



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



FRRR
Foundation for Rural
Regional Renewal

Action Research Report
for Community Partners into
FRRR's Disaster Resilient: Future Ready Victoria
Program

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Acknowledgements

We extend our deep appreciation to members of the three community project groups whose work forms the basis of the Disaster Resilient: Future Ready (DR:FR) program in Victoria. Your willingness to explore, create and learn, together with a strong commitment to your communities, inspired us throughout this research.

The University of Sydney recognises and pays respect to the Elders and communities – past, present and emerging – of the lands that the University of Sydney's campuses stand on. For thousands of years, they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

FRRR acknowledges the Dja Dja Wurrung people as the Traditional Custodians of Jaara country (Bendigo) where we are headquartered and extends our acknowledgement to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations where we fund organisations and activities. We particularly acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, the Bunurong people and the Dhudhuroa people, on whose lands this work took place. We pay our respect to Elders past and present and to the continuation of the custodial, cultural and educational practices of Australia's First People.

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Foreword

The increasing frequency and intensity of disaster events is leading to extensive social, economic and environmental impacts, especially in remote, rural and regional communities. That's why, since 2012, FRRR has actively invested in community capacity to enhance disaster preparedness and resilience.

After supporting communities in their recovery from disaster events, we observed that those able to recover most effectively had strong social capital, high levels of inclusion, diverse leadership and broad engagement across community and with the emergency management system. We wanted to better understand what it took to create these conditions and so the Disaster Resilient: Future Ready (DR:FR) initiative was born. Our focus was to better understand what it would take to enable community-led approaches that responded to the unique contexts of different places.

Following a pilot in three communities in New South Wales (NSW), we took the program to Victoria (Victoria), again partnering with three diverse communities – Korumburra; Whittlesea Township and surrounds; and Myrtleford. We extend our deep appreciation to members of these communities. Your willingness to explore, create and learn, together with a strong commitment to your communities, inspired us throughout this research.

To assess the effectiveness of the DR:FR approach, we partnered with researchers from the University of Sydney. This report shares the insights most relevant to our community partners in Victoria. Pleasingly, it confirms the learnings from the NSW program – especially the relevance and applicability of the seven dimensions of community resilience building both in stimulating the thinking and actions of community groups, and in making sense of their experiences, as projects progress. However, it also highlights the complexity of community resilience-building and the time required to activate, as community groups respond to challenges and opportunities, both within and beyond their immediate environment.

This document expands a little on these key points, as well as sharing some other findings and recommendations made by the researchers to enhance the ongoing impact of the DR:FR program in each community, and more broadly. We appreciate the insights that this experienced team has brought.

FRRR is also grateful to our funding partners in this initiative, including Sidney Myer Fund, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, Maple-Brown Family Foundation, Simon Kucher and Partners, Ronald Geoffrey Arnott Foundation, H & L Hecht Trust, Suncorp, Pinnacle Charitable Foundation and the Doc Ross Family Foundation.

This collaborative work has confirmed the validity of a deep, place-based approach that responds to the unique situation of each community and acknowledges the ability and willingness of local community groups to play a leading, active role in building resilience, working closely with authorities and agencies to strengthen their community for the future. We are currently working with communities in the Burnett Inland region of Queensland and welcome the opportunity to partner with more communities and more funders and intermediaries to bring this initiative to life in other regions.

If you want a copy of the full report, or you'd like to discuss how we can work together in future, please email info@frrr.org.au or call 03 5430 2399.

Natalie Egleton
CEO
On Dja Dja Wurrung Country

Executive summary

DR:FR is a national, multi-year, place-based initiative of the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR). It aims to support and strengthen the capacity and capability of remote, rural & regional communities to thrive and be resilient to the impacts of climate, natural disasters and other disruptions. The goal is to bring together grassroots organisations and community representatives who are interested in collaborating to collectively design and lead approaches that increase preparedness and strengthen resilience capacity. FRRR's role is to broker resources, relationships, practices and tools to create opportunities for community-led approaches to strengthening resilience.

Following an initial pilot project with three communities in New South Wales (NSW), FRRR continued its partnership with University of Sydney to undertake action research in Victoria. The research aim was to document and share ongoing learning from the program and its local projects to help understand what helped and what hindered resilience building (see p. 50 for more detail on the scope). FRRR selected three communities through an Expression of Interest process. These communities commenced diverse place-based projects to build resilience in a way that reflected their individual contexts. This report presents learnings and recommendations emerging from this experience.

The three participating communities (Korumburra, Myrtleford and Whittlesea Township and surrounds) varied in their demographics, needs and capacities, and also in their experiences of past and anticipated future disaster events. Each community developed resilience-building approaches that reflected their diversity, and their activity followed different trajectories over the course of the program. Action research data were produced using a wide range of methods over a four-year period. In addition to written commentary, the communities' activities and reflections are presented graphically here through timelines, Ripple Maps, and mapping of Resilience Dimensions created at multiple points throughout the project.

While much was learned about both the commonalities and differences in implementing the DR:FR program throughout the course of this research project, two key learnings emerged. One was the **value of the Resilience Dimensions approach** both in stimulating the project group's thinking and action, and in making sense of their experiences as their project progressed. The other key learning was the **complexity of community resilience-building as community groups responded to challenges and opportunities**, both within and beyond their immediate environment, over the time of their engagement with FRRR's DR:FR program.

These key learnings led to a number of recommendations for community partners and the future development of the DR:FR program, and these are summarised in the following section.

Key learnings and insights

This report highlights two key insights that emerged from the program's rich and ongoing learning opportunities. First, the findings reinforced the **value of the Resilience Dimensions approach** both in stimulating the project group's thinking and action and in making sense of their experiences as their project progressed. The [Resilience Dimensions](#) approach enables communities to develop and act in ways that responded to where they are at. It also offers time-poor volunteers a way to make sense of their experiences within a complex system.

However, within each dimension, a range of local and systemic factors can act to support or hinder community resilience-building and preparedness. Mapping the Dimensions over time clearly illustrated the complexity of the context in which community action was taking place and demonstrated the limitations of traditional, linear project management approaches in supporting community action on resilience.

This led to the second key learning: **community resilience-building is complex**, as community groups need to respond to challenges and opportunities, both within and beyond their immediate environment. Groups need to understand 'complexity thinking' (concepts like non-linearity, emergence, adaption, dynamic context and interconnectivity) and how to overlay that with the Dimensions to guide decision making.

The University of Sydney's research report also reinforces a number of observations from the NSW pilot and highlighted a number of other practical lessons for communities, which we've summarised below.

The DR:FR approach is effective

- The longer-term, three year placed-based DR:FR approach allows communities to develop unique solutions and a collectively agreed action plan. Starting points are different for every community. Regardless of their past or anticipated experiences of disaster, DR:FR Victoria demonstrated that disparate communities have the potential to build resilience locally over time.
- Through workshops that build over time, DR:FR introduces key concepts; explores roles and responsibilities in disaster planning, response, recovery and preparedness; maps local community demographics, assets and initiatives; and dives deeply into the Dimensions of Resilience on a local level to inform action for resilience building efforts.
- A particular focus on networks and inclusion recognises that people most impacted by disasters may have variable capability to respond in the event of a disaster, and benefit from active efforts to ensure participation in resilience building efforts.
- Flexibility on FRRR's part allowed for projects to be contextualised, shaping actions to very different local circumstances and priorities and to respond to changing timelines and evolving community life.
- Allowing communities to determine qualitative and quantitative measures of success and to determine where to focus their efforts meant that resilience building efforts were accountable to local community needs and responsive to the specific context.

Relationships and connections

- Investment in inclusion and network-building creates feedback loops, which can support momentum and over time, encourage self-sustaining and expanding local relationships.
- Community groups need to form relationships and develop multiple allies in the system, so they don't have to start from scratch if someone moves on from a position of authority.
- Focussing resources and effort on developing interconnectivity between groups is often a catalyst for community disaster resilience building, creating momentum to work on communication, network-building and self-organising.
- By recognising respective strengths and being able to leverage strong connections, community groups can adapt to a changing context over time and direct their efforts in line with their strengths and capacity.



Workshop outputs from Myrtleford.

Resourcing and support

- Early involvement of coaches and other supports will reap long-term benefits through community development, enhancing long-term disaster preparedness capability in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.
- Flexibility and the practical support of local knowledge, inclusivity and creativity are key to effective resilience-building. Changemakers often wear many hats and there is value in ensuring there are sufficient grant funds to support local leaders going above and beyond, so they avoid burnout and can build sustainable capacity.
- Community understanding of local disaster risk and resilience is as diverse as the communities themselves. That said, most places have a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills with which to drive change to improve their communities and achieve the shared responsibility desired. Tapping into and respecting this wealth is vital if shared responsibility in disasters is to be realised.



Myrtleford community group meeting.

Expect the unexpected

- Building resilience and disaster preparedness is a complex and busy space. Resilience building rarely proceeds in a straight line through predictable stages. The fluid dynamics of community life need to make space for adaptation and the emergence of new ideas and directions over the life of a project, to ensure community resilience-building is sustainable and able to thrive and grow over time.
- In reality, there may be gradual consensus-building, deep relationship development, uneven momentum, roundabout discussions, tested collaboration and incremental establishment of trust. All of this takes time, but the effort is worthwhile, given the eventual interconnectedness.
- Over-simplifying project processes risks poor outcomes and community frustration as the complex negotiations required of community members are not recognised and accounted for.



Korumburra volunteers.

Summary of recommendations

The key learnings from the Victorian iteration of DR:FR led to a number of recommendations, which are summarised below.

Program Design

Expression of Interest (EOI) Process

- Simplify the EOI process so that it can be easily completed by community members.
- Clearly articulate roles and responsibilities to establish realistic levels of participation and contribution, from staff and other delivery partners, and by the community.
- Indicate the staffing resources that are available from FRRR to support the partnership.
- Clarify and simplify the process for accessing resources, including funds, and accountability requirements.

Community coaches and supports

- Provide community coaches during the initial stages of the partnership, with a minimum employment of one day per week.
- Prioritise community coaches who have local relationships and community development skills.
- Provide three to five facilitated workshops (with consistent curricula and processes), including at least one workshop aimed at engaging others outside the EOI group.
- Provide resources on other communities taking action on disasters.



Whittlesea Community Resilience Committee with DR:FR Community Coach and City of Whittlesea staff.

Learning through doing – action research

- Consider inclusion of action research methodology.
- If appropriate and sufficient budget, provide support and mentoring on action research methods.
- Build research capacity through partnerships with local education institutions, where available.
- Provide access to action research ‘how to’ resources and tools.

