury Council and the RFS and SES, local stakeholders echoed concerns raised in other locations that there is no clear pathway for community priorities to influence policy.

A stakeholder from an emergency management agency, while hesitant to say that community requests could change policy without being tested (e.g. in surveys to understand broader social relevance) described a place-based impact of sharing and using risk and capability information strategically. In the context of formal community consultations being conducted by their agency:

> Instead of inviting thousands of people I might have met but don't remember, I can leverage Peppercorn networks and increase the chances that vulnerable groups are included and consulted.

3.2.4 Snowy Monaro

Stakeholders described the Disasters Are Our Business workshop as an important starting point for collective planning and joint work to reduce risk for vulnerable groups.

> I met people I would not normally have met. This makes safety management possible. We can account for people who would not normally be accounted for.

> The small group discussions about what organisations can do separately and together.

They recognised that the value of the workshop is in its next steps. Future collaborative events similar to the Disasters Are Our Business workshop are important, both to take account of the dynamic nature of risk and planning, but also to bring along organisations in the earliest stages of disaster awareness and

planning, who might not have been ready or resourced for the last workshop but might be ready in the future.

> There needs to be some kind of local plan. Vulnerable cohorts are going to change, services are going to change.

Interviewees who attended the workshop raised the impressiveness of the diversity of organisations represented in the workshop, including those working directly with vulnerable groups in disability, health and aged care services, and also in emergency management including the NSW Reconstruction Authority and Department of Communities and Justice. The local host organisation described the strategic process of establishing this diversity to enable higher-quality integrated planning.

Nearly three quarters of the 17 respondents in the event feedback survey on Disaster Ready Together workshop (71%) nominated 'collaboration' as something about the Summit they found valuable to their organisation.

The local host organisation and emergency management agencies highlighted the way the CSDC project has consolidated their ways of working together and connected them with new community groups, through the joint workshops and information events described at Section 3.1.4 above.

> There are working channels for communication. There is genuine collaboration. We [MFSS] are not teaching people how to fight fires. We have the same problem but different goals.

> They connected the RFS with people that we would otherwise never see. Lots of people with mental health related disability, or no driver's license… and women in rural areas who have never been encouraged or supported to think through disaster risk reduction.

> During the last fires [2019/20] there were seventeen communities on fire at the same time. They need to be organised and be able to operate as a community.

3.2.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

In the evaluation survey and interviews, stakeholders in Bega and Eurobodalla described some strategic information sharing activities that have commenced as a result of the Vulnerable Communities Emergency Management Workshops, such as:

- establishment of a new disaster readiness interagency at Moruya, involving emergency management agencies and NGO social services, to be led by RA
- new partnership approaches to sourcing and delivering relevant training and other capacity building resources such as planning packages for service users
- new referral networks to meet the disaster recovery needs of vulnerable community members.

Most of the 26 respondents in the event feedback survey on the final workshops (81%) nominated 'collaboration' as something about the workshops they found valuable to their organisation. Recognition of collaboration as being of value from this event was higher than in other project locations.

Multiple stakeholders reported that a finding from their involvement with the project was the rapid attrition of organisational knowledge and experience of what to do in a disaster – observed within their own organisation or in organisations they work with – due to post-disaster staff burnout and turnover rates and also the difficulty of documenting disaster management learnings and experiences in an effective way.

This makes sector knowledge building activities important because staff and leaders in community organisations can learn from collective disaster management experiences.

Similar to other locations, stakeholders reported the challenges of finding organisational resources to participate in collaborative strategic work. This is described further at Section 4.1.5 below.

3.3   Factoring disaster risk information into work and new risk reduction actions

<table>
<tr>
<td colspan="2">Key Evaluation Question</td>
<td>Does the program deliver its intended short, medium and long-term outcomes?
Specifically, for education activities, that:-
participating organisations and community groups factor disaster risk information into their work and trial new risk reduction actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td rowspan="4">Program Logic</td>
<td>Relevant service activities</td>
<td>Deliver and/or participate in community engagement events and activities which drive disaster risk awareness, education, communication and/or networking.
Design and deliver capacity building activities/ approaches for local NGO social service sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant outputs</td>
<td>Events, activities and/or products (such as tools or resources) relevant to local needs including of specific vulnerable groups
Place-based mapping resources are published, used and regularly reviewed which highlight local disaster management risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term outcomes</td>
<td>NGO social services sector representatives and emergency management agency representatives report improved NGO social services sector capacity and capability for disaster risk reduction.
Stakeholders report improved effectiveness of local disaster risk reduction efforts, especially for local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-term outcomes</td>
<td>Community and NGO social services sector representatives demonstrate capability and capacity in disaster risk reduction and trial new actions to reduce risk.</td>
</tr>
</table>

3.3.1 Overall project

In the context of the CSDC project's program logic, this key evaluation question measures action building from capacity and information sharing.

Across locations, surveys and interviews showed evidence of participating organisations factoring disaster risk reduction into their work and taking new action. Even in the Bega/ Eurobodalla, which has had one key event targeting the NGO social services sector, stakeholders reported taking action based on the knowledge and connections they gained.

Actions, as described below, encompass organisational readiness, community action, links with emergency services agencies and support for vulnerable service users. There are examples of new actions being initiated by organisations following capacity-building events, and also of new ways of working being introduced by local host and community organisations – such as joint community capacity-building events with emergency management agencies, P-CEP via train-the-trainer sessions and new information sharing networks.

Case study – Preparedness Support

Peppercorn Services, in partnership with the Local Government Recovery Officer, delivered a Seniors Preparedness Day in a geographically isolated community previously impacted by floods and with extreme bushfire danger. The community has many elderly residents living alone on rural properties. Peppercorn Services, Rural Fire Services, Council and Habitat for Humanity had a collaborative approach to reduce disaster risk in the area.

This event was attended by 65 local residents, the vast majority of whom were elderly and living on property, many also living alone. The Peppercorn team was able to give an introduction Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) session to the attendees to assist in informing them of their disaster risk and what they can do to better prepare themselves to minimize impact. The team also distributed fire resistant emergency bags with useful emergency information inside.

Due to the demographic of the community, the team were also able to offer assistance and advice to residents about My Aged Care services and how they can access this. Peppercorn Aged Care staff engaged with community members about accessing My Aged Care services and how this support can be used for practical emergency preparedness activities such as assistance with property preparedness.

3.3.2 Northern Rivers

Two thirds of survey respondents from the target LGAs involved with the CSDC project beyond the Summit (14 of 21) said there were new or different actions they might take to reduce disaster risk for themselves or others. Of the examples provided:

- 8 involved working differently with community members, with specific actions such as:
  - Rolling out P-CEP
  - "Enhanced motivation for collaboration with/between local emergency services and local residents"
  - "More inclusive responses in evacuation settings"
- 3 involved creating a plan within their organisation, with respondents identifying that they were clearer about how to achieve this:
  - "Have a simple actionable plan in the event of a disaster, plan proactively… concentrate on key important things first".
- 3 involved networking and collaboration, with one response specifying an intent to "interact with smaller community-led organisations".
- other actions included a plan for wellbeing interventions for workers.

When expanded to include respondents from the target LGAs involved in the Summit, three quarters of survey respondents (40 of 53) said there were new or different actions they might take to reduce disaster risk for themselves or others. Of the examples provided:

- 19 involved working differently with community members, with additional specific actions such as:
  - "Inclusion of young people in planning and decision-making processes"
  - "Starting preparedness conversations in casework"
- 5 involved creating a plan within their organisation
- 5 involved networking and collaboration, with one response specifying "working more closely with local First Nations organisations and leaders to learn more about how Country can be better cared for".
- other actions included conducting "further research in key areas, e.g. how to support local councils or other formal disaster management agencies in connecting with community-led grass roots responses to disaster".

Nearly one third (30%) of event feedback survey respondents from the target LGAs nominated 'ability to take action' as something about the Summit they found valuable to their organisation.

From interviews, further examples emerged of new actions and use of disaster risk information:

- an emergency management stakeholder said that through meetings and shared resources, work is being done to improve evacuation responses for vulnerable community members, and
- an NGO social services provider said that from informal networking at the Summit they learned that their issue with managing large volumes of donations was shared by other agencies, and this clarified for them the actions they needed to take on this in future.

Once again, P-CEP is a key driver of new work in this area, with a number of stakeholders taking up the model as a way of supporting vulnerable service users to plan ahead for disasters.

3.3.3 Hawkesbury

Four project evaluation survey respondents (50%) said there were new or different actions they might take to reduce risk for vulnerable groups, and 6 respondents (60%) said there were new or different actions they might take to reduce risk for themselves or their service users. Examples provided:

> I understand better how to stay informed hence being able to identify vulnerable clients and keep them informed to make sure they are planning evacuation.

> Be more aware and connected to notifications/warnings. Ensure this is also the case for people I work with.

Multiple survey respondents identified that they will use P-CEP in future to assist individual vulnerable service users prepare a disaster readiness plan.

Local organisations in Glossodia and surrounding villages – an area prone to having road access cut during flood events – have formed a Services West of the River Committee following CSDC activities, particularly the breakfast event, to collaborate on disaster readiness and relief planning.

> Every single organisation needs to be respected for where they're at. Awareness and education needs to come before risk assessment and strategic planning.

3.3.4 Snowy Monaro

47% of 17 event feedback survey respondents nominated 'ability to take action' as something about the Disasters Are Our Business workshop they found valuable to their organisation.

Five of eight survey respondents with project involvement beyond the Disasters Are Our Business workshop said they would take new or different actions as a result of their project involvement.

When expanded to include respondents who had been involved in the workshop only, three quarters of survey respondents (15 of 20) said there were new or different actions they might take to reduce disaster risk for themselves or others. Of the examples provided:

- 7 involved working differently with community members, with additional specific actions such as:
  - o encouraging service users to prepare a plan for bushfires, including reviewing insurance policies
  - o "prevention preparedness training and assistance to existing community groups in this space"

- 6 involved workplace improvements in planning and staff support for disaster management
- 1 highlighted an intent to work collaboratively with other organisations in this space.

The work led by MFSS with the RFS, Red Cross and Police to deliver community disaster preparedness workshops was raised by both participants and delivery stakeholders as an invaluable new way, brought about by this project, of working with vulnerable groups.

> The diverse people who came out, *together*, worked well because people took it on board. The elderly took it very seriously. They still talk about it. The way the different organisations answered questions collaboratively. It was a big day. They were very, very tired at the end of it. But they all stayed.
>
> The RFS is just coming away from being a very blokey culture. So people like the women in [joint workshop location] may never have connected with the RFS, never have been encouraged or supported to think through disaster planning.
>
> Multi-agency sessions are more cost-effective and more efficient. I can't set up community engagement sessions on my own. MFSS can fill a room.

Interviewees highlighted some of the new ways of working at a community level that have occurred as a result of the CSDC project:

- having MFSS on the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) was seen to be of benefit to the whole community (LEMC now has a subcommittee on vulnerability)
- the way that the Disaster Ready Together workshop created new professional networks for disaster planning and risk reduction
- introduction of P-CEP and training up social service organisations to deliver this model to their own service users
- creating an ongoing 'agenda' or impetus for disaster preparedness work, within organisations and at a community level
- local community groups are following up on disaster readiness with their members after P-CEP workshops (raised by multiple interviewees).

An external stakeholder observed that:

> If I could have wished for anything during the Black Summer fires, it would have been to have community service agencies on the LEMC. This would have improved both response and recovery. The absence of community service organisations on the LEMC directly impacted what happened to people in evacuation centres and in crisis.

3.3.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

16 of 25 survey respondents (64%) said there were new or different actions they might take for themselves or others. Of the 16 examples provided:

- 37% related to increased networking with new agencies

- 31% related to personal safety planning
- 25% were about working differently in the community, e.g. endeavouring to work more closely with the local LEMO
- 12% specified improving the way disaster risk was planned for within their organisation.

Nearly one quarter of 26 respondents (24%) nominated 'ability to take action' as something about the final project workshops they found valuable to their organisation.

As in other locations, project participants who were interviewed highly valued the support to build disaster preparedness into their work and sought continued involvement and more resources for ongoing disaster readiness planning.

> There does just need to be that bit more community outreach to be able to prepare for events – through workshops or resources like home packages.

Some interagency initiatives have come out of the final Vulnerable Communities Emergency Preparedness Workshop as stakeholders seek ways to continue collaboration beyond the project's completion date. These are outlined at Section 3.5.5.

