

Eurobodalla and Bega Valley Risks & Vulnerabilities/ Assets & Strengths

Community Sector Disaster Capability Project

June 2024



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Purpose of this report

This Eurobodalla and Bega Valley *Risks & Vulnerabilities: Assets & Strengths* report outlines the findings from the first phase of the Community Sector Disaster Capability (CSDC) Local Project in the Eurobodalla and Bega Valley and describes how these will inform the next phase of the project and the broader community sector disaster resilience and risk reduction efforts.

In this first phase, local CSDC Teams engaged with community, other local NGOs government and other agencies to identify:

- Local disaster risks, vulnerabilities, strengths and assets - with a particular focus on vulnerable groups
- Learnings from previous disasters

These findings provide CSDC Local Teams with a framework from which the next phase of the project - capacity strengthening activities for local NGOs and vulnerable communities - can be developed. They represent evidence base which can ensure that these capacity strengthening activities are relevant to local communities and NGO services and complement other disaster risk reduction initiatives.

About the Community Sector Disaster Capability Project (CSDC) Project

NCOSS in collaboration with AbSec and the Local Community Services Association is leading the Community Sector Disaster Capability (CSDC) Project, funded jointly by the Australian and NSW Governments under the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund.

The CSDC Project aims to strengthen the role of local community service organisations in disaster risk reduction to better support the wellbeing and safety of vulnerable community members (who can be hardest hit by disasters). Through a collaborative, networked approach to local disaster management, local community organisations and the communities they support will have the opportunity to bring their expert knowledge and connections into play.

The CSDC Project is developing and implementing approaches, activities and resources to strengthen organisational and community disaster risk reduction capability and leverage local disaster management expertise to reduce the impacts of disaster, particularly on those most vulnerable.

Local, place-based organisations are leading the work in three target locations (Hawkesbury, South Coast and Northern Rivers), identifying lessons learned from recent disasters and undertaking local engagement, mapping and capacity building activities. They are also seeking to strengthen relationships and two-way exchange between the NGO sector and local emergency management systems and agencies.

CSDC Project objectives are to:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Further information including a Program Overview flyer can be found at www.ncoss.org.au/disaster-capability/

Definitions

Hazard

A process, phenomenon or human activity that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, social and economic disruption or environmental degradation.¹

Disaster Risk

The potential loss of life, injury, or destroyed or damaged assets which could occur to a system, society or a community in a specific period of time, determined probabilistically as a function of hazard, exposure, vulnerability and capacity.²

Disaster Risk Reduction

Disaster risk reduction is aimed at preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk and managing residual risk, all of which contribute to strengthening resilience and therefore to the achievement of sustainable development.³

Vulnerability (in the context of disaster risk)

The conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards.⁴

Capacity (in the context of disaster risk)

The combination of all the strengths, attributes and resources available within an organisation, community or society to manage and reduce disaster risks and strengthen resilience.⁵

Strengths and Assets

Community capitals - natural, social, financial, cultural, built, political, and human – that contribute to community wellbeing and resilience.⁶

¹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Sendai Framework Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction, <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/hazard>

² United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Sendai Framework Terminology on Disaster Risk Reduction, <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster-risk>

³ Ibid <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster-risk-reduction>

⁴ Ibid <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/vulnerability>

⁵ Ibid <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/capacity>

⁶ Phoenix Australia, The Recovery Capitals (ReCap) Framework, <https://www.phoenixaustralia.org/disaster-hub/resources/recovery-capitals/about-the-project/>

Methodology

The Eurobodalla Bega Valley CSDC team conducted a detailed survey that was distributed to NGOs and community members. Comments and responses were also collected at community Yarn Ups in Bega, Narooma and Batemans Bay. In addition they engaged with seven Local Aboriginal Land Councils and four Aboriginal corporations regarding disaster mitigation. The team also drew on knowledge and learnings from extensive engagement projects conducted previously conducted by project partner Eden Community Access Centre (ECAC) such as the Rural Support Worker Project and The Disaster Preparedness, Recovery and Resilience Strategic Plan (DPRRSP). The DPRRSP was a two-year sustained engagement with the community and in consultation with emergency services, the community services sector, community groups, and all levels of government. Community engagement activities were conducted over a 10-month period. 142 community members were engaged in 17 Community Table Talks (disaster preparedness conversations), and 52 people attended two community workshops.