Program Implementation

Design and management

- Allow for flexible project design, including context specific project milestones and priorities.
- Allow for adaptation over time as new opportunities emerge and initial focus areas change in response to community life, actions and learnings.

- Include resources and opportunities for cross community connections and ideas sharing, as local projects develop (resource at least two opportunities for community-to-community conversations and peer-to-peer communications).
- Ensure clarity on the process of program completion and exit.
- Work in collaboration with community partners to disseminate and share learning from the program more widely.

Financial matters

- Further streamline processes for communities to access funds and provide clear guidelines at the beginning of projects regarding this process.
- The experiences of the DR:FR Victoria communities highlighted the importance of in-kind contributions and of adaptive and responsive administrative support.
- Therefore, we recommend that funders and enablers of future community resilience-building initiatives:
 - ensure full recognition of community in-kind contributions as part of budgeting and planning processes, to provide accurate costing of projects and valuing of volunteer hours and contributions; and
 - pay close attention to adaptive and responsive administrative support for volunteer community organisations that undertake community resilience building.
- Similarly, we recommend that community groups that are starting out in community resilience-building draw from the data and experiences of the DR:FR Victoria communities presented in this report in shaping responses based on their own local contexts.

Background to project and research

This initial section of the report presents an overview of the project's organisational, programmatic, methodological and conceptual origins.

Overview of FRRR DR:FR Program and DR:FR Victoria

The Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR) is focussed on increasing equity of opportunity in remote, rural, and regional Australia. This includes improving outcomes in the areas of people, place, and disaster resilience and climate solutions, in the belief that targeted philanthropic investment and collaboration will build more vibrant, sustainable, and adaptive remote, rural and regional communities - and a more equitable and prosperous Australia as a whole. FRRR believes:

- in the power of people to drive prosperity;
- that local solutions are central to achieving equality of access to opportunities across remote, rural and regional Australia; and
- that remote, rural and regional communities have the knowledge to best respond to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters.

The multi-year initiative is underpinned by a place-based approach, working over several years at a hyper-local level with grass roots organisations and community representatives who are interested in collaborating to collectively lead approaches that increase preparedness and strengthen resilience capacity.

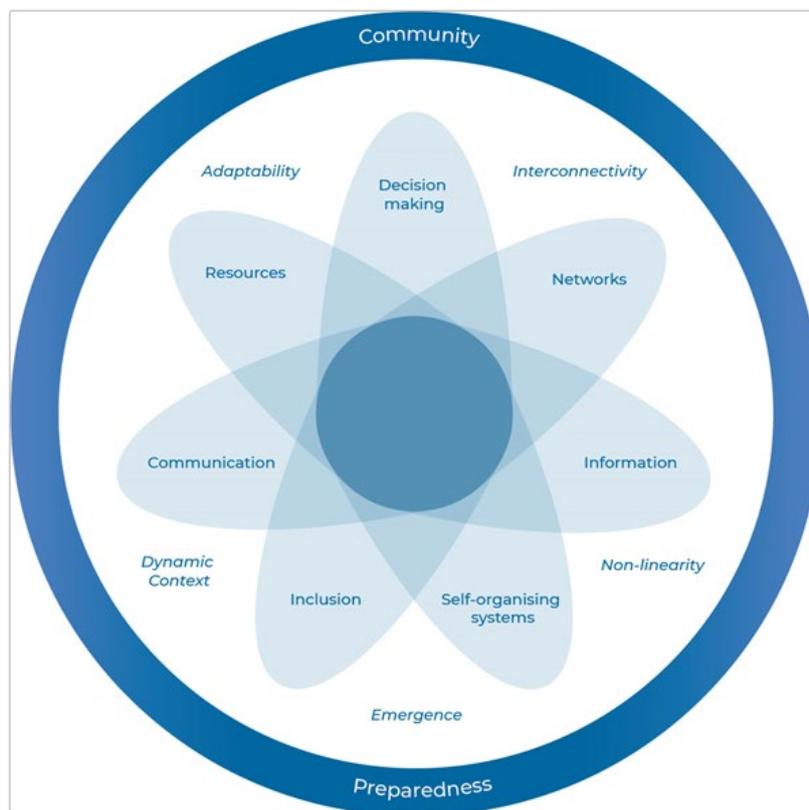
On this basis, FRRR has implemented the Disaster Resilient: Future Ready Victoria (DR:FR Vic) program since 2020, working with three communities across Victoria (Korumburra, Whittlesea and Myrtleford) for four years. The project concludes in 2025.

The DR:FR Vic program “aims to support and strengthen the capacity and capability of remote, rural & regional communities to thrive and be resilient to the impacts of natural disasters. ... In partnership with communities, we broker resources, relationships, practices, and tools to create opportunities for community-led approaches to strengthening resilience.” (FRRR, 2021, p.1)

Learning and evaluation framework: Resilience Dimensions

The action research for DR:FR Victoria was framed by Resilience Dimensions previously developed by the research team (see Howard et al, 2020; Rawsthorne, Howard & Joseph, 2023). The framework identifies seven dimensions that, collectively, build community resilience. These dimensions have been identified through both primary research with communities over the past eight years, as well as secondary research through extensive review of research scholarship. Primary research has been undertaken with communities affected by the Hunter Super Storms; Black Summer Fires; North Coast Floods; Hawkesbury Nepean Floods; Gosper's Mountain bushfire and prolonged drought.

Secondary research included a review of published research between 2018-2021 with key words including: community disaster resilience, disaster resilience, community-led disaster resilience, and measuring disaster resilience. This review included 87 peer reviewed journal articles, seven books and five research reports, reviews and policy documents. The Resilience Dimensions also draw on well over three decades of direct community development work, research and scholarship by the researchers.



Source: Howard et al, 2020

In addition to guiding the evaluation, the Resilience Dimensions were also shared by the researchers with partner communities, with a view to being transparent about what data was being collected, as well offering some guidance on what has been shown to be successful in other settings in building community resilience.

Community action in each of the three partner communities was reported throughout the project against the seven dimensions. Our analysis focuses on what communities did (*practices*), how they did it (*processes*) and how these actions will be sustained into the future (*structures*).

To illustrate how the Resilience Dimensions inform our research and evaluation, we use *Resources* (in this case a community asset such as a hall) as an example of the guiding questions we might explore:

- What resources are mobilised to support community resilience?
- How might a community asset like a hall be used to support community resilience?
- What are the impediments to mobilising this resource and how could these be overcome?

We also ask how this action interacts with other Dimensions: what information is needed to mobilise the resource, what networks are mobilised, how are self-organising systems drawn on, and who is included (and importantly excluded)?

- How are these resources mobilised?
- What conversations are needed to support mobilising the asset?
- Who needs to be involved in these conversations?

- How do we have these conversations (through public forums or surveys or informally)?
- Who leads the conversation and why?

We also ask how does this action interact with other Dimensions: what decision-making processes are in place? What forms of communication are relevant to mobilising this asset (for example, how do we let people know about the community hall)? How is inclusion enabled?

The Dimensions are flagged as important elements of supporting disaster preparedness – it is not expected that communities ‘tick off’ each. It is our experience that priorities differ over time and between communities. It is clear though that what we do, how we do it and how this action is sustained are important. Analysis and discussion later in the report illustrates the diversity of strategies and priorities which shape a community’s attention to different Dimensions over time. Starting points are different for every community. Regardless of their past or anticipated experiences of disaster, DR:FR Victoria demonstrated that disparate communities have the potential to build resilience locally over time.

Resilience Dimensions and complexity

While the Resilience Dimensions identify seven distinct areas of action to strengthen disaster preparedness, these sit within a larger realm of complexity thinking or complex systems. Increasingly, complexity thinking is informing our understanding of multi-dimensional social, economic, environmental and cultural contexts, and is a useful approach to action research in eco-sociological contexts (Rogers et al., 2013). Including this kind of thinking offers new and promising directions for anyone interested in disaster resilience building, and it helps us understand often invisible dynamics and feedback loops which enable and prevent action. In this report we provide analysis for each community as well as findings across communities focussed both on individual dimensions and on the ways in which key ideas about complex systems (including the ways interconnected, adaptable, dynamic, non-linear and emergent processes interact inside and across systems) were in operation over the life of this project.

Communities in Victoria

All three Victorian partner communities were designated as having 'moderate disaster resilience' in the Disaster Resilience Index (Australian Disaster Resilience Index, 2020). Communities in areas of moderate disaster resilience have some capacity to use available resources to cope with adverse events, and some capacity to adjust to change through learning, adaptation and transformation. Moderate disaster resilience is generally signified by moderate levels of coping and adaptive capacity, which in turn are associated with moderate levels of economic capital, moderate provision of and access to services, moderate community cohesion and variable encouragement for adaptive learning and problem solving.

Korumburra

Korumburra is an inner regional town with surrounding agriculture industries, located 120km South East of Melbourne at the foothills of the Strzelecki Ranges. At the 2021 Census it had a population of 4,749 people, an increase of more than 20% (1,110 people) since 2016. This population growth is likely to reflect the post-COVID demographic shifts evident across the whole of Australia.



The primary industries are dairy and beef. The area is also a popular tourism location forming a part of the South Gippsland LGA. The town's commercial centre borders the main highway, which to some extent bifurcates the community. There is a diversity of shops, although large supermarkets in nearby Leongatha negatively impact the local economy.

The median age of the community is 47. The population of Korumburra is generally older than Victoria more broadly (26.2% aged over 65 years compared to 16.8%). This trend holds for those aged over 80 years, which is close to double the state average.

Reflecting this age profile, Korumburra has lower levels of workforce participation than the Victorian community generally (53.3% compared to 62.4%). In terms of those in the workforce, there are more people working part time (38.5% compared to 32.3%) and lower unemployment rates (3.8% compared to 5.0%).

The community had poorer health than the Victorian community generally, with some 48% having at least one long-term health condition.

One point one percent (n=51) of the population identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander which is similar to Victoria more generally. There is a significant Italian community, comprising 5% of the population, which is reflected in the town's infrastructure and 65 people speak Italian at home.

Residents of Korumburra were more likely to own their home (42% compared to 32%). Thirty-five percent of households were paying a mortgage on their home and a further 19.3% were renting in 2021.



Korumburra community feedback session.