3.4 Identifying and prioritising communities' hazards, vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="6">Program Logic</td>
<td>Key Evaluation Question</td>
<td>Does the program deliver its intended short, medium and long-term outcomes?
Specifically, for risk assessment and strategic planning activities, that:-
• Hazards, vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations in communities are identified and prioritized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant service activities</td>
<td>• Review strengths and weaknesses of past local disaster support and identify lessons learned, to inform local disaster risk reduction.
• Develop place-based mapping resources which highlight local disaster management risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacity.
• Design and develop a mapping tool (central)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant outputs</td>
<td>• Place-based mapping resources are published, used and regularly reviewed which highlight local disaster management risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term outcomes</td>
<td>• Stakeholders report improved effectiveness of local disaster risk reduction efforts, especially for local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-term outcomes</td>
<td>• Councils, NGO social services sector and community groups factor disaster vulnerability and risk into planning and decisions.
• Local disaster management agencies and authorities demonstrate improved identification and understanding of local cohorts disproportionately exposed to risk.
• Stakeholders report improved effectiveness of local disaster risk reduction efforts, especially for local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk.</td>
</tr>
</table>

3.4.1 Over-all project

Place-based approaches to the identification of hazards, vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations were different in response to local environment and population, project resources and timing. Each location has contributed to NCOSS final reporting and project mapping of locational disaster management risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacities.

NCOSS has worked with the University of Canberra and Infoxchange to develop the Risks, Vulnerabilities and Assets (RiVA) mapping tool, which has three levels of data: (i) hazard data; (ii) statewide SA2 level poverty data; and (iii) the location of social services in the seven project LGAs. This is a resource which can assist social service organisations as well as Emergency Management stakeholders assess social factors and community services as well as disaster hazards to inform planning and preparedness.

Identification of community hazards, needs and assets was an area of focus for both the Hawkesbury and the Northern Rivers regions, where rigorous data collection activities were undertaken in very different ways. This complemented the local service delivery landscape in both locations, where there was a dense population and a large, diverse NGO social service sector, and a need to establish a clear and reliable picture of needs and vulnerabilities across that broad range of stakeholders.

Case study – Mapping Vulnerability
The Northern Rivers CSDC Team noted that vulnerability data in the Northern Rivers Local Emergency Management Plan (LEMP) was basic data drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on Language Spoken at Home, Households without Access to a Motor Vehicle, and Need for Assistance with

Core Day to Day Activities. They assessed that it did not provide a detailed picture of what vulnerabilities may exist and in which locations.

With the assistance of Southern Cross University students, ABS data was gathered on 16 indicators for communities identified as at risk in the Local Emergency Management Plan to provide a detailed view of possible vulnerabilities and vulnerable locations – including age, household income, mental health, unemployed, disability and 2 or more long-term health conditions.

This data was then presented visually, giving a clear indication of vulnerability against geographic location - Disaster-related vulnerabilities in Kyogle, Lismore and Richmond Valley LGAs (2021 ABS Census), www.floodhelpnr.com.au/disaster-ready-together. It has now been incorporated into the Northern Rivers LEMP and other Council plans. Local NGOs also found the data useful for planning service delivery.

Given the level of interest in these datasets from emergency management stakeholders, NCOSS has separately commissioned datasets based on this methodology for the other CSDC project locations.

In each location, project evaluation survey respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of positive statements about how the project identified, prioritised and acted upon local disaster risk reduction needs. Combined results at Figure 13 show over-all agreement that the project helped to identify, prioritise and act on local needs, using satisfactory and inclusive processes. In particular there was strong agreement that needs and priorities were identified in the project. There was less confidence in the project leading to action on local priorities, with one-third of respondents neutral and one respondent disagreeing with the statement.

Figure 13: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Combined/ all locations)
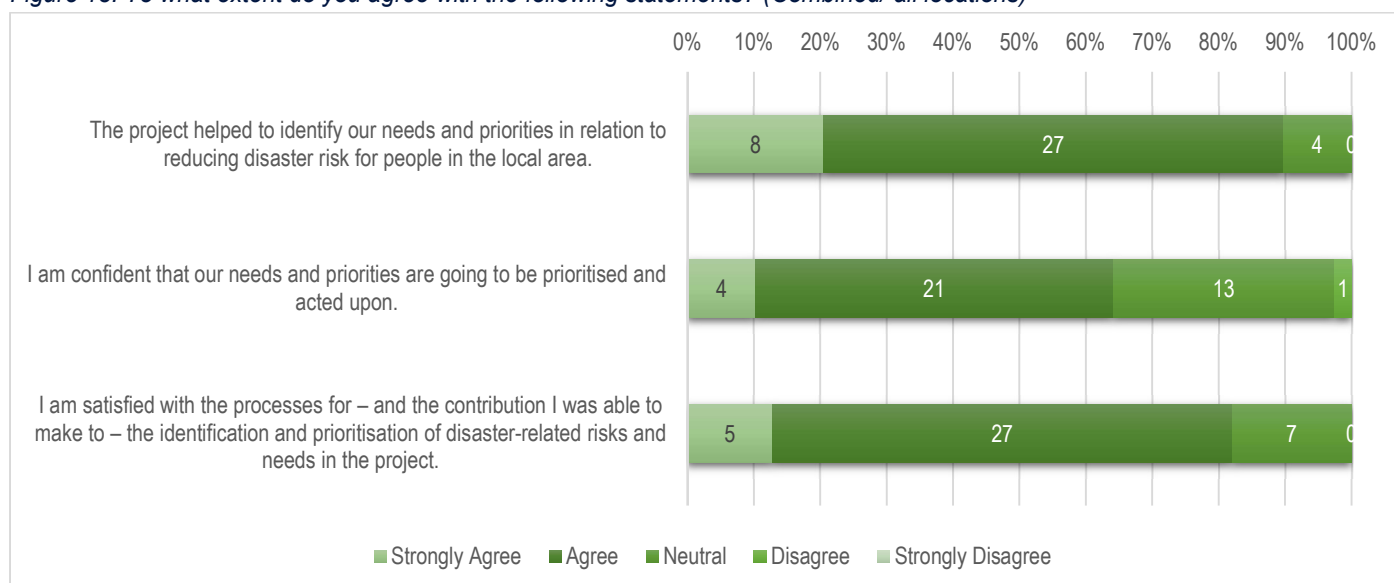
3.4.2 Northern Rivers

In order to capture local hazards, vulnerabilities, needs and aspirations, Lismore conducted a survey of local NGO social service organisations on Lessons Learned So Far and held a workshop attended by over 70 people including 43 representatives of local social services based in a 'Harwood' public knowledge engagement format. This informed their work and contributed to the focus areas of the Disaster Ready Together Summit.

A stakeholder from the local host organisation pointed out that the initial work undertaken to define the local NGO community services sector was a critical identification activity which ensured key sectors such as

aged care, disability services and early childhood education and care were invited to be part of the workshop and Summit.

> No project this size can meet the level of need that we mapped in this project. An outcome in itself is to map and define that need.

Resilient Lismore also delivered a Census analysis mapping place-based vulnerability (see Case Study – Mapping Vulnerability above). This was designed to assist NGOs and emergency management agencies and authorities to understand the range and geographical distribution of local vulnerabilities. One stakeholder from an emergency management agency described this tool as highly valuable to their understanding of the local area.

Of the 18 survey respondents from the target LGAs who answered questions about the CSDC project (beyond the Summit):

- 17 (94%) agreed or strongly agreed that the project "helped to identify our needs and priorities in relation to reducing disaster risk for people in Lismore, Kyogle and Richmond Valley LGAs", and no respondents disagreed (1 was neutral)

- 15 (83%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident their "needs and priorities are going to be prioritised and acted upon", and no respondents disagreed (3 were neutral).

- 16 (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were "satisfied with the processes for – and the contribution I was able to make to – the identification and prioritisation of disaster-related risks and needs", and no respondents disagreed (2 were neutral).

Figure 14: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Northern Rivers)
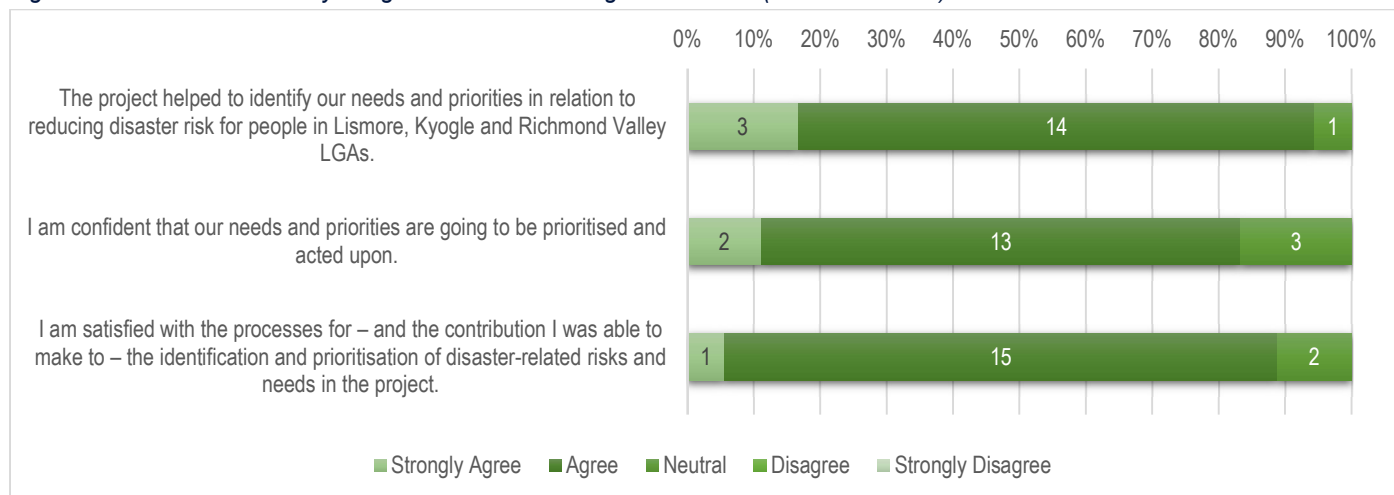
3.4.3 Hawkesbury

This outcome area was a key focus in the Hawkesbury region. Peppercorn and Bligh Park completed and analysed 30 qualitative interviews with representatives from social service organisations and community representative groups on their experiences of disaster management, recovery and readiness, and what could be done better. From the data analysis, a summary report was produced and stakeholder questions and requests for changes to disaster management were submitted to relevant government and emergency management agencies for their information and response. Stakeholder engagement on findings from the interview process is described at Section 3.6.3 below.

Analysis of interview data identified "collaboration, connection and communication" as three main areas of work for the local NGO social service sector and emergency management agencies to improve disaster readiness in the Hawkesbury especially for vulnerable community members.

Small-group workshops at the Community Organisations Breakfast event also provided information on the sector's disaster risks, needs and strengths.

There was a sense from internal and external stakeholder interviews (conducted in April/ early May) that the project "isn't really complete", in that there has not been time to prioritise or take action on the disaster risk-related hazards, vulnerabilities, strengths, needs and aspirations identified in the local interview process.

Of the 10 survey respondents from the target LGAs who answered questions about the CSDC project in the Hawkesbury:

- 6 (60%) agreed and 1 strongly agreed that the project "helped to identify our needs and priorities in relation to reducing disaster risk for people in the Hawkesbury area", and no respondents disagreed (3 were neutral)

- 5 (50%) agreed and 1 strongly agreed that they were confident their "needs and priorities are going to be prioritised and acted upon", and no respondents disagreed (4 were neutral).

- 4 (40%) agreed and 3 (30%) strongly agreed that they were "satisfied with the processes for – and the contribution I was able to make to – the identification and prioritisation of disaster-related risks and needs", and no respondents disagreed (3 were neutral).