Key Findings

Coordinated communication is crucial

At all levels problems with communication were seen as a major vulnerability. At a local level the lack of clear instructions and protocols left people confused by conflicting messages and ad hoc responses and telecommunications failings also left some people cut off from important information.

At a regional and state level the failure of jurisdictional communication across borders led to unprepared and under resourced communities helping with evacuees without any immediate official support. Communication was slow between government leading to community members and services stepping in without a plan or protocols until officials responded days later.

Connected communities can be highly effective in disaster response and preparedness

Across the sector there was a recognition that the more community services connected and communicated with emergency services and each other the more effective they could be. These community organisations have grass roots knowledge and the trust of locals making them a valuable resource for emergency management teams. Their role has not been officially recognised but should be as part of a network of support that can help safeguard individuals, especially those facing disadvantage before, during and after a disaster.

Cultural burning is necessary and possible with a more inclusive approach

A high fuel load was raised as a major risk and contributor to the intensity of the Black Summer bushfires. People throughout the community see the need for hazard reduction burning to prevent further disasters. The region is fortunate to have an active Aboriginal community and residents recognise that their local knowledge could help reduce the fuel load efficiently through cultural burning.

Risks & Vulnerabilities

Lack of effective communication from authorities

A recurring theme was the conflicting or non-existent communication during the 2020 bushfire disaster that led to confusion and distress. There is a need for clearer guidelines for evacuation procedures that can be understood and easily accessed by the community.

Specific and considered communication is also needed for Aboriginal communities in the region. As part of the CSDC team's activities there has been an acknowledgement by the State Emergency Service (SES) that their approach has been to tell everyone what they should do and that the SES had not engaged with most Aboriginal communities in past years. Many Aboriginal people do not take much notice of official warnings and still rely on signals from birds and other species to determine when or if it is time to evacuate.

A key element in preparing for future emergencies, is to have people, who are known and trusted by communities, trained to take a leadership role in times of emergency. There is now an increased focus on two way engagement to capture local knowledge.

“Having witnessed the Rural Fire Service/Police and Council in the 2020 local fire disaster we were extremely disappointed in the lack of clarity in their communications. Much was 'made up' as they went along with little to no coherent plan.” – Survey respondent

Jurisdictional problems leading to delays in response

The lack of communication during the 2019-20 bushfires, between emergency services in East Gippsland and cross border counterparts caused additional stress and uncertainty for evacuees.

The Eden tourist Information Centre was flooded with a rush of evacuees from Mallacoota and surrounds, seeking advice, support and emergency accommodation. As the highway to Melbourne was cut, all evacuees had to travel into NSW. The response to an initial call to the Bega Valley Shire office was that there was no emergency declared in the shire, so no formal support was available. Eden community banded together to provide food and bedding until formal arrangements were put in place a day or two later.

Lack of coordination and clarity of roles

While community organisations in the region are effective and very well connected there is a lack of unity in times of disaster and recovery. Better pre-planning is needed and a strengthening of local emergency management teams to become the focal point of recovery efforts. Community service organisations need education about the role of emergency services and all levels of government before, during and after a disaster so they can better assist and engage. Detailed service mapping or who has what service available lists are needed to coordinate between services and organisations.

“I am still very unclear what role govt expects our service and similar services to play during and post disaster.” – Survey respondent

Untrained staff and the need for more funding

Community service representatives highlighted the need for training for their staff in preparedness and disaster response:

- Regular preparedness training and information sessions conducted by local emergency service organisations
- Education about personal and community preparedness as recommended by emergency services organisations
- All-hazards education and information
- Empowering community to manage and minimise individual and community-wide hazards as recommended by emergency service organisations

Alongside that need is the need for more funding to support this training and to hire more staff to engage with the community.

Fuel load being too high and lack of hazard reduction

High intensity bushfire is the major ongoing disaster concern for South Coast communities. Survey respondents highlighted systemic failures in the bushfire’s regulatory framework, with the main focus being on bushfire response. This focus on the aftermath instead of prevention effectively locks out learning and locks in repeat disasters for the future.