Whittlesea Township and surrounds

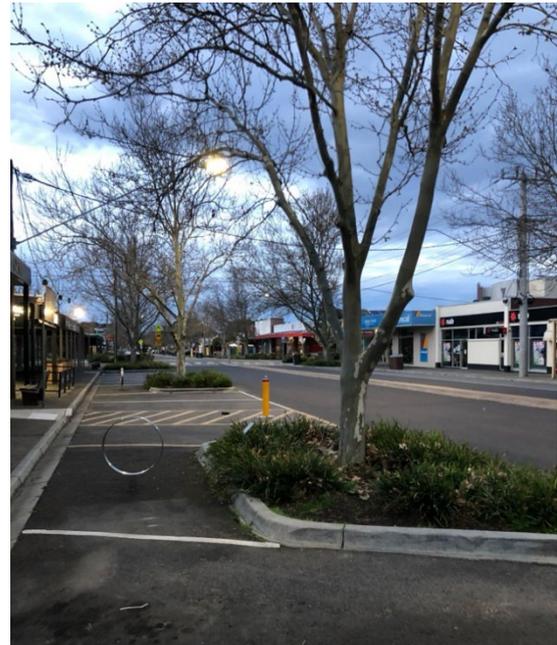
The following information relates to the postcode 3757, as distinct from the City of Whittlesea within which it is located. The City of Whittlesea includes a large area of metropolitan Melbourne and therefore has a different demographic profile from that of its rural fringe.

At the 2021 Census, Whittlesea Township and surrounds had a population of 9,735 people, an increase of 6.9% (776 people) since 2016. The median age of the community is 41 years. Whittlesea had a slightly older population compared to the median age in Victoria.

Workforce statistics for the community were similar to the Victorian average. Whittlesea Township and surrounds has a slightly lower level of workforce participation than the Victorian community (59.6% compared to 62.4%). In terms of those in the workforce, more were working full time (56.8% compared to 56.2%), while the percentage in part time work was exactly the same (32.3%). In 2021 the unemployment rate was slightly lower in Whittlesea Township and surrounds (3.3% compared to 5.0%).

The community had poorer health than the Victorian community generally, with some 44.9% having at least one long-term health condition.

One point three percent of the population identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, again similar to the Victorian population more generally. The two main cultural backgrounds are English and Australian with 79.3% of the community ancestry coming from those two countries. Eighty-seven point three percent of the community only speak English at home, while the highest non-English language spoken at home in the community is Italian, spoken by 1.4% of the community. Residents of Whittlesea Township and surrounds are more likely to paying a mortgage than the average Victorian (46.7% compared to 36.1%). In 2021, some 37% of the community owned their home outright and a further 13.2% were renting.



Myrtleford

At the 2021 Census Myrtleford had a population of 3,285 people, with very little population growth since 2016 (approximately 1%).

The median age of the community is 50. Myrtleford is generally older than the median age in Victoria (28.9% aged over 65 years compared to 16.8%), a trend that holds for those aged over 80 years as well.

Reflecting this age profile, Myrtleford has lower levels of workforce participation than the Victorian community generally (54.1% compared to 62.4%). In terms of those in the workforce, there are more people working part time (38.9% compared to 32.3%) and lower unemployment rates (2.9% compared to 5.0%)

The community had poorer health than the Victorian community generally, with some 46.4% having at least one long-term health condition.

One point five percent of the population identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander which is similar to Victoria more generally. The three main cultural backgrounds are English, Australian and Italian. Eighty-three point seven percent of the community speak only English at home. The next most spoken language is Italian with 6.7% of the community speaking Italian at home.

Residents of Myrtleford were more likely to own their home (46.2% compared to 32%). 27% of households were paying a mortgage on their home and a further 22.5% were renting in 2021.



Myrtleford working group meeting.

Findings and research insights

Community action over time

The following project timelines for each community track action and key moments of change over the four years of the DR:FR Victoria program. Timelines include information both about *what* happened and summary analysis, which provides some sense making for each of the moments captured and their connection to change over time in each community.

Overall learning insights regarding community action over time, and elements of program design that contributed to success include:

- 1. Ensuring that project parameters were flexible and contextualised for each community was a critical success factor in the DR: FR Victoria program's design and implementation.** Although broad program objectives were consistent, flexibility in the scope, design and implementation of each community project enabled tailored action in different local contexts to meet diverse community priorities and a meaningful direction for their initiative.
- 2. Adopting a flexible approach to project milestones and timeframes within the overall project period was also an effective strategy for supporting local community resilience building.** The high level of complexity and unpredictability inherent in the dynamics of community life, community engagement and decision-making processes were evident in very different ways in each participating community. This meant that some aims and actions took longer to achieve than initially predicted, some needed to change direction, adapt or be set aside for new activities, and some gained traction much more quickly than others. **The capacity of DR:FR Victoria to work with flexible milestones in communities, as well as adaptation and change, supported positive momentum in community resilience building and made space for positive local impact to take place in a way that more structured and prescriptive program structures cannot.**
- 3. Locally determined measures for success and impact (both quantitative and qualitative) were also critical to effective resilience building in DR:FR Victoria.** Resilience dimensions (discussed below in each community) provided guidance regarding areas of attention and priorities which shaped local projects over time, but the program resisted the temptation of imposing a set of context free indicators or measures against which community success was to be gauged. This meant that **community resilience building efforts were accountable to local community needs and responsive to the specific context of both disasters and contours of community life.**

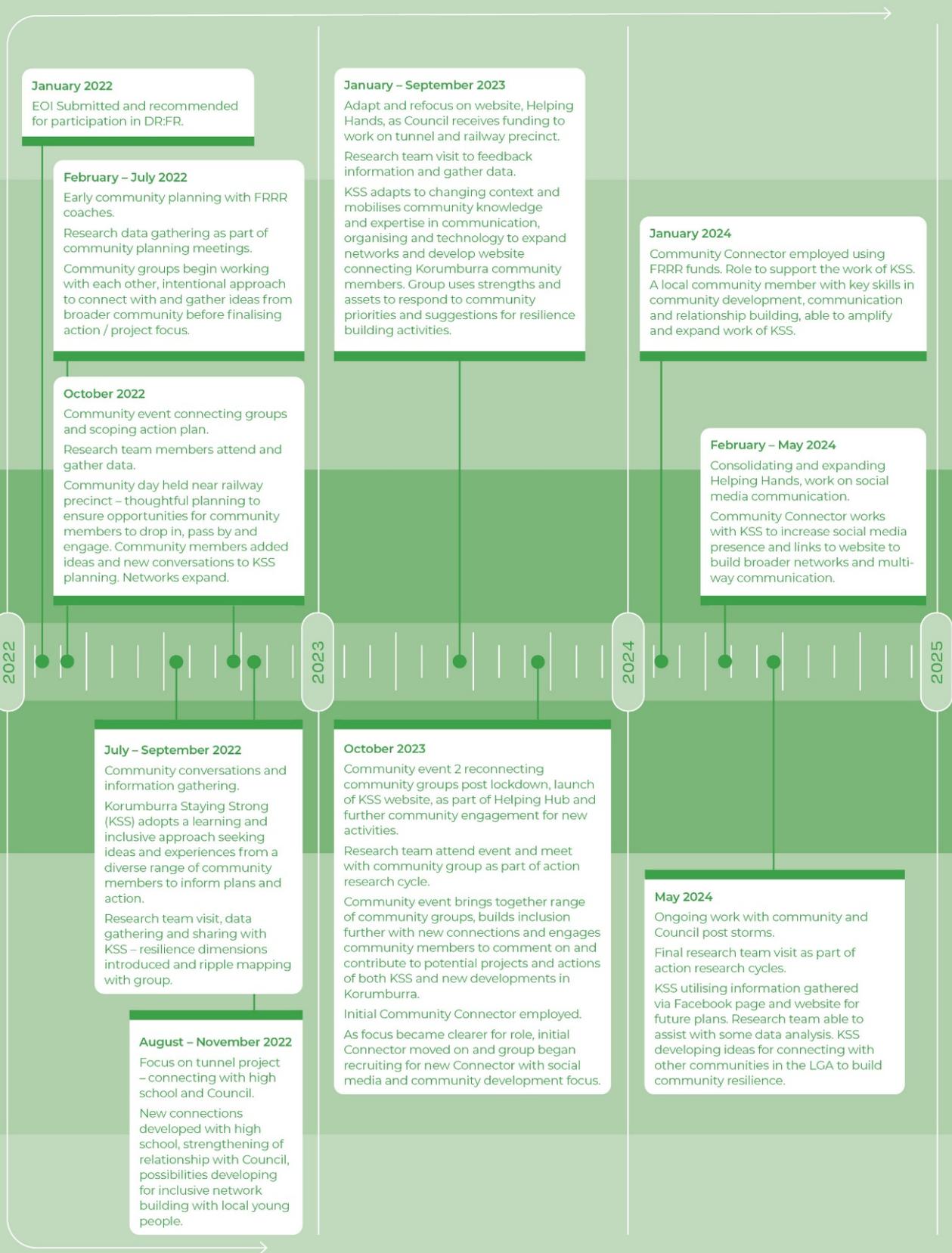
The importance of this cannot be over-estimated, as this process actively works against formulaic tick-a-box processes often imposed on communities, and practically supports respect, recognition and valuing of community knowledge and decision-making. The data presented below in timelines, Resilience Dimensions analysis over time and examples of complex systems in action provides a very clear picture of communities in very different ways, seeking recognition for their knowledge, skills and capacities to be included in disaster resilience building. Supporting community-led and owned measures of success is a vital foundation for this to occur and one which was a key success factor for DR:FR Victoria.

The following pages detail the key activities in each community over the lifetime of the program.