Figure 15: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Hawkesbury)
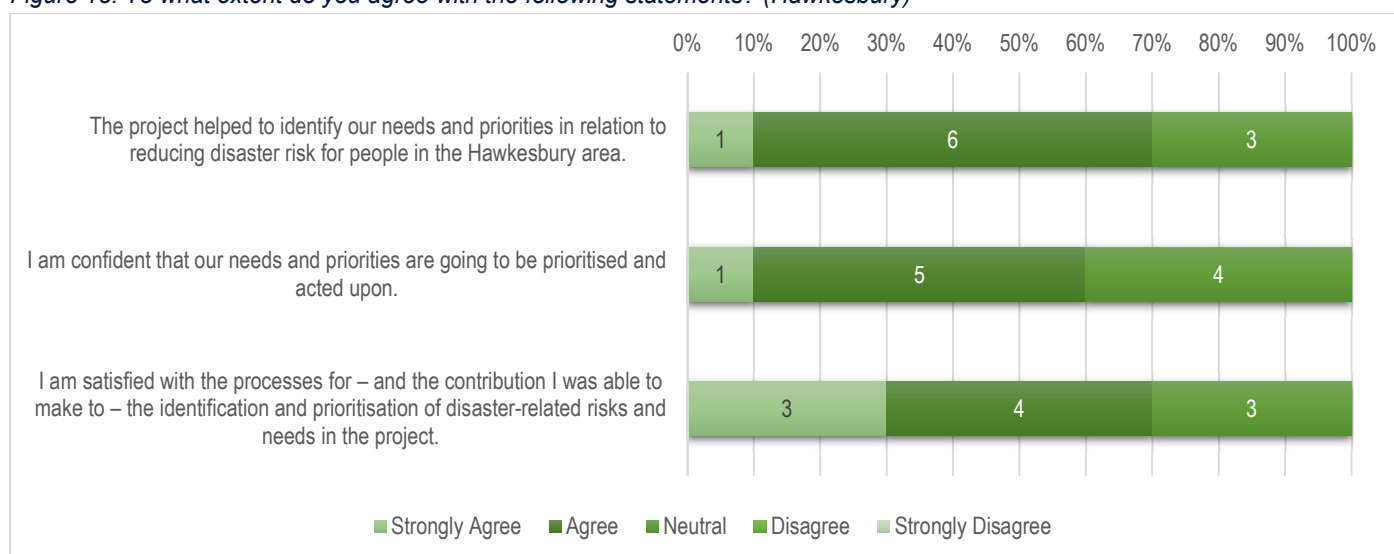
3.4.4 Snowy Monaro

MFSS managed their own data and records on target vulnerable groups and learnings from consultations with them on capability strengths and needs and what was learned from past events. They drew on their direct experiences of past events – particularly the 2019/20 bushfires – to inform CSDC project priorities.

Their working relationships with Snowy Monaro Regional Council, and Council's Monaro Regional Interagency forum also informed their work in this space as these networks informed the project's initial local priorities and helped embed project activities into the local community.

They have prioritised the hazards and vulnerabilities they identified through the project in their work to establish the Vulnerability Sub-Committee of the local LEMC. They have also advocated these priorities at

a national level via the CSDC Project. The CEO of MFSS spoke as part of a panel on vulnerability and disability at the National Disaster Preparedness Summit convened by the National Emergency Management Agency in 2023.

Of the 8 survey respondents with project involvement beyond the final workshop:

- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that the project "helped to identify our needs and priorities in relation to reducing disaster risk for people in the Snowy Monaro area"

- 4 (50%) agreed or strongly that they were confident their "needs and priorities are going to be prioritised and acted upon", and 4 (50%) were neutral. This suggests that the Snowy Monaro project would benefit from more transparent planning and communication on how stakeholders' needs and priorities are actioned after they are identified, given that MFSS is highly active in the local and higher-level advocacy and policy impact space.

- 6 (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were "satisfied with the processes for – and the contribution I was able to make to – the identification and prioritisation of disaster-related risks and needs", and no respondents disagreed (2 were neutral).

Figure 16: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Snowy Monaro)
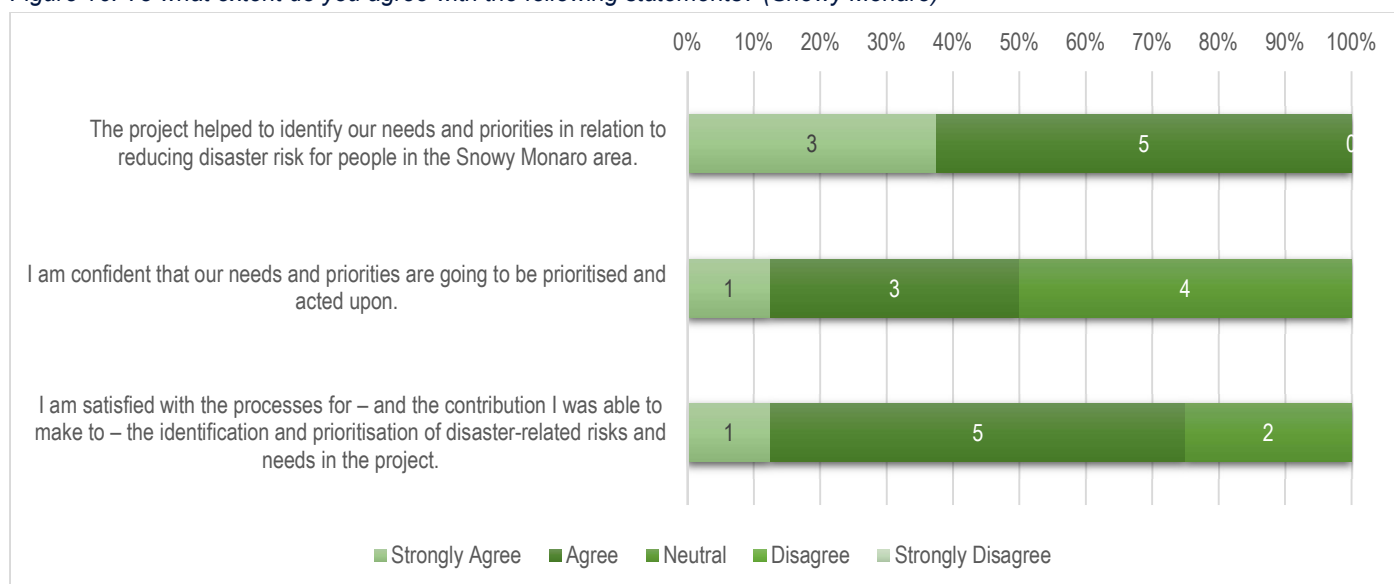
3.4.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

A goal of the Vulnerable Communities Emergency Preparedness Workshops was to define 'vulnerability' in the local context. To inform workshop (and broader project) focus areas, Katungul and ECAC conducted two surveys to gather views on disaster risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacity building priorities. They received responses from 34 community members and 10 community service organisations.

In interviews, stakeholders said that as a group they identified that after the 2019/20 Black Summer fires and COVID-19 in particular, there is increased vulnerability on the South Coast related to mental health and trauma, and homelessness entrenched by risk factors such as low literacy and low socio-economic status that are a barrier to grant applications and insurance processes. People with disability were highlighted as being vulnerable to poor outcomes in the event of a disaster, and sector challenges were identified. A stakeholder from the disability services sector said that they gained multiple new connections at the workshop they attended, which would assist with disaster readiness planning.

> We didn't know the RFS had a program called AIDER. Now we have linked up clients with that.

Workshop participants recognised the value of ongoing NGO social service sector collaboration in order to progress disaster preparedness for these local priority groups.

> There does just need to be that bit more community outreach to be able to prepare for events, through workshops and home packages for disaster readiness. We need a centralised database for community services to go to, to get information about what people provide and who to link up with.

> Drills are based on the assumption that emergency management agencies are going to show up. We need to work with scenarios that some or all emergency management agencies are not available – either they are too stretched or they physically can't get there.

Of the 2 survey respondents who answered the project evaluation question about identification of community needs and priorities:

- 1 agreed that the project "helped to identify our needs and priorities in relation to reducing disaster risk for people in Bega/ Eurobodalla". 1 was neutral.
- 2 were neutral on whether they were confident their "needs and priorities are going to be prioritised and acted upon".
- 2 agreed that they were "satisfied with the processes for – and the contribution I was able to make to – the identification and prioritisation of disaster-related risks and needs".

This is in line with survey results in other locations, where there was less confidence that local needs and priorities will be acted upon.

Figure 17: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Bega/ Eurobodalla)
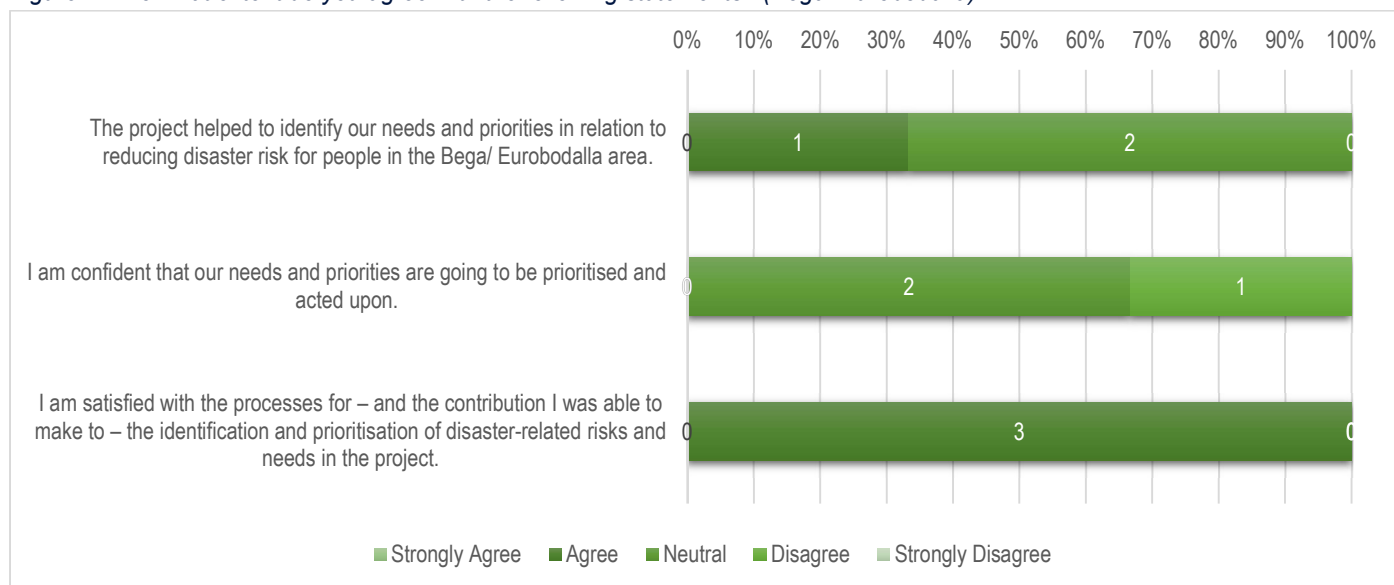
3.5 Embedding risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities into business as usual

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="5" style="writing-mode:vertical">Program Logic</td>
<td colspan="2">Key Evaluation Question</td>
<td>Does the program deliver its intended short, medium and long-term outcomes?
Specifically, for risk assessment and strategic planning activities, that:-
• risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities are systematically embedded into business-as-usual practices.</td>
</tr>
</table>

Key Evaluation Question		**Does the program deliver its intended short, medium and long-term outcomes?** **Specifically, for risk assessment and strategic planning activities, that:-** • **risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities are systematically embedded into business-as-usual practices.**
Program Logic	**Relevant service activities**	• Engage with NGO social service sector and emergency management agencies, to facilitate information exchange, capacity-building and joint planning between sectors
	Relevant outputs	• Local integrated strategies are established to reduce disaster risks impacting vulnerable groups and communities
	Short-term outcomes	• Emergency management agency and NGO social services sector representatives report joint networking, coordination and collaboration to reduce disaster risk • NGO social services sector representatives and emergency management agency representatives report improved NGO social services sector capacity and capability for disaster risk reduction.
	Medium-term outcomes	• Community and NGO social service sector demonstrate capability and capacity in disaster risk reduction and trial new actions to reduce risk.

3.5.1 Overall project

As risk is dynamic and risk reduction requires consistent, ongoing collective action, a measure of disaster risk reduction capability is the extent to which target services gain the "tools and supports for managing the climate change reality", as described by a central stakeholder, and adopt them into their business as usual.

In evaluation interviews across project locations social service NGO stakeholders confirmed that the project is meeting a capability gap and providing much-needed sector development in disaster readiness.

In this outcome area, evaluation data suggests limited progress but high-level local interest in continued work towards this goal. Barriers to progress were, universally:

- **time**: by adopting a community development approach to this work, the project has invested time into setting up networks and the work of collaborative readiness and planning commenced in the later stages of the project (see Section 0), and

- **sector resources**: few social service NGOs have the staffing and funding resources for sector development especially in an area such as disaster readiness – a relatively hidden or ignored capability in competitive tendering that no single government agency funds or measures, meaning that organisations struggle to find a way to resource continuous engagement (see Section 4).

Project activities continued after the evaluation data collection periods in each location. These are described as far as possible but stakeholder experiences and outcomes are not measured for post-evaluation activities.

3.5.2 Northern Rivers

A finding from interviews and especially from the focus group with NGO social services sector representatives was that agencies want to do more collective and internal organisational work on embedding disaster preparedness. They sought further project leadership on disaster preparedness.

> It would be great to have more community sector capacity-building. We would bring along our Executive team to a future workshop.

> Organisations need more detailed workshops about disaster planning.

> Resources like a template that guides decision-making.

Stakeholders from the local host organisation agreed that the next step for the project was to develop more comprehensive resources for organisational preparedness. Work was planned within the project's remaining timeframe and resources to support NGO social services with premises in the flood zone to develop evacuation plans.