In managing bushfire risk, a key change that is needed is a much greater focus on mitigation through increased levels of cultural burning. Engagement has been undertaken with Batemans Bay, Bega and Eden Local Aboriginal Land Councils CEOs and other staff. The main focus has been on cultural burning, as expansion of existing programs is a key tool to mitigate the risk that high intensity bushfires pose to Aboriginal communities and assets, as well as the wider communities in Eurobodalla and Bega Valley shires.

The current legislative framework views regular planned low intensity burning, in terms of how many years before fire can again be introduced to an area, as it does high intensity bushfires. Consequently, if cultural burning is to be the tool to mitigate risk to human lives and property, as well as the restore environmental values, legislative change will be needed.

“Be more aware and supportive of measures to reduce flammable fuels around our community - such as mechanical fuel reduction, thinning and cultural burning.” – Survey respondent

Telecommunication problems

During the Black Summer bushfires mobile phone services failed leaving many residents without communication. Landlines and those that were actually mobile but on a different Telstra system to traditional mobile services remained but that meant that only those with the right systems were still connected.

“It would be good if in emergencies Telstra could switch systems so they provided coverage for all their mobile systems and maybe agreement between service providers to provide text message service across all providers in that situation.” – Survey respondent

Remote communities especially vulnerable to future disasters

The towns and especially villages on the Far South Coast are particularly vulnerable with the majority located remotely and within heavily forested areas. This makes access in and out risky and local support services are often small organisations so they can only provide limited support. Additionally RFS volunteers in these areas live locally so their ability to volunteer was not guaranteed because their own families and homes could be under threat.

Disadvantaged acutely experiencing housing crisis putting them at greater risk for future disasters

The housing crisis in the region was amplified by the fires and continues to pose the most tangible and stressful component of recovery. Loss of houses; existing rental housing shortages; heightened demand by fire effected and CoVid19 creating an urban to country population drift have all reduced the amount of housing available and this has had the greatest negative impact on those struggling financially. People who would otherwise consider the option of moving ‘to town’ and thereby to safer locations were driven back to the bush where there’s greater potential dangers and the complications due to isolation.

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Assets & Strengths

Passionate and dedicated community service sector with grass roots knowledge

Across the region there are many place-based community service groups who are trusted and dedicated to their local communities. They have already been active in responding to and rebuilding after disasters. Their grass roots knowledge about a diverse range of subject matter such as terrain, tracks, fire trails, fire habit, fuel loads, the phone number of the local CWA representative, who to call for an excavator or bulldozer, which buildings are available for refuge or even which cafe could provide meals is invaluable information in a disaster.

In addition to the immediate disaster response community service groups such as the Community Recovery Engagement Working Group (CREW), Eden Community Pantry, Rural Aid are all working to help create communities of resilience who will fair better in future disasters. These groups are an asset with deep understanding of local disadvantage and vulnerabilities and how best to support these groups.

Communities that rally together

During the Black Summer bushfires Eden’s residents and organisations stepped in to support evacuees even without official support or government backing. Local community organisations including the Eden football club appealed to local residents for bedding and set up a BBQ to help those short of food and funds.

Cultural burning can mitigate disaster risk

The Aboriginal community knowledge around bushfire risk mitigation is a huge asset to the region. The local

CSDC coordinator has been engaging seven Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALC) and four Aboriginal corporations regarding opportunities to embed cultural burns and understandings of risk and risk migration based on Aboriginal knowledge and practice. Discussions with LALCs have focused on cultural burning programs and paths to increase funding for engagement of LALC rangers to expand the current level of cultural burning.

Landowners willing to be part of the solution

Survey respondents voiced their willingness to reduce fuel load on their properties and manage fire risks to mitigate bushfire disasters. They feel restricted by regulations but are open to doing their part to help prevent catastrophic fires.

Lessons learned from disaster events

Evacuees put pressure on surrounding areas without resources

During the 2019-20 bushfire emergency in late December 2019, thousands of holiday makers and residents of Mallacoota in East Gippsland, Victoria were forced to evacuate as large, high intensity bushfires burnt through East Gippsland. Hundreds of evacuees arrived in Eden NSW on 30 December 2019, seeking emergency food supplies and accommodation. The Eden tourist information centre was inundated with people seeking help, so the staff contacted the Bega Valley Shire (BVS) to see what help the shire could offer. The response was that as there was no emergency declaration in the shire, nothing would be done by council.