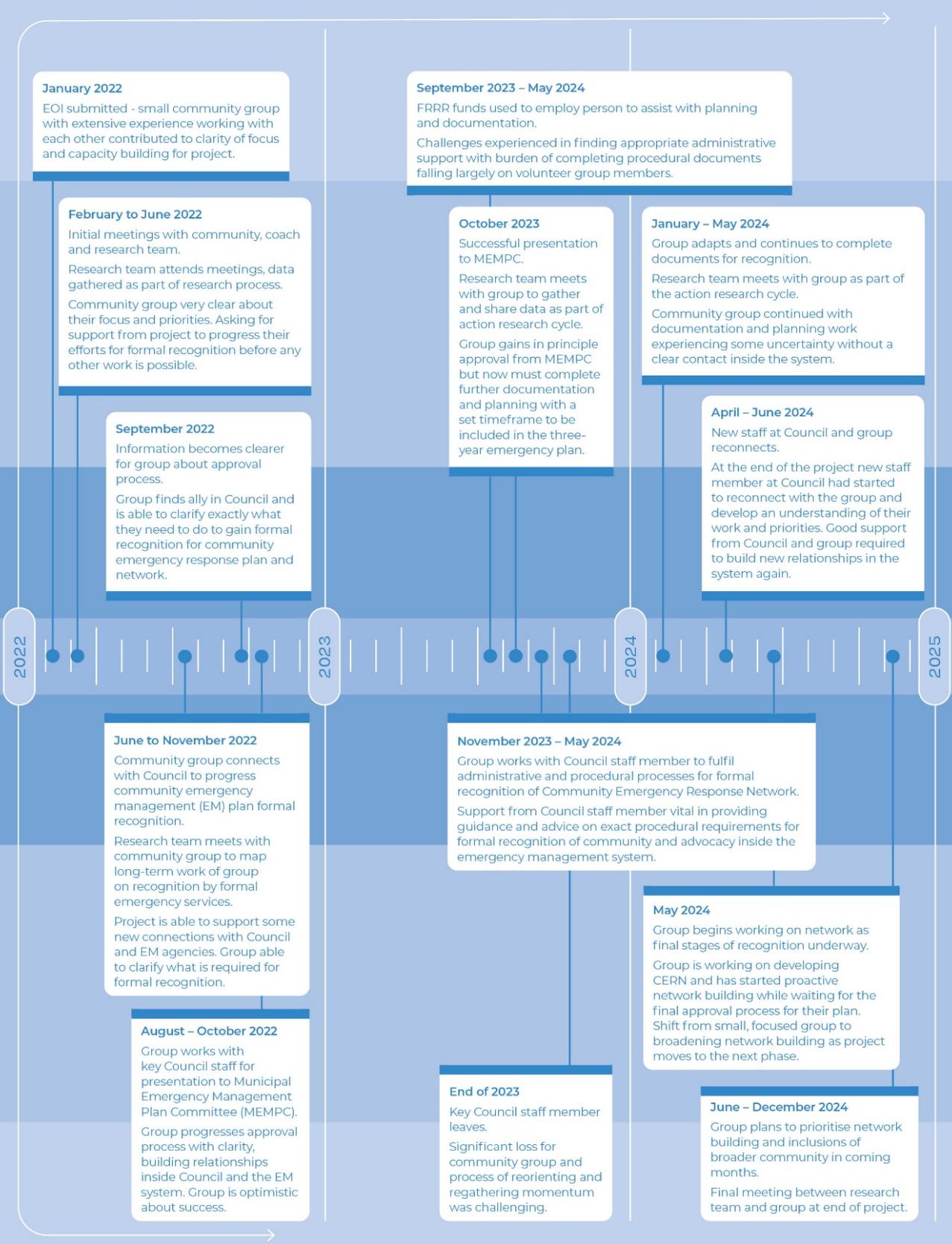


Whittlesea Township and surrounds workshop.

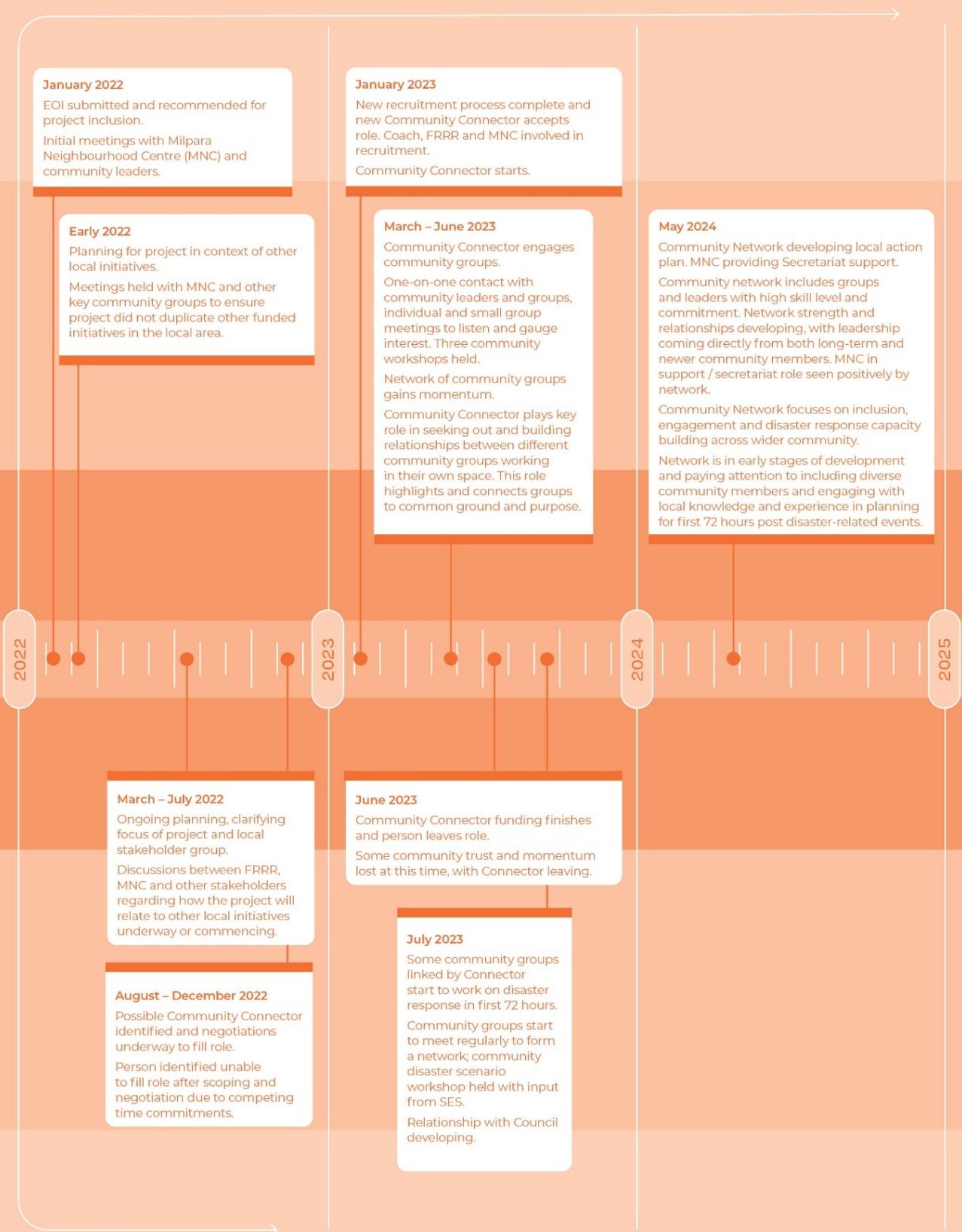
Korumburra



Whittlesea Township and surrounds



Myrtleford



Actions to support disaster preparedness and build community resilience in each community

This section reports actions in each of the partner communities against the Resilience Dimensions discussed earlier. As previously mentioned, these are not intended as a 'to do' list but aims to provide a framework that supports and guides action towards community resilience. What is marked in the following discussions is the diversity of approach evident as well as the affirmation that paying attention to these elements of community life will support collective action that allows communities to be better prepared for future disasters.

Korumburra

Data collected with the Korumburra Staying Strong (KSS) group is presented below at significant points across the DR:FR Victoria initiative. This data was generated through focus group discussions, observations and individual interviews. The interpretation of the data was checked with members of the group to ensure it reflected their experiences.

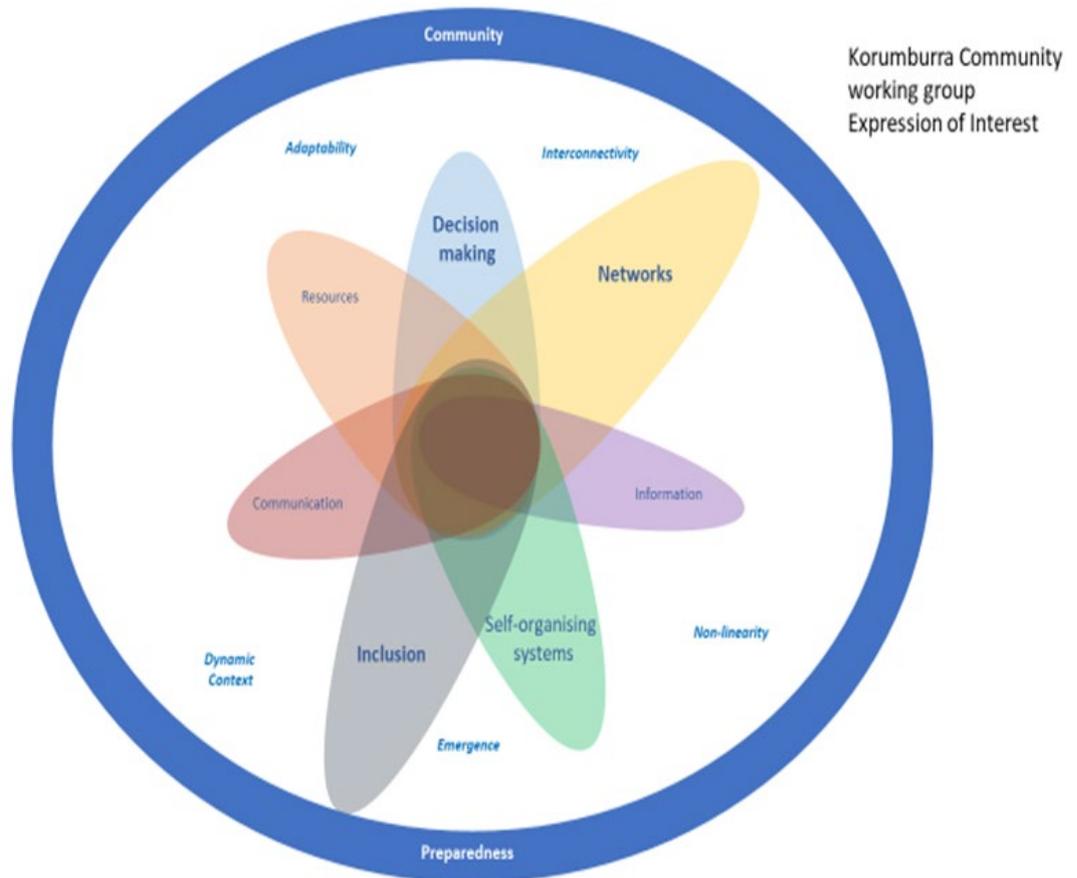
General overview

The mapping of action against the Resilience Dimensions reveal shifts over time in the focus of KSS activities, however, even from the Expression of Interest stage inclusion has been a strong thread through the group's work. This has meant the group has paid specific attention to be open and transparent about their actions, have repeatedly built in opportunities for wider community input, and have consistently asked questions about the usefulness of their work to the broader community. This has included analysis of Census data, collecting information about services, and engaging in community conversations. The working group brings together a mix of business, service and resident perspectives, but with potential to increase the diversity in terms of age, ethnicity and other demographic factors.