Following the evaluation period in the Northern Rivers, Resilient Lismore conducted a Disaster Ready Together check-in workshop as a follow-up on collective work towards disaster readiness commenced at the Summit (see Section 3.1.2). They also commenced the Lismore Floodplain NGOs Evacuation Project – a collective disaster readiness planning exercise for NGOs operating from premises in the Lismore flood zone where low rent has attracted social services to establish offices, including services that have not experienced flood events in the CBD.

They have also been collaborating closely with the Reconstruction Authority and local Community Resilience Officers in developing a regional approach to roll-out of the P-CEP model. They reported that some local social sector NGOs had taken on the P-CEP model for their own client groups. One local organisation had trialled the cultural appropriateness of the model for local First Nations communities and provided their findings to the service model developers at the University of Sydney.

3.5.3 Hawkesbury

A flood event that occurred in April 2024 demonstrated to some internal and external stakeholders that community members and also social service NGOs were more aware of where to go for accurate and up-to-date disaster information and were taking earlier action, for example to evacuate livestock in a coordinated way with individuals volunteering the use of their higher-ground paddocks. Social service NGOs were observed to more actively circulate disaster event updates from Council and the SES on social media and via email.

Other stakeholders saw this progress on embedded disaster readiness action as less directly attributable to the CSDC project. They pointed to more experience within the sector from frequent flood events in recent years and multiple disaster readiness initiatives active in the local area, including Hawkesbury Council's Disaster and Emergency Dashboard and its Recovery On Wheels network.

This context is also important because it points to a strength of Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services and their delivery of the CSDC project – these organisations have a strong working relationship with Council and are integral to emergency management agencies' efforts to embed disaster readiness in local communities, including some harder-to-reach groups.

> When you say you're from [agency] people often go, "Oh, bloody [agency]." But then Peppercorn can come from a different angle and – they're Peppercorn. So where we can't get things across like preparedness, when it comes from Peppercorn those people that are negative will be receptive and they'll take it up… it allows you to make headway broader and faster in a community.

> While the research says [emergency management agency] is a trusted voice, in reality if they hear something they're not going to ring [us] to validate it. They're going to ring family, neighbours and services like Peppercorn.

From a community development perspective an observed shift towards embedded risk reduction, resilience and adaptation activities among Hawkesbury social services and community members during the most recent flood event, is indicative that the CSDC project, as an integrated initiative, is on the right track.

The final project event at the Hawkesbury Connect Interagency, held after the project evaluation interview period, presented project report, tools and resources to attendees so that project findings and deliverables can continue to inform the work of social service NGOs in the Hawkesbury region.

3.5.4 Snowy Monaro

Multiple community representative groups who participated in local CSDC workshops (delivering P-CEP together with joint agency information sharing and community discussion, as described at Section above), described in interviews the ways that they have incorporated disaster preparedness into the way that community members work and interact with each other.

> We have met a second time. Everyone was more confident that they knew what would happen in the event of a disaster. Non-drivers had buddied up.

> People have started ringing each other to check if they were okay.

> As an organisation we now have capacity to follow up with community members and keep up conversations about disaster awareness.

Social service NGO representatives expressed a readiness and motivation to embed risk reduction and resilience activities into their business as usual, especially since the Disasters Are Our Business workshop. As in other locations, these organisations have become engaged and motivated by the project's first major collective event and are ready to discuss specific organisational and collective actions and access specific planning tools. They sought regular community meetings on this issue as a form of joint planning and organisational accountability.

> This was a step in the right direction in terms of thinking and getting organised.

> There needs to be another meeting to talk about what would be a plan. What do they do elsewhere?

> We need to plot out a map or directory of community services and develop a sub-committee to keep it up to date, to keep that momentum. They can call a meeting if there is warning of a weather event or disaster.

After the project evaluation interviews were completed, MFSS produced a final report on the Disasters Are Our Business workshop and presented the findings of the report to the Monaro Regional Interagency (with future plans to also present the findings to the LEMC Vulnerability Sub-Committee). These provided opportunity to embed the findings and next steps for local disaster preparedness from the CSDC project,

into the future collaborative work of social service NGOs and emergency management agencies in the Snowy Monaro.

3.5.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

Formal and informal networking and disaster readiness activities are underway as a result of the Vulnerable Communities Emergency Management Workshops:

- Eden Community Access Centre is initiating local informal networking events, with the intent that these will become integrated into local ways of working in the NGO social service sector and continue past the project conclusion date through collective commitment and initiative
- an interagency group for the Bega area is being established, spearheaded by local RA staff, as a result of discussions at the Bega workshop.

In interviews, external stakeholders described the reasons for their commitment to maintaining the momentum for collective disaster preparedness planning built by the workshops:

> We really need to keep having these conversations. Things change, we need to keep on top of it.

> With these connections we have a larger scope of what we can do, like different grant opportunities. We are stronger and more empowered, having that many services working together.

Katungul has completed a *Cultural Burning Road Map* for next steps on embedding cultural burning practices on First Nations community-owned and potentially also government and privately owned land. They are cognisant of the long timeframes likely to be required to achieve this.

> This is the start of a decade of progress. It's not something that is knocked out in a year or two … Getting continuity is critical in this sort of thing.

This was echoed in an interview with a First Nations stakeholder external to Katungul who had been involved with this part of the project.

> Managing the forest is not a six-month program and then you go home. It's a lifetime dedication. We need to keep learning from Elders and also white experts … Look at the environment, not the clock.

Stakeholders highlighted the potential for the cultural burning practices to be self-sustaining, by generating revenue as part of a broader program of active bush management using First Nations practices and principles combined with contemporary science. Examples of revenue raising activities are oyster leases or sustainable logging as part of thinning bushland for the purpose of hazard reduction. These ideas are based on the principle that Australian bushland was actively managed by First Nations communities for tens of thousands of years, and that current bush preservation practices may not be possible to continue in the context of climate change and modern deforestation, urbanisation and agricultural practices that surround national parks.

3.6   Stakeholders' engagement in risk identification and management

	Key Evaluation Question	**Does the program deliver its intended short, medium and long-term outcomes?** **Specifically, for risk assessment and strategic planning activities:-** • **socially inclusive stakeholders and beneficiaries' engagement in risk identification and management.**
Program Logic	**Relevant service activities**	• Engage with NGO social service sector and emergency management agencies and authorities to facilitate information exchange, capacity-building and joint planning between sectors.
	Relevant outputs	• Local integrated strategies are established to reduce disaster risks impacting vulnerable groups and communities.
	Short-term outcomes	• Community stakeholders report being more equipped to take action to reduce disaster risk for themselves and others. • Emergency management agency and NGO social service sector representatives report improved joint networking, coordination and collaboration to reduce disaster risk.
	Medium-term outcomes	• Local disaster risk reduction coordination effectively leverages community and NGO social service sector strengths.

3.6.1 Overall project

This key evaluation question explores the most ambitious program goal, which was to include community in local risk identification and management. It relies on successful delivery of the project's education activities evaluated at Sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.

Engagement in risk identification and management means collaborative decision making in disaster planning, ideally with local agencies responsible for disaster planning.

Short term outcomes against which progress is measured, are (i) that community stakeholders report being more equipped to take action, and (ii) emergency management agency and NGO social service sector representatives report improved joint network, coordination and collaboration to reduce disaster risk.

Data collection on community stakeholders' project experiences and outcomes was limited for reasons outlined at Sections 2.3.4 and 2.3.5. Some interviews were held with community members in the Snowy Monaro and those stakeholders reported that they felt more equipped to reduce disaster risk, for themselves and also for their local communities.

In each location closer links are being achieved between social service NGOs and emergency management agencies. There are also some examples of joint networking, coordination and collaboration to reduce disaster risk and improve focus on vulnerable groups in disaster planning.

Project stakeholders across locations and centrally reported a challenge in joining up community and emergency management planning processes in meaningful ways. This was seen to be a long-term challenge that would require local and state-wide advocacy, partly due to the issue of who can represent the community in a fair and democratic way in planning processes, and what will planning processes look like in local communities as disaster management resources – for example, CRNs – ebb and flow.

Despite this challenge, there are examples at a local level of closer collaboration. Where social service NGOs and emergency management agencies have worked together in this project, stakeholder responses

on each side have usually been positive, especially about outcomes for community members and vulnerable groups.

Case Study – Working at a Community and Government Level

Katungul aimed to build a program of hazard reduction burning in South Coast bushland informed by First Nations traditional knowledge combined with contemporary science and technology. Katungul's intent was to establish this within Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) as a model of what was more broadly possible.

This initiative drew from place-based disaster management priorities and local First Nations knowledge and experience. It would bring together LALCs, community stakeholders and government and emergency management agencies is an investment of time and resources, to achieve positive community and environmental outcomes and reduce risk of high-intensity bushfires in the local area.

Katungul invested considerable time in establishing a working relationship with three local LALCs in order to establish this program. While the approach has had limited success so far, the work is seen through the lens of long-term gain through consistent outreach and ethical conduct to build trust.

A broad range of government agencies have also been approached for support and implementation of this program including the local Rural Fire Service and Councils, NSW Aboriginal Affairs and National Parks and Wildlife Services. This process of lobbying and advocacy for local solutions to a complex program has benefitted from Katungul's ethos of consistency and slow but steady network-building.

Aboriginal Affairs has expressed interest and support for the proposed program.

In each location, local host organisations have gained non-voting membership to their community LEMCs (Katungul is an observer on Eurobodalla for the duration of the project, but not Bega), as observers. This has sometimes been a time-consuming process. This outcome is of considerable value to the project outcome of engaging the community in risk identification and management. It raises social services sector and community visibility, creating possibility for collaboration, input and advice, as LEMC members know who to ask if they have a question. Additionally, the social services sector gains stronger links for information exchange, increasing the likelihood that their information on disaster planning is accurate and up-to-date.

In the project activities described at Sections 3.5.2 to 3.5.5, local host and partner organisations have presented local end-of-pilot project findings, resources and next steps to social service NGO networks and emergency management networks, so that stakeholders may continue to engage in cross-sector networking, risk identification and management beyond the CSDC project timeframe.

3.6.2 Northern Rivers

Resilient Lismore:

- is an observer on the Northern Rivers LEMC
- is a participant in the Lismore CRN
- invited some emergency management agencies and government agencies involved in disaster management to participate in the Disaster Ready Together Summit.

Drawing on these new links with emergency management agencies and the sector development and capacity building activities of the CSDC project, professional networks between emergency management authorities and the NGO social services sector are growing in the Northern Rivers – faster with some agencies and authorities than others. Motivation was expressed on all sides during project evaluation

interviews to work more closely together, especially in order to deliver joint work on disaster preparedness with vulnerable and traumatised groups.

A stakeholder from an emergency management agency highlighted the project's work in summarising vulnerability data (see Section 0 above) as informing their agency's understanding of local need with regard to disaster preparedness. This is an example of the project's progress towards an intended medium-term outcome that local disaster management agencies and authorities demonstrate improved identification and understanding of local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk.

A different emergency management agency valued the Summit as an opportunity to connect with the NGO social services sector and exchange information and ideas but found there were barriers to building these connections formally or informally at the event. This stakeholder saw the project's work linking up emergency management agencies with the NGO social services sector and community as being in its early stages and sought further collaboration in future.

3.6.3 Hawkesbury

Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services engaged in multiple activities to strengthen socially inclusive stakeholders and beneficiaries' engagement in risk identification on management. Peppercorn

- is an observer on Hawkesbury LEMC
- attends and actively support activities of Hawkesbury Council's Recovery on Wheels disaster readiness interagency network
- engages in joint planning and delivery of P-CEP and preparedness information events with agencies such as RFS, Council and Service NSW (My Aged Care).
- consulted on local disaster management strategy including Heatwatch (WSROC) and Hawkesbury Nepean Valley Disaster Adaptation Plan.

The 'Dismiss the Myths' Disaster Symposium was a critical point in the project to seek government and emergency management agencies' responses to community needs and priorities identified in project activities up to that point, but especially the prior sector workshop and the qualitative interview process. Agencies including the RFS, DCJ, NSWRA and Hawkesbury City Council were provided community questions and concerns before the Symposium and invited to attend in order to respond.

There were mixed perceptions among evaluation interview respondents of the extent to which community stakeholders' engagement with risk identification and management was recognised by emergency management at the Symposium. Not all stakeholders had a sense that they had been heard.

> People didn't feel like they got transparency … because a lot of the questions that they were asking, the panel sort-of said, "Oh look, I'd have to flick that upstairs to get that information. So all that's beyond my ability to answer," and then so people didn't feel that they came to the party, they didn't answer the question.

Hawkesbury stakeholders identified in interviews that Peppercorn's strategy to build community activities on the foundation of the P-CEP disaster planning service model was beneficial because it built community members' skills in recognising risks relevant to their own circumstances and vulnerabilities and planning for those risks.