Consequently, the information centre staff helped some evacuees find accommodation in Eden and other towns in the Bega Valley and Snowy Monaro Shires. Most other evacuees decided to stay in Eden and sleep in their cars, on the expectation of returning to Mallacoota the next day to collect caravans and other belongings. Information centre staff rang local council rangers to ensure all toilets were left open overnight.

The current Bega Valley and Eurobodalla Shire Local Emergency Management Plans (LEMPs) do not include provision for an organised response in local government areas (LGAs) not immediately affected by an emergency event. The CSDC has advocated for changes to LEMPs so that all have a section that recognises the potential flow-on effects of evacuees to adjoining jurisdictions. Also that protocols are agreed between adjacent jurisdictions, whether the same state or interstate, to communicate the need to immediately take action to establish support systems for evacuees.

Aftermath stressors hamper recovery and have a greater impact on vulnerable communities

The communities of Eden and the hinterlands have experienced ongoing significant detrimental impacts on their mental health and recovery due to aftermath stressors associated with the fires. Some of these included:

- Difficulties with insurers
- Housing availability and affordability
- Access to builders and other contractors, rising costs and exploitation
- Geographical and demographic isolation
- Flood and additional natural events
- Trying to navigate eligibility and access to appropriate services

Aboriginal communities need to be more actively engaged in disaster response and preparation

The SES acknowledged that they had not engaged with most Aboriginal communities in past years. In response a Community Strategy and Engagement team is being established by the SES. This team will work with the project and communities to better prepare remote communities to minimise risk to those communities. It was suggested that it may be possible to stream drone footage from near the fire front to some community members, to relay to and give earlier warning to, those in the community that rely on traditional knowledge.

There was also discussions on whether elders might share knowledge that would help with visual messaging that would be more relevant to Aboriginal communities during flood emergencies. The SES is working to

appoint and train volunteer flood wardens to help coordinate immediate response in local communities that are readily isolated during flood emergencies.

Next steps

On the advice of Department of Communities and Justice, the Bega Shire EOCLEMO and Rural Fire Service staff, the CSDC wrote to the Cross Border Commissioner regarding the cross-border emergency evacuation communication protocols. The Commissioner has passed the letter on to the Regional Director of the NSW Reconstruction Authority for that area and will be following up with the CSDC to see how best these lessons can be incorporated into future local emergency management planning arrangements.

The South Coast Eurobodalla Bega CSDC team are planning with local partner Eden Community Access Centre (ECAC) for further engagement and capacity building activities focused on the NGO sector in 2024. As part of the DPRRSP work the following strategic actions were recommended as potential ways to build and support community preparedness, recovery and resilience:

Communication

- Partner with emergency services to develop and implement co-led communication strategies
- Leverage local owned, social and traditional media to disseminate disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience information and promote ongoing conversations about preparedness needs.
- Create opportunities to come together and share personal preparedness information
- Partner and collaborate with emergency services to close agreed gaps in communication between agencies and the community
- Partner and collaborate with agencies to close agreed gaps in communication between government agencies and departments and the community
- Advocate for increased mobile and fixed internet and connectivity for known black spots and areas of concern.

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Education, Information & Training

- Strengthen relationships between local emergency services and the community with an emphasis on identifying and meeting ongoing education, information and training needs.
- Strengthen relationships between relevant government agencies and their representatives and community to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes
- Develop partnerships with the relevant agencies to support the delivery of immediate post-disaster recovery services
- Promote existing preparedness information and training
- Work with agencies to develop and facilitate regular information sessions
- Work with emergency services to develop programs and initiatives that empower young people to identify and mitigate disaster risk

Community Connectedness

- Partner with emergency services to create and facilitate initiatives that bring communities together to discuss disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience
- Develop and facilitate programs that support and build capacity in community leaders and connectors to further community connection initiatives.
- Promote current and future community events that bring community together and encourage positive interactions
- Develop and facilitate programs and initiatives that support community connectedness and inclusion

Attachments

- [Add](#)
- [Add](#)