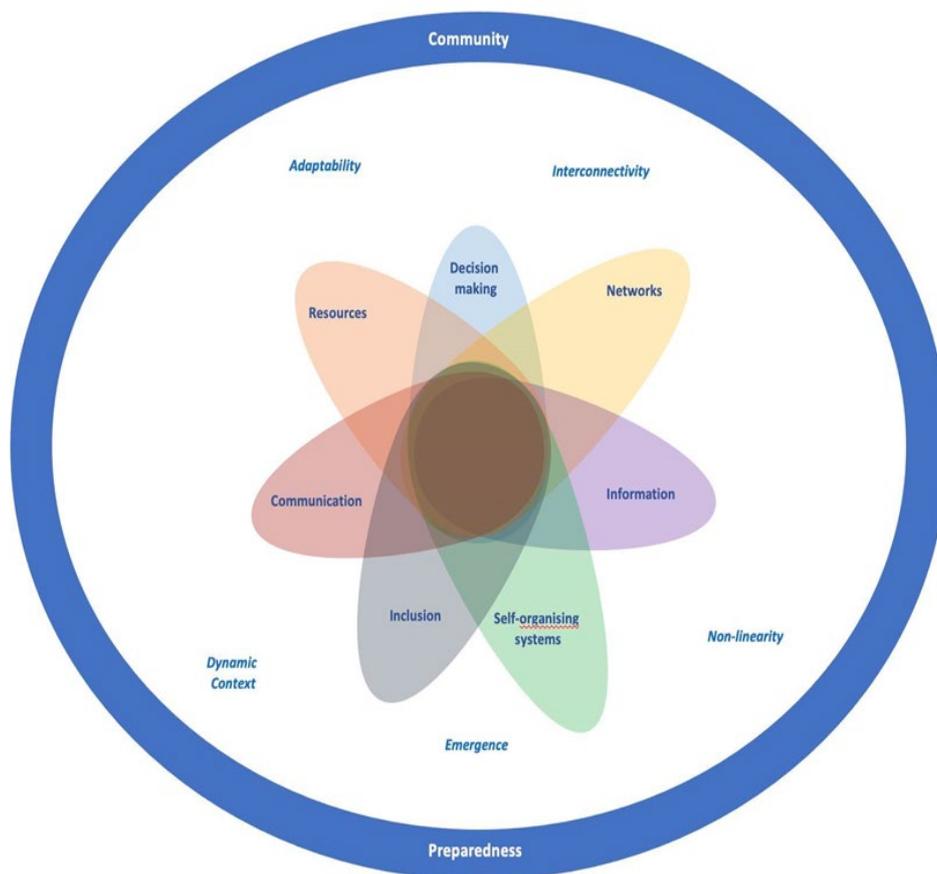
Conversely, throughout the DR:FR initiative, KSS has been less focussed on seeking to participate in decision-making forums (such as emergency management). This reflected a sense of trust in the existing decision-making forums and the expertise of those in those forums. KSS saw their contribution to resilience building in relation to building inclusive networks that could support emergency management agencies.

Change over time

At the **Expression of Interest stage** there was a strong focus on leveraging the existing networked culture of the community (most notable through the Korumburra Roundtable). The newly formed DR:FR Korumburra Community Working Group was keen to increase the diversity of those involved in or reached by community activities (inclusion). At this stage other Resilience Dimensions where of less focus to the group.

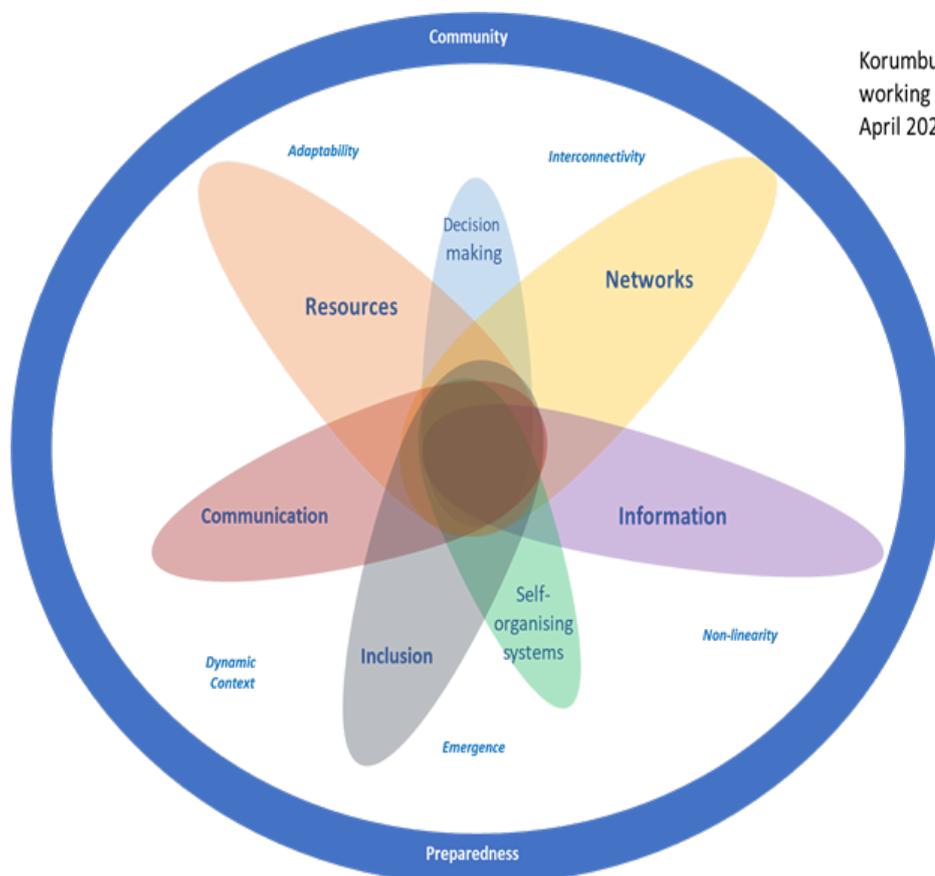


The **August 2022** illustration captures a period of circumspection and uncertainty among the KSS group. The phrase **“we don’t know what we don’t know”** had notable traction during this time and led to an early emphasis on information-gathering. While this period can (and to some extent was) experienced with frustration by community members it was pivotal in the longer-term success of KSS. **Sitting with this discomfort created time and space for relationships to be developed which was particularly important for a group that did not have a strong history of working together.** This was specifically acknowledged and discussed during one research team ripple mapping activity.



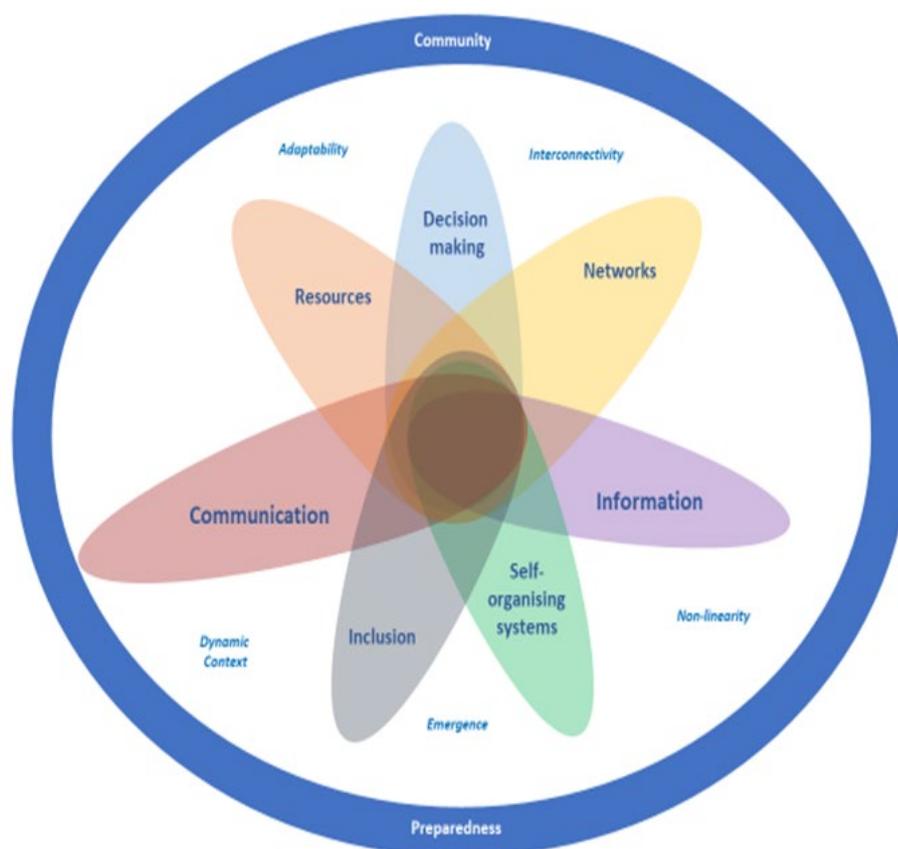
August 2022

By **April 2023** there was significantly more clarity about how the group (by then known as Korumburra Staying Strong) could build community resilience. **Creating and increasing opportunities for participation remained a strong focus**, with a participatory community priority process designed and implemented in October 2022. This process clarified, gave direction and endorsed activities. KSS had creatively **mobilised existing networks and resources to build community connections**. A new focus emerged, **highlighting communication and information to support greater inclusion**.