3.6.4 Snowy Monaro

Monaro Family Support Service:

- is an observer on the Monaro LEMC and chairs the Sub-Committee on vulnerability
- has regular meetings and joint planning with Council including briefing on community disaster preparedness concerns and ideas
- engages in joint planning and delivery of P-CEP and preparedness information events with agencies such as RFS, Red Cross and Police
- consulted on local and state disaster strategy, e.g. Snowy Monaro Pre-Event Recovery Plan (NSWRA) and NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan.

A broad range of stakeholders in interviews described the success of the CSDC Project in raising stakeholders' engagement in local risk identification and management. MFSS has advocated and partnered on multiple fronts to communicate the needs identified within local communities to emergency management authorities and structures:

- MFSS now has a place on the LEMC as an observer
- the LEMC now has a Sub-Committee on vulnerability and MFSS is a member
- in community workshops jointly facilitated by MFSS and emergency management agencies, community members were able to raise local risks, and emergency management agency representatives said in interviews that this has improved their understanding of local risks and vulnerabilities
- community, emergency management and local host organisation stakeholders were confident that community workshops were reducing risks and vulnerabilities identified (acknowledging that systems change was also necessary in some areas, such as timing and circulation of evacuation advice).

The attendance of a broad range of government and emergency management agencies involved in disaster management and response allowed local NGO social services to directly raise concerns about the risks they identified in their own work and with their service user cohorts. Responses of government and emergency management agencies were reportedly variable.

> Some of them still have a culture of giving top-down advice without bothering to understand how that plan would apply at a local level. They get so involved in the details of their own role that they lose interest in the bigger picture and the complexities that come with different vulnerabilities.

3.6.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

Katungul is on Eurobodalla LEMC as an observer for the duration of the CSDC pilot with the possibility to remain on the committee if the work of the pilot is continued in any future arrangement. Endeavours to observe at Bega LEMC have not succeeded. Katungul engaged with local and central SES representatives on the agency's community engagement and capacity-building activities on the South Coast including a pilot of Flood Warden training (disaster management training for community members in two locations at risk of isolation during a flood), and establishment of a local Manager, Partnerships and Stakeholder Engagement.

As described at Section 3.5.5, Katungul has engaged with government, emergency management agencies, LALCs and other stakeholders on roadmap development to build a program of cultural burning for bushfire prevention and land management.

The CSDC project in Bega/ Eurobodalla had two aims with regard to the engagement of socially inclusive stakeholders and beneficiaries in risk identification and management:

- find ways for community priorities and concerns, as voiced by community members and representatives of the NGO social services sector, to inform local disaster management strategy, in line with broader project aims
- link up agencies using First Nations practices for hazard reduction burning with emergency management agencies, so that these cultural burning practices are recognised and accounted for as an effective disaster management approach on the NSW South Coast.

This dual focus was acknowledged by internal project stakeholders as ambitious and difficult to execute as timing became more critical.

In the Bega/ Eurobodalla area, the CSDC project is in the earliest stages of improving engagement between emergency management agencies, the NGO social services sector and other community representatives, and LALCs and other agencies willing to trial cultural hazard reduction burns.

Stakeholders interviewed were satisfied over-all with emergency management agencies' representation and engagement in the Vulnerable Communities Emergency Management Workshops.

Survey respondents from emergency management agencies involved in the project mentioned new or different actions they might take such as "I will investigate opportunities to work with NGOs to better align in future," and "better connection with newly identified local organisations I was previously unaware of".

Outside of the workshops, the local host and partner organisations' endeavours to engage with Local Emergency Management Committees was variable. Katungul had a place on the Eurobodalla LEMC as an observer for the duration of the project, with the possibility of continuation if the work of the pilot is able to be progressed in future. This has not been achieved with Bega Valley LEMC despite multiple attempts to engage via the LEMO.

With regard to cultural burning, Katungul has engaged with Aboriginal Affairs NSW and has had some initial discussions with local RFS teams, which have stalled while the RFS updates their Bush Fire Risk Management Plans. They observed in interviews that when it comes to local establishment of cultural burning practices, they "have not had a lot of success in terms of getting the RFS bureaucracy to understand they have a role to play".

A stakeholder in Katungul raised in an interview the level of skill and experience required to engage with ACCOs and also with government agencies. In both of these spheres, goodwill is "hard earned and slips away fairly rapidly," impacted by staff turnover at both ends, local and broader politics that shift organisational priorities, and project timeframes.

Discussions between the Bega LALC CEO and the RFS District Manager Far South Coast, were held in January regarding LALC representation on the Eurobodalla & Bega Valley Shire Bush Fire Management Committees. LALC representative have since joined the committees.

After the project evaluation interview period, final meetings were held with the CEOs of the Bega, Batemans Bay and Merrimans LALCs. All have confirmed the *Cultural Burning Road Map* will be helpful in providing direction to future cultural burning programs.

The Batemans Bay LALC ranger advised that an issue forecasted within the *Road Map* had already created delays to the Princes Highway cultural burning initiated by Transport for NSW, and that its recommendations provided guidance in dealing with those delays. He also advised that he would like to

have a presentation on the *Road Map* made at the next LALC cultural burning workshop to be held near Batemans Bay later in 2024.

The limited progress to date in this outcome area is foreseeable given that project work in the area had only been active for six to seven months at the time of evaluation – and given the findings in this evaluation that effective stakeholder engagement takes time, especially with First Nations communities.

4.   Barriers

Key Evaluation Question 2

What were the barriers in implementing the project? What are the future issues, uncertainties, interdependencies, and risks in upscaling and replicating the project?

Summary outcome finding

Project locations shared some barriers to implementation that should inform any future extension, replication or expansion of the CSDC project pilot – particularly related to NGO social services sector resources to participate in sector development, capacity of the project to engage in a sustained way with First Nations communities within current project parameters; and ability of emergency management agencies to incorporate community needs and priorities in a systemic way.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are to progress broader lessons learned from this pilot for government and funding agencies responsible for disaster risk reduction.

3. Government and funding agencies address the historic level of disengagement between emergency services and social services identified in this pilot as an ongoing barrier to leveraging the assets of social services regarding vulnerable populations towards better disaster preparedness and response. This requires:

   - cultural change in emergency services' structures and practices

   - ongoing NGO social service sector development regarding disaster risk reduction

   - appropriate community-level resources and support in each of these sectors for the work of collaborating to improve community-level outcomes.

4. Government and funding agencies invest in NGO social service sector disaster risk reduction, on an ongoing basis. Social service organisations offer significant infrastructure and expertise for engaging and planning with vulnerable communities – however these NGOs are currently funded to deliver specific services and outcomes for which they are accountable.

   a) To adequately leverage their capabilities towards disaster risk reduction requires annual investment in local coordination and engagement over the long-term. As climate change brings more extreme and frequent disaster events to local communities, it is not realistic or sustainable to expect organisations to include disaster risk reduction as an unfunded component on top of their funded obligations.

   b) This includes community-based health, disability, aged care and early childhood education and care services who would benefit from joining up with NGO community services and local emergency management agencies to plan for the disaster readiness of their organisations and their service users.

4.1.1 Over-all project

Resources in NGO social services sector

A key barrier raised in every project location has been that social services NGOs' participation in CSDC project activities – especially those focused on community development goals such as collective strategy and planning, joint capacity building and networking – is not funded. Many participants are effectively donating their personal time in order to be there or redirecting resources supported by other funding

streams. The resourcing constraints especially impacted disability service providers working with individual funding packages and was raised by neighbourhood centres as a barrier to further project engagement.

This has impacted joint work and also the kinds of vulnerable groups reached by the project so far.

> Who was missing? Who did not engage? We heard directly from organisations who wanted to engage but had no capacity or staffing resources to participate, [like] community aged care, and early childhood.

> Older people living alone are really difficult to engage. They are not necessarily accessing community services.

To overcome this barrier in the Hawkesbury, Peppercorn and Bligh Park Community Services made a decision to pay organisations (that were not government or lead agencies) for their time to participate in the qualitative interviews they conducted to inform local CSDC project activities and directions. They gained 30 interviews in this process. This strategy is replicable in some but not all circumstances.

Overall, the NGO social services sector offers significant infrastructure to emergency preparedness and response, and expertise for engaging with and planning for vulnerable communities. However, these NGOs are currently funded to deliver specific services and outcomes for which they are accountable. To adequately leverage their capabilities towards disaster preparedness and response requires a small annual investment over the long-term.

First Nations organisations and communities

Stakeholders in every location and centrally said that the project had more work to do in building disaster risk reduction capability in First Nations communities, and capability of emergency management agencies to understand and address First Nations-specific risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacities. There are examples within the project of disaster risk reduction harnessing First Nations knowledge and expertise. In particular, Katungul's work in the Bega/ Eurobodalla region to establish First Nations cultural burning practices for bushfire hazard reduction. The work of Rekindling the Spirit in the Northern Rivers and the First Nations keynote speaker and presenters at this region's Disaster Ready Together Summit were highlighted as changing local services' understanding of how to work with First Nations organisations and communities.

However, effective collaboration at a community level was most often raised as a project challenge or barrier rather than a strength.

Specific barriers to First Nations engagement raised in interviews were:

- time – most frequently, stakeholders highlighted that genuine connections and trust take time to build, and the time limits built into this project have impacted the inroads that could be made with local First Nations communities
- capacity of First Nations organisations, disproportionately impacted by competing priorities in the communities they serve and staffing turnover
- local networks and relationships, with some local host organisations reporting insufficient time and resources to forge new connections in this space in a respectful and culturally sensitive way.

As highlighted in Section 3.1.5, disaster-related trauma in First Nations communities compounds other traumas related to historic and current acts of systemic and personal racism and violence.

Emergency management agencies

In each location local host and partner organisations had developed positive and highly productive working relationships with individuals or local branches of emergency management agencies. These are highlighted throughout Section 3 above.

However, each location experienced challenges at some point in establishing a way to secure a community voice in the planning processes of emergency management agencies, with policies regarding community participation appearing to be locally determined. Central and local project stakeholders identified this as an area for high-level advocacy and reform as a cultural shift and state-wide policy changes are required.

> During the [last local disaster event] there was a really big expectation on community services to step up. Now, LEMOs have put the barriers back up. That sends a message that the sector is not valued … The top end want to push a lot more responsibility on to the community sector and volunteers but they're not willing to resource it properly or even discuss what that might look like.

4.1.2 Northern Rivers

Post-disaster NGO resources

From evaluation interviews in the Northern Rivers, it was highlighted that the ongoing impacts of disasters such as COVID-19 and the 2022 flood event added complexity to the issue of limited NGO resources (as outlined above). Local organisations' staffing capacity continues to be limited by ongoing impacts on childcare access, healthcare access and NGO operation out of temporary or work-from-home premises. Additionally, stakeholders reported trying to get 'business as usual' or 'core business' back up and running, in the face of continued increased service demand as a result of recent disasters.

Disaster preparedness is not funded as part of this core work and is difficult to prioritise in the context of service users' need for ongoing disaster recovery support.

Project timing

In order to do the early work of defining, mapping and joining up the vast landscape of NGO social services in target LGAs (the need for which is discussed at Section 6.1.2), the CSDC Project in the Northern Rivers area has been impacted by time limitations in delivering community and NGO sector capacity-building activities.

4.1.3 Hawkesbury

Service sector engagement

Peppercorn has strong relationships with Hawkesbury community members and NGO social services, and has a positive local reputation for its long-standing work in disaster recovery support and P-CEP delivery and training.

However, their work to bring community groups, social service NGOs and emergency management agencies together to work on disaster preparedness for vulnerable groups, was completed in the context of ongoing trauma and recovery from consecutive flooding events. For some community representative groups in particular, previous disaster and ongoing recovery experiences have strained their relationships with emergency management agencies. The work of the CSDC project in initiating new ways of working together was complex.

Project structure

Constraints related to the CSDC project's funding grant process and structure included: late commencement, following delayed NSWRA announcement of funded projects and the time taken to conduct the Expression of Interest process and contract local organisations; and the resource intensiveness of project meetings and reporting requirements, discussed further at Section 8, which Local Project staff saw as detracting from time available for delivery of project activities.

4.1.4 Snowy Monaro

NGO social service sector engagement

Monaro Family Support Service observed a variable rate of engagement in project activities by local social service NGOs. Those that did not engage, or attempted to engage but could not commit sufficient resources, faced resource barriers, as described at Section 4.

> We have discovered varying abilities and willingness and opportunity for different community service organisations to engage deeply in this space. For example, fee-for-service organisations are not funded to participate. Organisations not locally based or managed may not understand the importance or relevance of the work. Not all of them will see equally that they have a role to play. It needs to align with their purpose and values.

An additional local project barrier raised during interviews was the momentum within the NGO social service sector to plan for a future disaster. In the context of competing priorities and absent or indirect funding for the work of disaster preparedness, some organisations had limited interest in disaster management after the initial recovery stage. Some had experienced relatively marginal impacts of the Black Summer bushfires on their operation and their service user groups and had less impetus to include disaster preparedness and risk reduction in their strategic policy and operations. In this context, the staff at MFSS described the amount of work involved in committing some organisations to participate in project activities.

> It took multiple follow-up phone calls and flexibility on the day about who turned up and who didn't. We were having to ask people to effectively donate their time to the work, which wasn't easy.

Project resources

The MFSS team found that the project's documentation, reporting and accountability activities were at times overwhelming, especially in the context of part-time employment and the high volume of local meetings necessary to keep program objectives on track. The splitting of the South Coast and Snowy Monaro into two projects resulted in significantly reduced resources for the Snowy Monaro project relative to the other three projects, contributing to the reporting burden for this project.

4.1.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

Stakeholder engagement

The engagement of ACCOs for both capacity-building and cultural burning project activities has been a core project challenge for the Bega/ Eurobodalla region.

For cultural burning in particular, Katungul's stakeholder engagement aims were ambitious in their intent to deliver new ways of working not only between Katungul and each of the seven local LALCs, but between LALCs and relevant government agencies. This requires trust built over the longer term.

Project timeframes

Contract delays reduced the period of operation for both Katungul and ECAC. Given the nature of the work, this reduced the local host and partner organisation's capacity to deliver project outputs and achieve its intended short-term outcomes, measurable after 1-2 years of service delivery.

5.   Lessons learned

Key Evaluation Question 3

What lessons can we learn for future work in disaster risk reduction:

    a.   for participating NGO social services?

    b.   for Project Partners and funders?

    c.   for Emergency Management and other local disaster management stakeholders?

A project deliverable was to identify local lessons learned from previous disaster events, to inform disaster risk reduction in future. These have been identified in different ways in each location and are included in project deliverables including:

- Lessons Learned Report (Northern Rivers, October 2023)
- Risks and Vulnerabilities/ Assets and Strengths Report (Northern Rivers, November 2023)
- Risks and Vulnerabilities/ Assets and Strengths Report (Hawkesbury, November 2023)
- Summary document, leading themes analysis of qualitative interviews (Hawkesbury, April 2024)
- Project final report and local summary reports of locational disaster risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and capacity (NCOSS, June 2024).

During evaluation interviews, stakeholders were asked what they learned, and what they hoped would be learned from this DRRF pilot program. Themes from responses are outlined below.

Summary outcome finding

Local host and partner organisations conducted early research and analysis of lessons learned from management of past disaster events in their locations, to inform the strategic directions of their CSDC projects. From their project experiences, project stakeholders shared lessons they learned on joint action for local and high-level change, clarity of purpose in a community development approach, and the importance of the values of relationships and local capacity-building for future change.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are to progress broader lessons learned from this pilot for government and funding agencies responsible for disaster risk reduction.

5. Government and funding agencies incorporate community development approaches into disaster risk reduction strategy, policy and programs. There is a growing body of research evidence regarding community development. These evidence-informed approaches need to be applied towards building community disaster resilience through organisations who are already well-engaged with high-priority populations. Community development requires an investment over time and should be funded accordingly.

6. Government and funding agencies continue the services piloted in the CSDC project within its current locations, and consider options to expand the program to new regional locations in NSW.

5.1   Lessons for participating NGO social services

NGO stakeholders reported that they made new connections and/or gained a broader understanding of their sector in the exercise of defining the social service 'sector' in their location that has service users who experience vulnerability in disaster events.

Some were reminded of the value of joining up and planning together – a practice impacted by COVID and funding shifts towards market-based service models and competitive tendering.

5.2   Lessons for project partners and funders

Learnings that project partners will take to any future iterations of this pilot primarily related to managing the dual timelines of place-based capacity building (best achieved gradually) and communicating program impacts to government bodies and funding agencies (best achieved promptly).

The scale of project ambitions across large geographical areas over short delivery timeframes was a salient lesson for project partners in the importance of robust project planning. Reporting and delivery pressures in within the project highlighted the need to ensure all activities are appropriately factored into project design and planning, including commissioning, contracting, relationship development and community development methods.

Project partners were interested in how the project might join up local action and state-wide advocacy in different ways in future. They acknowledged the level of government interest and were looking at ways to harness that while giving space for locations to actively listen to community stakeholders about disaster risk and risk reduction. At the local levels some stakeholders were more familiar with ways of working in this project area than others.

Some stakeholders have sought clarity on the project's purpose and intended deliverables. Government agency representatives in particular were more likely to request in their survey and interview feedback the delivery of community-based plans or actions they could resource, support or otherwise join up with. This is another area where government processes mis-align with the project's community development approach, but there was potential for these timelines to connect as sector events in the second half of the project built motivation, collective purpose and desire for community-wide planning and action.

5.3   Lessons for emergency management and local disaster management stakeholders

Most emergency management agency representatives who responded to evaluation surveys and interviews said that they connected with community members they had not been able to reach before, and that community engagement was much higher for them when partnering with NGOs. They saw the cost-effectiveness of joint disaster preparedness work with local social services and many sought better recognition of this from funding bodies and decision-makers in both sectors.

Some, on the other hand, sought better connection with project activities and goals, but this appeared also to be driven by their recognition of the value of joint work to influence community preparedness.

5.4   Broader lessons learned from the pilot

Broader key messages, detailed below, were raised by diverse survey and interview participants in every location (and from central project stakeholders) – across government, emergency management, community and NGO social service sectors.

Recognise the value of a community development approach to disaster readiness
Stakeholders frequently expressed that the project activities in which they participated were highly valuable to them and to the work they did, and they wanted this value to be recognised. This encompassed the formal networking and joint planning and also the informal engagement that local host and partner organisations invested in as part of their community development approach. Stakeholders were positive that local community and NGO social service sector stakeholders could contribute more to disaster management, to mutual benefit of community and government.

> It's going to cost a lot less money to fund someone already embedded in the community and already proactive in the emergency preparedness space.

There is a currently a significant gap, with community development services and activities not funded for many communities, and community service organisations well placed to build local disaster preparedness capacity and capability closing down because of lack of funding.

Invest time

Stakeholders valued the CSDC project's investment in relationships and acknowledged that the establishment of trust can take more time than the pilot structure provided, particularly with vulnerable groups experiencing disaster-related trauma (see Section 4). The community development approach of the CSDC project requires investment of time, and stakeholders had positive experiences with this approach and want the time to do the work of networking and capacity building properly and – when it comes to vulnerable groups traumatised by disaster - ethically.

> We can reduce time spent in recovery [after a disaster event] by doing this work properly, but it's a process. It doesn't happen overnight.

The CSDC project approach and activities challenged local host and partner organisations to build new ways of working between the emergency management and social services sectors. This has been slow and complex work, and stakeholders saw a lesson for government and funding agencies that time must be committed to this important area of work so that it can continue to be a local priority. The project has identified opportunities for social service organisations to collaborate with emergency management agencies to build their understanding of vulnerability in the context of disasters - with two-way learning and capacity building based on mutual respect and recognition of each other's expertise and skillset.

Related to time is consistency. Stakeholders want to see this work as ongoing in local communities, so that disaster planning and capacity building can account for the dynamic nature of disasters and for change in the NGO social services sector.

Resource disaster preparedness in everyone's work

At every level of the project stakeholders have called for disaster preparedness to be resourced as part of core business for NGO social services managing risk for vulnerable groups, so that:

- organisations can afford to attend training (such as P-CEP), capacity-building (such as CSDC activities) and joint disaster planning
- organisations can document their lessons learned and plans for future events appropriately, so that working knowledge of disaster recovery is less likely to be lost after an event and more likely to inform future disaster planning
- there is more likely to be policy and practice development in the space.

> There should be resources built into contracts for community wellbeing projects for disaster readiness. Then things can happen more quickly and easily when a disaster occurs.

> We're in an environment where we are going to continue to be disaster affected, without a doubt. If you lose that knowledge and those skills and that information you then have to start again.

> This work is long-term and it needs to be embedded in the community sector.

Part of value is recognition and measuring the contribution that community representative groups and agencies already make before, during and after a disaster.

> The reality is we're not a 24/7 service. The preparedness infrastructure assumes that we are. Do not overestimate what NGO infrastructure offers to the community. They need to recognise the work we do and value and resource it properly.

6.   Networking and relationship building

Key Evaluation Question 4

What (if any) working relationships and/or networks are newly active or strengthened as a result of this project?

Summary outcome finding

The CSDC project built many new relationships and disaster risk reduction networks, for example between:

- local social service NGOs which networked through CSDC project activities
- social services and other services with vulnerable service users, such as in disability services, health, aged care and early childhood education and care
- local services and peak body project lead agencies
- local host and local partner organisations and peak body project lead agencies
- local services and community groups and local government and emergency management agencies.

6.1.1 Overall project

The survey responses indicate significant progress in this area across each of the locations.

Event feedback surveys for culminating sector events in each location found that approximately 83% of stakeholders across the project identified networking as something about their respective event that they found valuable to their organisation

Of the 28 project evaluation survey respondents (across all locations) who responded to a question on the project's greatest achievement for them, 17 (60%) mentioned networking or relationship building. Some specified networking in relation to geography, some spoke about networking in the NGO social services sector and some mentioned the new ties between emergency management agencies and NGOs.

> It has been great to see the clear relationships built between emergency managers/ response personnel and community sector directly. I think this is a valuable and unique arrangement that will serve the area well in the future.

Across locations, stakeholders raised in surveys and interviews that a legacy of this project is the new networks that local host and partner organisations have formed during the CSDC project period. In each location there is evidence of new connections between social service NGOs, with many stakeholders remarking on the inclusion of service providers in disability, health, aged care and early childhood education and care. There is also evidence of inclusion of local government and emergency management agencies in these networks as a result of CSDC project events.

Like sector development, professional networking and coordinated planning are areas of work for which target social service NGOs reported difficulty finding the resources to participate. At one workshop, a stakeholder raised that a number of participants were effectively donating time to be part of the collaborative effort to reduce disaster risk, because their organisation did not receive funding to do that work. This is addressed at Section 5.

In each location, internal project stakeholders identified their all-teams project network as a valuable project outcome that increased their learning and development in disaster risk reduction.

> Hearing our strengths and challenges echoed has been very affirming.

6.1.2 Northern Rivers

When asked if they had developed new connections for future action on disaster risk reduction:

- 83% of survey respondents from the target LGAs (43 of 52) said they had new connections from the Summit

- 28.5% from the target LGAs (15 of 52) said they had new connections from the project as a whole

- including respondents from all LGAs, 86.5% (64 of 74) said they had new connections from the Summit.

Diverse examples of new connections were provided by 25 respondents, including across university and research teams, local government, state government agencies, legal services, community organisations, First Nations academics, and Police.

More than three quarters of event feedback survey respondents (77%) nominated 'networking' as something about the Summit they found valuable to their organisation.

8 out of 17 survey respondents in the target LGAs said they worked differently with other organisations as a result of the Disaster Ready Together Project in the Northern Rivers. Examples included collaborative data collection, better connections with people working directly with community members, and new collaborative activities such as a group set up to deliver P-CEP Connect.

In interviews, a broad range of stakeholders highlighted that professional networking and joint work on disaster risk reduction was a critical and successful program component.

> A lot of the organisations had been going so hard on their own recovery and sky-rocketing client loads. They had been working out of their usual offices and homes and been asked for more at a time when they had less. The workshop and the Summit gave them the opportunity to take stock and make connections.
>
> Grassroots workers were able to connect and talk. Sure, there is stuff going on at the leadership level, but it was great to network informally and network around preparedness.

These relationships were described as hard to measure, but tangible to people on the ground, as an outcome that can live on after the project.

Interviewees spoke highly of the regular Disaster Ready Together newsletter, which shares local initiatives and activities and helps people feel connected. The newsletter has grown from an initial database of 96 email addresses to 540 addresses as of April 2024.

A number of stakeholders, both within and outside of the local host and partner organisations, said that the connections they made with the project lead agencies were highly valuable to their organisation.

6.1.3 Hawkesbury

In the Hawkesbury's project evaluation survey, 4 out of 9 respondents said the project had increased the number of people or organisations they worked with on disaster risk reduction. The examples they provided included:

- the Recovery on Wheels network run by Council
- NCOSS
- local working groups and reference groups.

One survey respondent who works in a government agency said:

> The project has enabled me to connect with more local community stakeholders and raise awareness at regional and state forums of the needs of disaster affected people and communities. This may eventually lead to policy changes or protocols to improve services provided during and after disasters.