Korumburra Community working group
April 2023

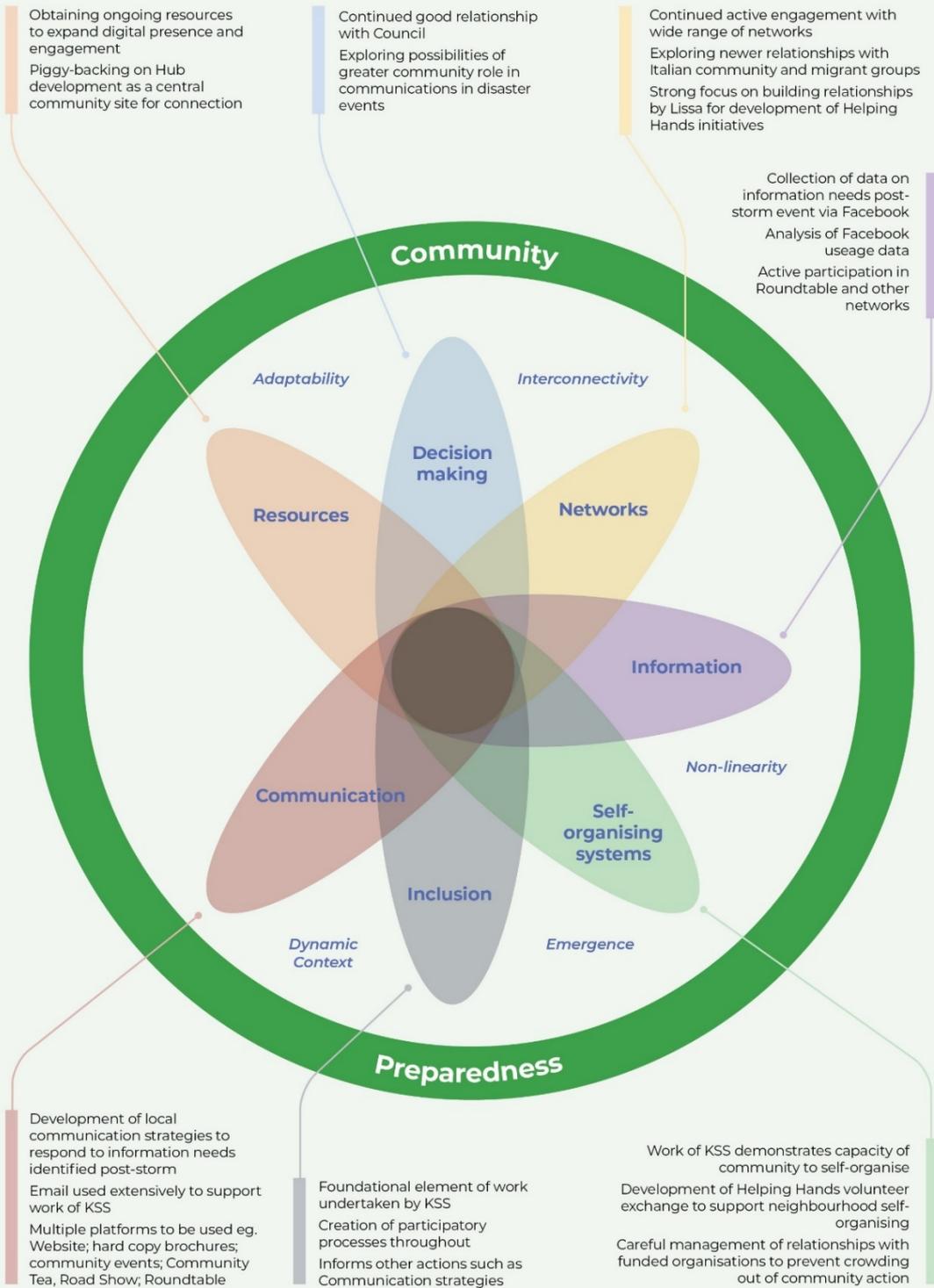
By **October 2023**, there was marked progress in building community resilience from the work of KSS. With FRRR funding support the group was able to **establish a website and create a stronger social media presence** (communication and information), hold a second **community wide participatory networking and planning event** (inclusion and networks) and establish the **infrastructure required for the Helping Hands initiative** which matched volunteers with those needing assistance to remain resilient and connect (self-organising).



October 2023

The final research visit was in **May 2024**. The diagram overleaf illustrates the success and readiness of the KSS group, at that point in time, to play a significant role in building community resilience into the future. Resilience building is an ongoing process and a focus over the next year will be **maintaining the momentum** built through participation in DR:FR Victoria. The creative use of local resources and networks is likely to assist, as will avoiding the drive to formalisation. Staying consistent to their values of inclusion and place (Korumburra) will ensure the activities of the group remain genuinely community-led.

Korumburra



Whittlesea Township and surrounds

Data collected with the Whittlesea Township and surrounds group is presented below at significant points across the DR:FR Victoria initiative. This data was generated through focus group discussions, observations and individual interviews. The interpretation of the data was checked with members of the group to ensure it reflected their experiences. The pre-partnership conversations in Whittlesea Township and surrounds took place with the Community Resilience Committee (previously the Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Committee) which was formed in 2009 following the Black Saturday bushfires. The CRC had previously worked with FRRR in the development of a Community Emergency Plan in 2015.

General overview

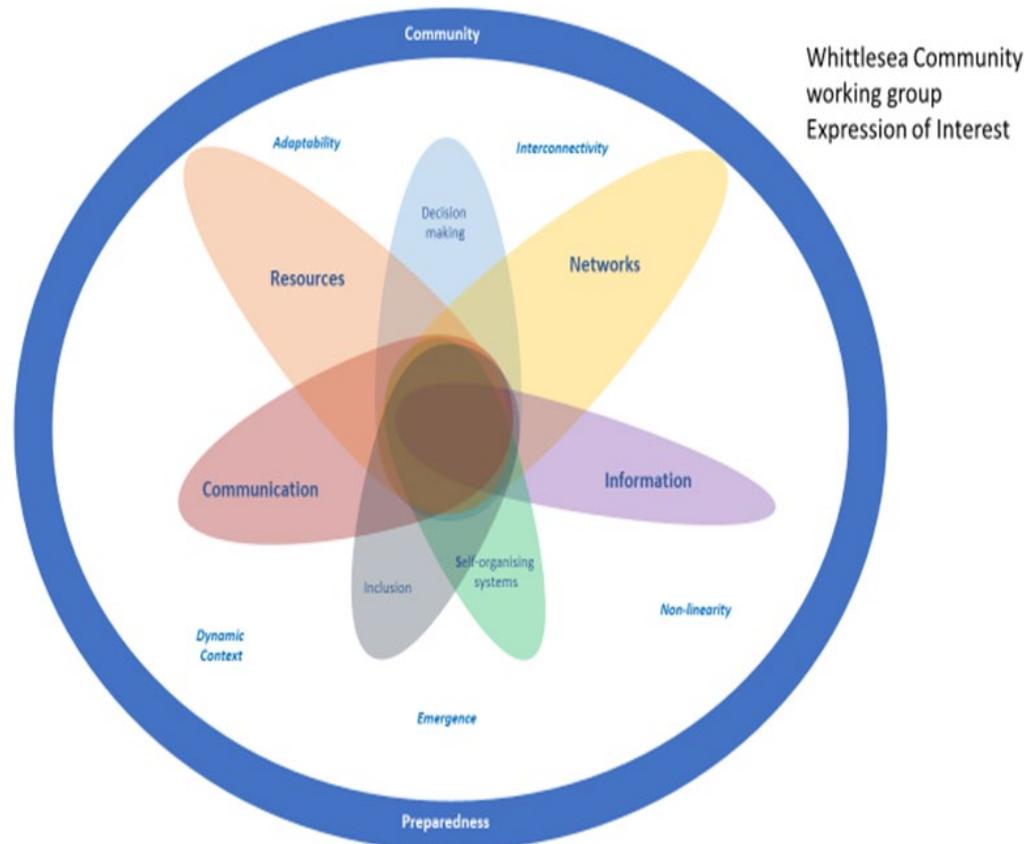
An enduring **focus of the work of the Whittlesea Township and surrounds group was on being formally recognised within the Emergency Management system**. This desire to have formal recognition within the decision-making system supported the group's drive throughout the DR:FR Victoria partnership. This focus **postponed action on other elements of the Resilience Dimensions**.

Resources played an important role in the task of **producing a plan suitable for endorsement**, although this proved to be more complex than anticipated. The group spent considerable time on recruiting and orienting casual staff to the tasks required only to have them find other more sustainable employment.

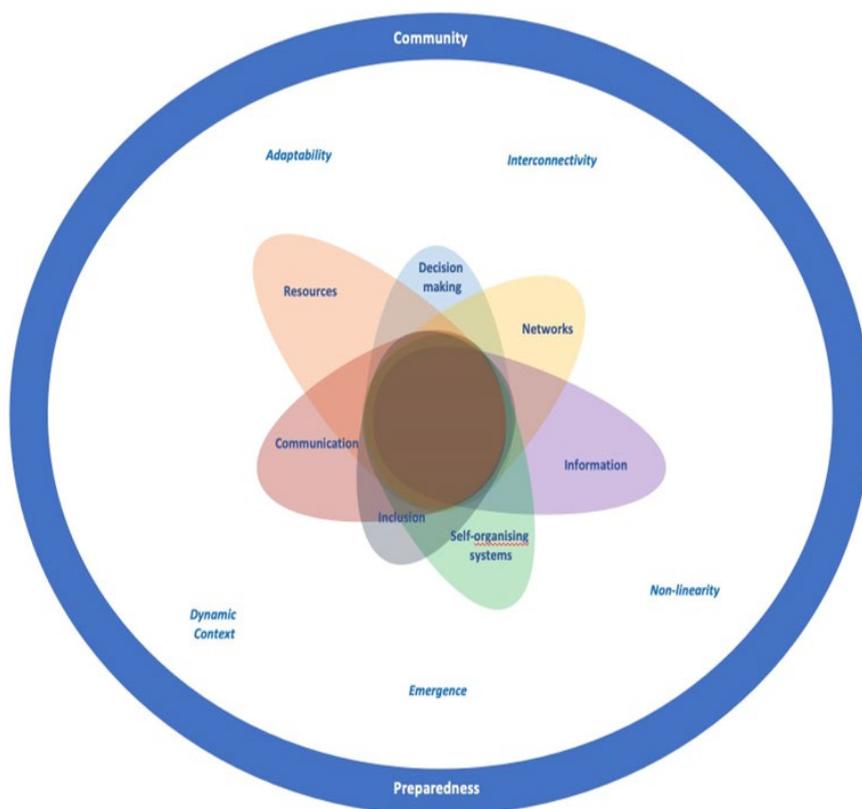
Developing a **strong ally within Council allowed for a significant shift in progress**, although the fragility of this approach was evident when that ally left. The issue of **institutional instability** is one highlighted in Whittlesea Township and surrounds. **A more networked approach may have overcome the reliance on an individual**.

Change over time

The group's interest in partnering with FRRR in relation to disaster resilience was driven by a desire to re-imagine and re-invigorate a Community Emergency Plan that would be recognised and endorsed by the Municipal Emergency Management Plan Committee (MEMPC). The Dimensions diagram below illustrates the **early focus in Whittlesea Township and surrounds on resources (an endorsed Community Emergency Plan) and networks (the renewal of the Community Resilience Committee)**. Other related dimensions identified were communication and information both of which would be enabled by greater clarity about roles of individuals, groups and networks through the Community Emergency Plan.