In response to the project evaluation question on whether their organisation works differently with other organisations as a result of the project, 30% of the 10 respondents who answered the question said yes. The examples they provided were: more connection with local community stakeholders; connection with Hawkesbury Council's Recovery on Wheels network; and connections with other community networks.

Of the 7 event feedback survey respondents from the Dismiss the Myths Disaster Knowledge Symposium:

- 5 agreed they had developed new connections for future action on disaster risk reduction, with examples spanning government, emergency management and social sector agencies
- 5 nominated 'networking' as something about the Symposium they found valuable to their organisation.

In interviews and surveys, Hawkesbury stakeholders reported that their involvement with CSDC project activities opened up new networks for them within the NGO social services sector, or with emergency management agencies.

Internal project stakeholders in the Hawkesbury sought more opportunity for cross-fertilisation between CSDC project locations and further opportunities for joint advocacy.

6.1.4 Snowy Monaro

4 out of 7 survey respondents responding as a stakeholder from an organisation said they worked differently with other organisations as a result of the CSDC project in the Snowy Monaro. Examples included: more active updates on each other's activities; and better understanding of each other's roles and potential strengths in the event of a disaster.

When asked whether the project had increased their connections:

- 88% (15 of 17) said they had new connections from the Disasters Are Our Business workshop
- 62.5% (5 of 8) said they had new connections from the project as a whole.

One survey respondent noted that, "there is a long way to go to develop communications and plans among local services and this is a great start."

100% of 17 event feedback survey respondents nominated 'networking' as something about the workshop they found valuable to their organisation.

Almost every stakeholder interviewed said that they wanted the networks and relationships that were started during this project to be honoured by continued investment.

> Relationships make everything work faster in a crisis.

> Having those networks established and having those community champions greatly assists disaster readiness. You would be building it from scratch otherwise. Networking is a disaster preparedness activity.

The relationships established by this project between emergency management authorities and NGO social service sector organisations, not just limited to MFSS, were highly valued by a number of project stakeholders.

> It was great having the Reconstruction Authority and other emergency management authorities in the room [at the Disasters Are Our Business workshop]. That broke down barriers and started new relationships.

Multiple stakeholders observed that the community workshops and events had helped small rural communities to re-establish neighbourhood relationships after COVID-19 and have informal discussions about disaster readiness.

> It has made people more aware of who is in the community. It's reduced isolation. That helps with their mental health … We can use regular events like bingo to check in on people's plans.

> COVID just trashed the whole community … The telephone communication [from this project] re-awakened old pre-COVID networks.

6.1.5 Bega/ Eurobodalla

When asked if they had developed new connections for future action on disaster risk reduction:

- 92% of survey respondents (24 of 26) said they had new connections from the workshops
- 2 respondents (8%) said they had not made new connections from the CSDC project or the workshops specifically.

Diverse examples were provided by 17 respondents, spanning local service providing agencies, emergency management agencies, NCOSS, early childhood education and care providers and health services.

88% of 26 event feedback survey respondents nominated 'networking' as something about the workshop they found valuable to their organisation.

Out of 4 survey respondents with broader project involvement:

- 2 said they had new connections from the CSDC project
- 2 said their organisations works differently with other organisations as a result of this project.

Stakeholder interviews were undertaken too early in the Bega/ Eurobodalla's service delivery process to gain insights into networking and relationship building outcomes, especially in the community and NGO sector.

It is notable that survey results show the value of the Vulnerable Communities Emergency Preparedness workshops to local stakeholders, especially for networking and relationship development. This speaks to

the calibre and collaborative structure of the events and ECAC's continuous engagement with stakeholders throughout their short delivery period.

The tenacity and time investment of relationship development activities in the cultural burning program are described at Section 3.6.5 and the Case Study – Working at a Community and Government Level at Section 3.6.1.

7.   Local innovation

Key Evaluation Question 4

What (if any) local innovations and positive changes to disaster risk reduction can be described from this project?

Summary outcome finding

This evaluation report describes a broad range of positive changes to disaster risk reduction. Capacity for disaster identification and management has been built for individuals, organisations and communities. The appetite for further work and more coordinated action is generally expressed by stakeholders in the context that the first steps have already been taken and that these steps are valued and need to be continued.

7.1.1 Northern Rivers

Seven survey respondents said that the project's fostering of networks and professional relationships was its greatest achievement.

Four respondents highlighted new tools, resources or information they had gained from the project, including how to access local data.

Multiple survey and interview responses raised the calibre and success of the Summit as a means of improving local disaster risk management awareness and knowledge and bringing people together on this issue. Key elements of its success were:

- the decision to host it locally meant that it was affordable and convenient for community service organisations to attend
- quality of presentations and diversity of presenters, in terms of gender and culture but also in terms of stakeholder type – people heard presentations from academics, service providers and government agencies
- diversity of attendees, drawing from across the social services sector, not limited to community services providers.

7.1.2 Hawkesbury

Peppercorn invested significant time and resources into conducting and analysing 30 qualitative interviews in order to have high quality local data on the disaster risk reduction needs of the local community. The subsequent summary report and key themes analysis provide a platform for future local and high-level advocacy and collaboration with local emergency management agencies.

During evaluation interviews for the Hawkesbury, an emergency management agency representative stated that their work is more likely to be guided by high-quality data on collective community needs and concerns, rather than questions from individuals, because it is difficult to dedicate resources to one-off issues. As a result of the CSDC project, the local community now has a data resource sufficiently trusted by community stakeholders and sufficiently reliable in quality for emergency management agencies, to potentially inform positive change in disaster risk reduction for vulnerable groups.

In this context, the Risks, Vulnerabilities and Assets (RiVA) mapping tool for each of the seven project LGAs commissioned by NCOSS, may be a useful resource for engaging emergency management agencies in CSDC project findings.

7.1.3 Snowy Monaro

In the Snowy Monaro, the project's full potential with regard to advocacy for systemic change has been demonstrated. MFSS engaged effectively with project lead agencies, particularly NCOSS, to advocate for the local community's disaster readiness needs in state and federal government policy spaces (see Section 3.4.4). MFSS was also instrumental in the development of the Roles of NGOs in Disaster Management resource, published on the NCOSS website, which social services can use to scope their role in the various phases of disasters and to inform advocacy to government and Emergency Management agencies.

The MFSS demonstrated a creative and locally tailored approach to community resilience and preparedness, for example through their community 'Preparedness Support' sessions and their 'Let's Get Packing' resources. Leveraging their strong local reputation and networks, this project successfully engaged vulnerable community members to build disaster preparedness at the individual and community level. This provides proof of concept for the role of social service NGOs in disaster preparedness.

In their direct work with vulnerable communities, they complemented capacity-building activities with new pathways for escalating disaster risk reduction needs that require input, change or decision-making from local emergency management agencies, via the local LEMC and their vulnerability subcommittee.

7.1.4 Bega/ Eurobodalla

Since the beginning of their involvement with the CSDC Project, Katungul has intended to achieve a program that supports NSW South Coast landowners – First Nations, government and private – to take up cultural burning practices. Their intent to deliver this in a way that reduces a number of different disaster risks for local First Nations people and communities demonstrates an innovative response to a local risk:

- addressing vulnerabilities within target First Nations communities by creating local jobs that strengthen connection to Country and culture
- reducing risk of high-intensity bushfires in future by managing local bushland with combined traditional and science-based knowledge
- building capacity within the local community at every level to work collaboratively.

This is a shift that requires change at every level, from community to legislation.

While the cultural burning arm of this project has experienced a range of challenges and is in its earliest stages, its six-month program of negotiation with a range of stakeholders has initiated local discussions about disaster risk reduction and built capacity within Katungul to deliver this complex work in the longer term.

> There are skills and experience required to work with LALCs but also to work with government agencies.

PART C: PROJECT FACTORS IMPACTING RESULTS

8. Governance and reporting

8.1 Leadership

Project lead agencies

A finding of the process evaluation in February 2024 was that local host and partner organisations highly valued the support provided by the project lead agencies, including:

- monthly All Teams Catch-Ups
- monthly NCOSS/Local Coordinator catch-ups
- ad-hoc support, including in-person support, provided on request and/or in response to issues.

The process evaluation report highlighted that project lead agencies' networking and support role has been crucial in these diverse projects finding a shared voice and purpose. This was confirmed in evaluation interviews in which multiple stakeholders highlighted the support of the project lead agencies – especially with regard to advocacy and networking – as a key contributor to project outcomes.

Some stakeholders observed that the role of project lead agencies in advocating on matters of statewide importance identified locally, could be developed further in step with local progress on joint planning and collective action, as described at Section 3.2.1.

Place-based project leadership

The project has a broad reach – partly in its design intent to bring together local NGO social services and community representative groups and establish communication and action pathways with emergency management agencies. Partly, this reach is the result of the high level of state and national interest in communities' disaster readiness experiences and innovations (see Section 10).

For local projects to fully engage in each of these spheres, the project requires a dual focus on service delivery and strategic management. Some stakeholders observed that engagement of local host and partner organisation CEOs or other leaders, was an effective way to manage this and to maximise the project's advocacy potential, as they had recognition and authority in networking activities and represented the project's strategic goals in key events, particularly those involving community leaders.

8.1.1 Recommendation

The following recommendation is to progress broader lessons learned from this pilot for government and funding agencies responsible for disaster risk reduction.

7. Government and funding agencies link place-based disaster risk reduction activities with relevant peak bodies in the way they are designed and resourced. Place-based projects need to have a clear line of communication with relevant peak bodies who understand local context and can speak into relevant state or federal policy contexts. The involvement of peak organisations, whether or not as a lead organisation, is a highly effective way to ensure that lessons from local delivery are able to inform central policy, strategy and governance decisions.

8.2 Governance

The project's governance structure links up local service delivery with broader (state-wide or national) expertise and activity in a number of ways:

- the Project Reference Group (PRG) comprises stakeholders with broad interests and expertise, offering diverse project connections, advocacy networks and advice sources
- project Lead Agencies provide practical support and advice on project establishment and delivery, and support communication and information-sharing across the four locations
- local reference groups were an optional project component for Local Lead Agencies, offering localised networking and advice opportunities.

These links help to share ideas and ways of working, and to escalate and address systemic issues (such as: working with NDIS frameworks and systems; navigating state-wide disaster management structures and frameworks such as Community Resilience Networks (CRNs), Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs) and evacuation centres; and identifying shared challenges and barriers.

Project lead agencies

Project lead agencies were raised in the process evaluation workshop and in evaluation interviews as the most useful project governance mechanism in terms of local projects' access to advice, problem solving, networking with other local projects, advocacy on systemic issues and raising the profile of the project.

Lead agencies provided a range of individual establishment supports including project inductions and on-the-ground support. They are present in PRG and All-Teams meetings, where they actively take up issues for further action such as linking local teams with further training or bringing in guest speakers on topics such as engaging with disability services.

They also take up advocacy to government and media organisations, based on local project results and findings.

Project Reference Group

The Project Reference Group was a contracted requirement of the Project - providing the key accountability mechanism for monitoring and supporting project implementation. It was first convened in early May 2023 and met nine times over the course of the project.

The process evaluation in February 2024 found that the Project Reference Group (PRG) was less effective than the project lead agencies in providing support and advice to individual agencies and less likely to be approached by local host and partner organisations outside of meetings. While the PRG was the vehicle for a number of guest speakers to build their knowledge and capacity, the PRG meetings are seen to be over-all a time-consuming governance element without commensurate value to local projects.

Local host organisations reported difficulty in explaining their service delivery strengths and challenges in meetings, as different PRG members may value different project elements depending on their expertise and interest. While PRG members contributed to the project's collective knowledge, this reportedly became increasingly challenging to utilise as local projects become more established and more specific in the support they required.

There was value identified by local host organisations in having access to high-level government and non-government sector representatives via the PRG, and in raising the profile of their work and achievements via PRG networks. NCOSS raised during workshop discussions the option to retain these advantages in future projects using other governance mechanisms with reduced reporting and accountability expectations, such as a panel of experts which could be approached for input and advocacy on an as-needed basis.

Local Reference Groups

The Northern Rivers was the only location to establish a local reference group. As Resilient Lismore, the local host organisation, was working together with four local partner organisations, the reference group was established as a way to structure joint project leadership and diverse organisational input in a 'busy' sector with a high number of NGO social services and community representative groups operating in the target LGAs. It also facilitated and reflected strong connection with the Reconstruction Authority, which was a member of the local reference group.

8.2.1 Recommendations

The following recommendation is to inform future continuation, replication or expansion of the CSDC project, or to progress broader lessons learned from this pilot for government and funding agencies responsible for disaster risk reduction.

8. Program providers consider future governance arrangements – locally and project-wide – to account for key governance functions: advice and support; management of risks, challenges and barriers; and representation, stakeholder communication and advocacy.