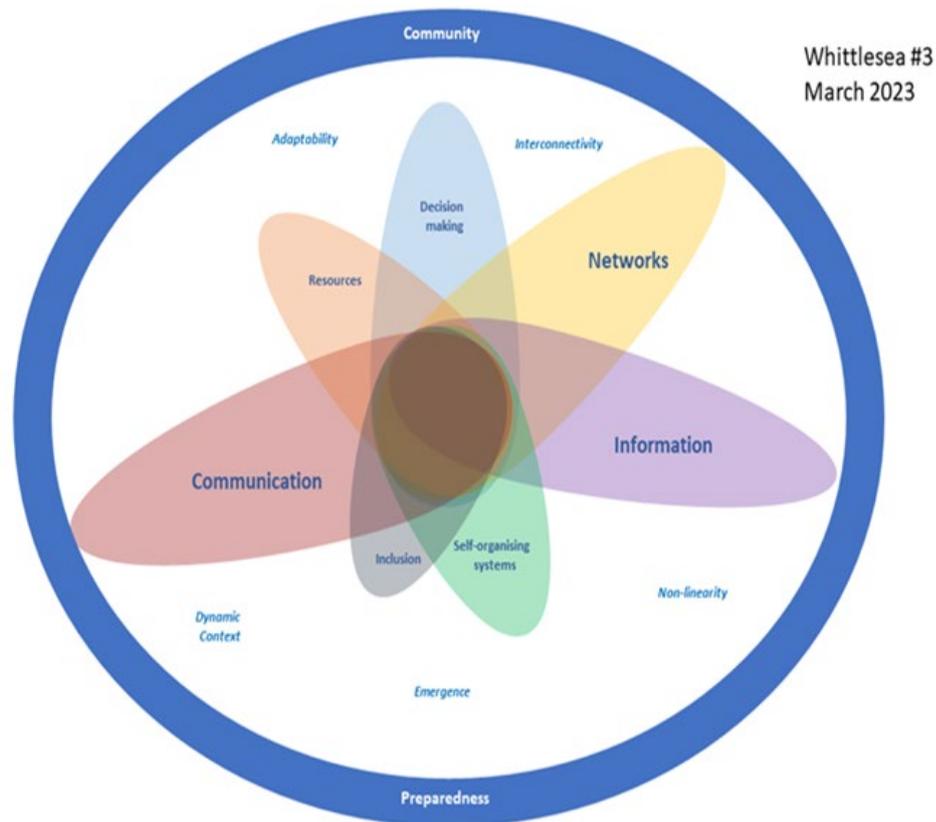


By **August 2022**, the activities of the Whittlesea Township and surrounds group had shrunk or withdrawn to some extent from those envisioned at the Expression of Interest stage. This may reflect the **impact of COVID on individuals and the broader community although it may also illuminate the 'natural' cycle of community action**. In the diagram below, **resources, communication, and information continue to be a focus of the group's work**, with a specific goal of endorsement of a Community Emergency Plan. This meant leveraging resources (human and capital), gathering information, and establishing communication pathways in order to formalise community knowledge in the Emergency Management planning. At this stage **new attention was being turned to building networks and inclusion** to support the eventual endorsement and implementation of the Plan.

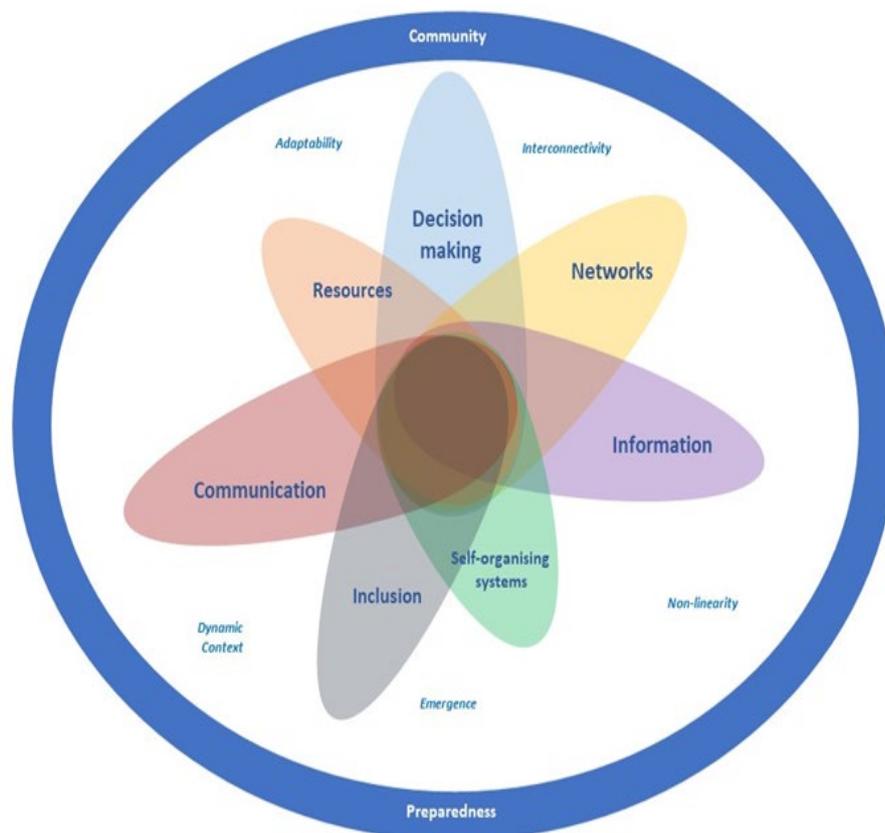


August 2022

At the third action research cycle in **March 2023**, there was a significant shift evident in level of activities of the group in Whittlesea Township and surrounds. Funding provided by FRRR resulted in the **capacity to pay for the time of one or two people to undertake the writing work for a plan** to be formally included in the local emergency management planning documents. This allowed **group members to focus on building the infrastructure** that would be required to support the Community Emergency Response Network (CERN). While there was evidence of more external engagement the process continued to be **driven by a small, tightly networked, group of people** although for the first time the issue of **succession planning** was emerging.



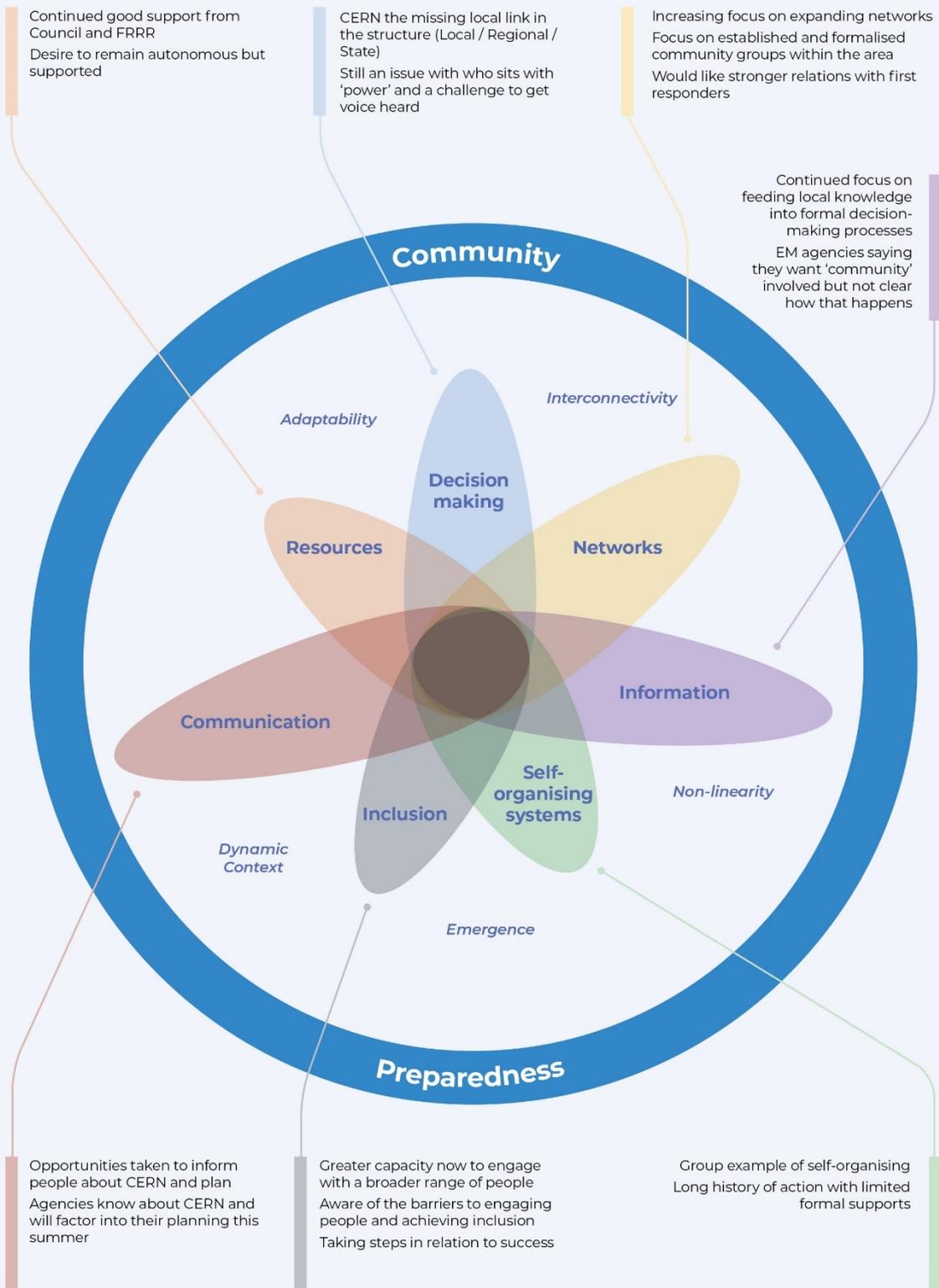
During 2023 and into 2024, the Whittlesea Township and surrounds community group focussed on drafting the documents required to enact the in-principle support for a Community Emergency Management Plan by the MEMPC. This documentation will guide the establishment, composition, and roles of the CERN, the long-term goal of the group. Accordingly, considerable energy was placed in **communicating with those outside the working group about the CERN**, broadening inclusion and networks.