8.3 Reporting and accountability

Local Host Organisations reported during the process evaluation in February 2024 that they appreciated the rigour of the project reporting processes, though at times reporting was repetitive and took too much time away from local activities.

The burden of project accountability, particularly of number of meetings, was also raised as a project challenge during evaluation interviews, by a broad range of project stakeholders. For local host organisations, these meetings were taking place in addition to a high volume of local meetings they were attending in order to progress project goals and activities, such as in local emergency management planning and coordination or local social service sector networking. Where projects, such as this, rely on the part-time employment of workers, project reporting, communication and coordination processes need to be as minimal as possible while allowing for learnings and issues to be captured, shared and addressed in a timely manner.

Implementation Plans

Implementation plans – part of DRRF reporting and accountability requirements – were generally seen as helpful project design and planning tools, observed by the project lead agencies to be used by some local host organisations as an active project planning tool more than others.

Some project stakeholders reported during evaluation interviews that the requirement to complete these plans was difficult at the start of the project, as local host organisations were still testing the community needs that would inform local project objectives. While some of this work had been done for their initial project applications, early assumptions needed to be tested in the context of new partnerships, available resources and local interest and need.

The process for finalising local implementation plans at project commencement (together with subsequent milestone reporting against the plans) was viewed as not flexible enough to take account of iterative project design, i.e., changes and innovations in approach and method in response to local need and emerging local insights.

Milestone Reports

Milestone reports were also part of DRRF reporting and accountability. While the reporting process was resource intensive and became repetitive when commencement delays in some locations reduced times

between Milestone Reports 1 and 2, the reports were helpful tools for end-of-project evaluation and reporting.

Local Progress Reports

Local Host Organisations appreciated the Local Progress Reports to NCOSS as these assisted them with monitoring and record-keeping across all project activities.

Given delays in commencing the independent Monitoring and Evaluation project, local reporting provided the key mechanism for recording delivery details and local project activities.

NCOSS reporting

NCOSS managed Milestone Reports to NSWRA, and reporting to the PRG and to its Board, drawing on the Local Progress Reports prepared by local host organisations.

8.3.1 Recommendations

The following recommendation is to inform future continuation, replication or expansion of the CSDC project, or to progress broader lessons learned from this pilot for government and funding agencies responsible for disaster risk reduction.

9. In the project establishment stage, program providers:

   a. workshop with local host and partner organisations the core project activities not subject to place-based adaptation, including but not limited to reporting, evaluation and accountability activities, to create towards collective understanding and ownership of these project elements, and

   b. finalise the project's program logic and evaluation plan earlier so that data collection activities can be workshopped in line with Recommendation 1(a) and built into local project planning.

   It is noted that longer project timeframes are required to enable these elements to be incorporated into project design.

9.   Timeframes and grant structure

9.1.1 Service delivery period

Service delivery periods were impacted in each location by DRRF activities, with delayed announcement of grants, and also by the selection process for local host organisations and subsequent contract negotiations:

- Snowy Monaro commenced project delivery in mid-June 2023, and had been operational for approximately ten months at the time of evaluation interviews

- Hawkesbury commenced project delivery in early July 2023 and had been operational for approximately nine months at the time of evaluation interviews

- Northern Rivers commenced project delivery in early August 2023 and had been operational for approximately nine months at the time of evaluation interviews

- Bega/ Eurobodalla commenced service delivery in September 2023, with ECAC commencing in December 2023. The project has been operational for approximately nine months at the time of evaluation interviews but fully operational for about six months.

These commencement periods include team formation and initial planning, so some locations observed that project activities started in the weeks following these commencement dates.

The process of contract finalisation was protracted in the Bega/ Eurobodalla region due to leadership changes and staffing challenges in Katungul. This caused a shift in organisational resources and priorities that resulted in Katungul electing to retain the work of establishing a regional cultural burning program, and local partner organisation ECAC taking the lead on project activities related to community and NGO social service sector capacity building on disaster risk assessment and preparedness.

9.1.2 Commissioning model for partnerships

The commissioning model of the DRRF funding grant impacted ways of working between participating organisations and also delays in setting up the CSDC project in four different regional locations:

Contract negotiation and management of project reporting – necessary functions of NCOSS's position as project commissioner – took up more time than expected.

There was a reported tension for project lead agencies between honouring the space for place-based initiative and leadership, and providing support for local host and partner organisations to fulfil contract requirements, for example in the form of templates for reports. This was also to some extent a resource issue, with project resources especially for LCSA and AbSec limiting the extent to which project staff were available. One central project stakeholder queried whether peak bodies are best-placed to commission services from their members as this added another layer of complexity to project lead agencies' role in local work.

Local host organisations also had a commissioning relationship with their local partner organisations. These local partnerships were critical to service reach, as recognised by DRRF in their requirement that services be delivered by local partnerships (see Section 1.4). However, local partner organisations in some locations struggled to deliver within available resources. Resilient Lismore, which had four local partner organisations, recognised that their partnership arrangement had become a barrier for local partners' participation in the second half of the project.

> The fee offered was not enough for them to do anything meaningful with.
> It wasn't enough for them to engage a project worker. That particular model
> is not particularly workable in that way.

The commissioning model also exacerbated delays in contract finalisation in Bega/ Eurobodalla, because the local host organisation contract had to be in place before the local partner organisation contract could be finalised.

10. Policy context

Some elements of the policy context in which this pilot was operating should be described as they have impacted project outcomes.

Firstly, there is government interest in community disaster resilience, as disaster events related to climate change become more extreme and more frequent. There is some recognition that local responses to disaster preparedness, delivered by organisations that have already built trust with local communities and especially vulnerable people, makes sense from an ethical and economic point of view.

As a result of this interest project lead agencies have responded to a high volume of requests from a range of state and national government agencies for verbal and written input to disaster mitigation, preparedness and resilience policies and frameworks.

Despite this intense interest, disaster preparedness is a sparse sector development space. In a service delivery environment shaped by competitive tendering and funding models based on market economy principles, social service NGOs have limited if any resources to dedicate to professional development and organisational development in the disaster preparedness space, much less community-level strategy.

Finally, efforts within this project to find ways for community networks to influence local disaster management planning – while not isolated efforts – are taking place without guiding policy or protocol at government level. A policy shift is required in order for emergency management agencies to formally recognise the value of community input into the strategies they prepare. This is addressed at Section 4.

PART D: CONCLUSION AND APPENDICES

11. Conclusion

The Community Sector Disaster Capability project has been warmly received by community and NGO social service sector stakeholders who have participated in local capacity-building project activities in the Northern Rivers, Hawkesbury, Snowy Monaro and Bega/ Eurobodalla in NSW. This work is highly valued and project participants sought more capacity-building support and resources so that disaster preparedness is a continuous cycle.

Of equal value to these participants was the networking and relationship building that local host and partner organisations invested in as part of building community capacity for disaster risk reduction.

In some circumstances, participants' disaster recovery slowed down this work, especially for First Nations communities.

Most stakeholders in government and emergency management agencies saw the positive value of the project's work in building local motivation for disaster preparedness planning and joint work. They saw the cost-effectiveness and outcome effectiveness of joint emergency management and social sector NGO efforts to work with vulnerable groups on disaster risk reduction.

There was a clear message from diverse project stakeholders that the CSDC project has commenced valuable work despite resource and policy gaps that challenged its goals. They sought continuation of the pilot so it can build on its strengths and lessons learned, and so that stakeholders' investments of time and organisational resources so far can meaningfully reduce future harm in the next local disaster event.

The view that the pilot should be continued and embedded into local communities in NSW is supported by the findings of this evaluation. The CSDC project has been in operation for less than twelve months and the actions, plans and networks that arise from a capable and joined-up community are becoming more evident in its latter months as the pilot draws to a close. It is the start of an important process of building community-level disaster readiness and mutual capabilities within social service NGOs and emergency management agencies to reduce disaster risk together. Without the work of the CSDC project, there is a missing piece in current policy approaches to disaster readiness: to resource disaster management efforts of people and agencies present in local communities during and immediately after a disaster event.

Appendix 1 - References

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Appendix 2 – Glossary of terms and acronyms

Table 4: Glossary of terms

TERM	DEFINITION
Cohorts	Groups of people linked by shared identities, characteristics and/or experiences.
Community stakeholders	Stakeholders in target locations who are participating in the project as individual residents or as representatives of voluntary or community groups.
Emergency management agencies	Government, volunteer and charity organisations with a formal role in emergency management and response e.g. Reconstruction Authority, Rural Fire Service, SES, Red Cross, Anglicare, Salvation Army, Fire and Rescue, state government agencies with a formal role in Emergency Management, Councils
Evaluation	A systematic and transparent process that can be used to assess the appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness or net social benefits of an initiative.
Indicator	A metric that is used to indicate performance. It may be indirect, require interpretation or explanation, or combine multiple values in an explicit formula.
Local	In the context of this project, 'local' refers to people and organisations within the four target locations (Hawkesbury, Northern Rivers, Snowy Monaro and Eurobodalla/ Bega Valley.
Local host organisations	Community organisations commissioned by NCOSS to deliver the CSDC project in target locations. See *Figure 2*.
Local partner organisations	Community organisations commissioned by local host organisations to partner in the delivery of the CSDC project in target locations. See *Figure 2*.
NGO social services sector	The collective network of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) delivering community and social services in target locations.
Outcome	The changes attributable to the initiative's outputs, that may manifest in the short, medium or long term. They may include changes in people's lives, status, conditions, knowledge, attitudes, values, behaviours, or satisfaction levels.
Output	The products, services and infrastructure that result from the initiative activities. May also be referred to as a 'deliverable'.
Project lead agencies	NCOSS, AbSec and LCSA as the agencies funded by the NSW Reconstruction Authority to jointly deliver this project. See *Figure 2*.
Vulnerable community members/ groups	People or groups within the community for whom disasters pose the greatest risk, due to factors such as age, disability, income or cultural background. 'Vulnerability' is not inherent in these life circumstances or experiences – it is a term to describe the structural/ social inequalities these people are at higher risk of experiencing during or after a disaster.

Table 5: Glossary of Acronyms

ACRONYM	FULL TERM
AbSec	NSW Child, Family and Community Peak Aboriginal Corporation
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease of 2019
CRN	Community Resilience Network
CRO	Community Resilience Officer
CSDC	Community Sector Disaster Capability (title of project)
DCJ	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
DRRF	Disaster Risk Reduction Fund
ECAC	Eden Community Access Centre
KEQ	Key Evaluation Question
LALC	Local Aboriginal Land Council
LCSA	Local Community Services Association
LEMC	Local Emergency Management Committee
LEMO	Local Emergency Management Officer
LGA	Local Government Area
MFSS	Monaro Family Support Service
NCOSS	NSW Council of Social Service
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
P-CEP	Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (service model)
PRG	Project Reference Group
NSWRA	NSW Reconstruction Authority
RFS	Rural Fire Service
SES	State Emergency Service

Appendix 3 – List of documents, desktop review

- All Teams Catch-Ups agendas (19.09.23, 17.10.23, 30.01.24)
- Local Teams Updates – NCOSS emails to local teams (x10)
- Local Progress Reports (template based),
    - Sep 23: Hawkesbury; Snowy Monaro; Northern Rivers
    - Nov 23: Hawkesbury; Snowy Monaro; Northern Rivers; Bega Valley/ Eurobodalla
    - Feb 24: Hawkesbury; Snowy Monaro; Northern Rivers; Bega Valley/ Eurobodalla
    - Apr 24: Hawkesbury; Snowy Monaro; Northern Rivers; Bega Valley/ Eurobodalla
    - May 24: Hawkesbury; Snowy Monaro; Northern Rivers; Bega Valley/ Eurobodalla
- NCOSS reports to Board (Jan 23; Apr 23; Jun 23; Aug 23; Oct 23; Dec 23)
- Event feedback templates
- Lessons learned interview/ survey templates
- PRG Meetings – agendas, minutes, attachments (08.05.23; 05.06.23, 10.07.23, 40.09.23, 09.10.23, 20.11.23
- PRG Terms of Reference
- PRG Members and Attendance spreadsheet
- Reports to PRG (Aug 23, Oct 23, Nov 23)
- Project Implementation Plan
    - Sub Plan, Snowy Monaro
    - Sub Plan, Hawkesbury
    - Sub Plan, Bega Valley and Eurobodalla
    - Sub Plan, Northern Rivers
- Draft Host Activities Schedule (May 23)
- Milestone 1 Report (Jun 23)
- Milestone 2 Report (Nov 23)
- Milestone 3 Report (Jun 24)
- Partners Service Agreement
- Local Host Agreement
- Local Team Contacts spreadsheet
- Schedule of CSDC Meetings and Reporting
- DRRF Program Evaluation Plan (Resilience NSW (now NSW Reconstruction Authority), 2022)