October 2023

At the final action research visit in **May 2024**, we saw a **more balanced array of activities** being undertaken by the Whittlesea Township and surrounds working group. Over the life of the DR:FR Victoria program the group had been able to use resources well to make progress on their clear goal. Despite formal support, **advocacy was still required to ensure genuine participation in decision-making**. The need for a **robust and active network of agencies** to support the CERN was recognised. **Communicating** both 'up' (to institutions) and 'across' (to the broader community) remained an ongoing priority. Having a **community voice at the decision-making table** illustrated the importance of community action to ensure that voice was inclusive and sustainable. It is important to remember that this was the status at that point in time and ongoing focus will be required to sustain resilience.

Whittlesea Township and surrounds



Myrtleford

Data collected with the Myrtleford group is presented below at significant points across the DR:FR Victoria initiative. This data was generated through focus group discussions, observations and individual interviews. Action research engagement with Myrtleford, for a range of reasons, was lower than with other DR:FR Victoria partner communities. **Myrtleford followed a distinctly different path than other communities** in terms of auspice, coach, and FRRR involvement.

General overview

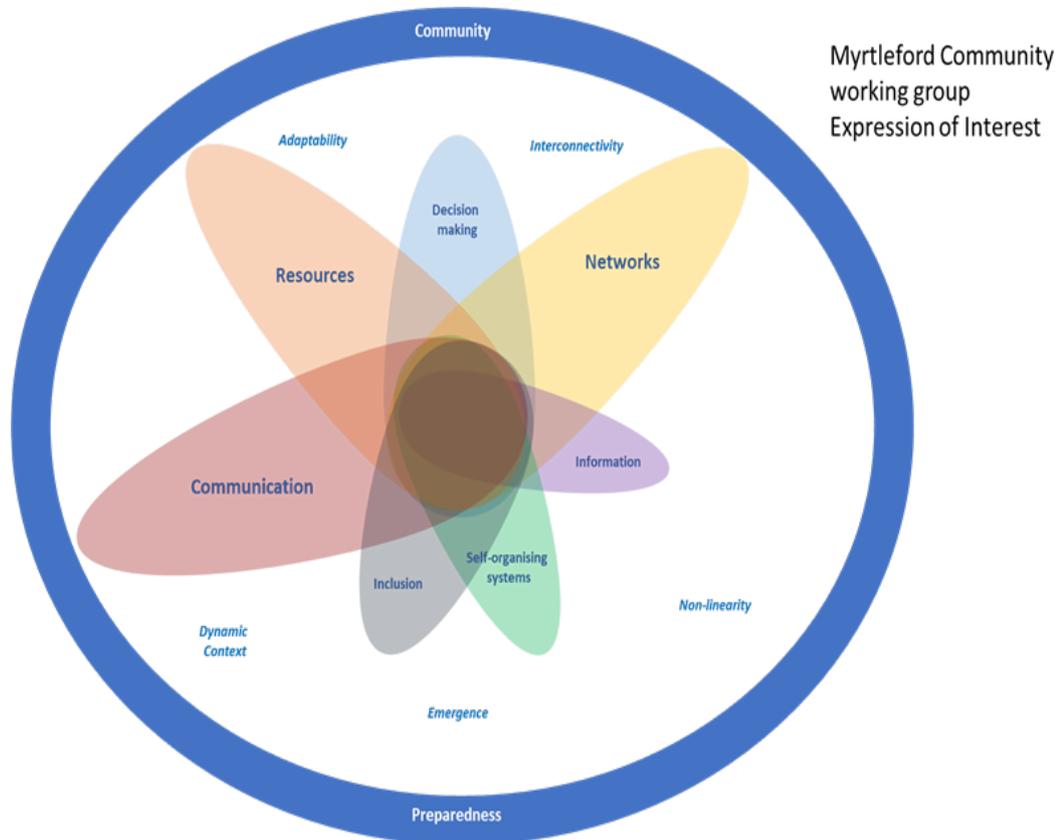
Accessing the **resources** required to support community action on resilience was a high priority in Myrtleford. These resources were not only **financial** but also **human** resources, including **networks, relationships and motivation**. This is illustrated on all the Dimensions diagrams below. Over time it became apparent that **existing infrastructure was not well placed to act as a catalyst for community action** in the absence of additional resources.

Communications, both with formal systems (such as council and Emergency Management) and with informal systems (the broader community) about disasters was a focus throughout the DR:FR Victoria partnership in Myrtleford. This highlighted a sense of **frustration about lack of information and consideration in communication strategies from formal systems**.

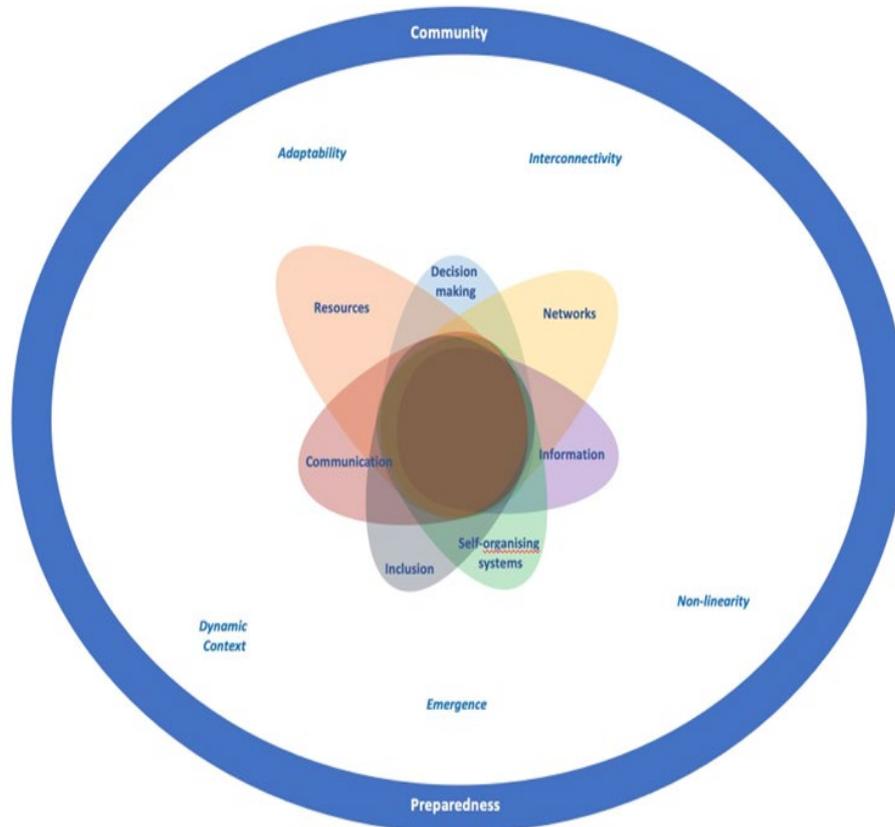
The Myrtleford DR:FR Victoria partnership's **ability to act on other elements of resilience was hindered by resource concerns**. It was evident that the availability of additional resources enabled greater network activity through resourcing from FRRR.

Change over time

At the **Expression of Interest** stage, the envisaged focus of the community working group in Myrtleford was on **building network capacities** such as connection, better communication and strong networks; formal and informal systems working together; and fostering the already strong relationship with council. Accordingly, at this stage we can see that the starting point for the Myrtleford group had a very **marked focus on communication and networks** as well as mobilising resources for action.

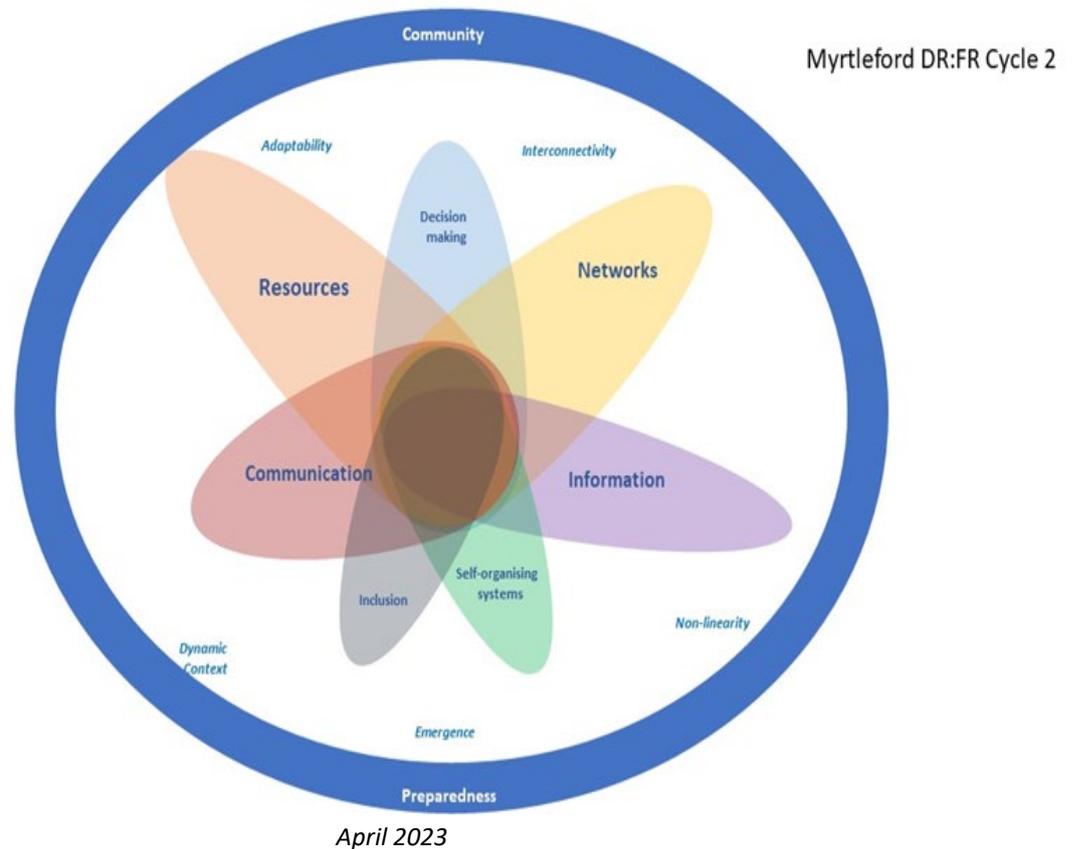


The Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre (MNC) took on a leadership role in DR:FR Victoria partnership after careful consultation and negotiation by FRRR. The main activity within this period of the partnership was reaching agreement on the who, how, and what of DR:FR Victoria activity. This period, similar to other communities, was impacted by COVID and staff leave. The period between the EOI and the action research cycle of **August 2022** was one of **limited externally oriented activity**.

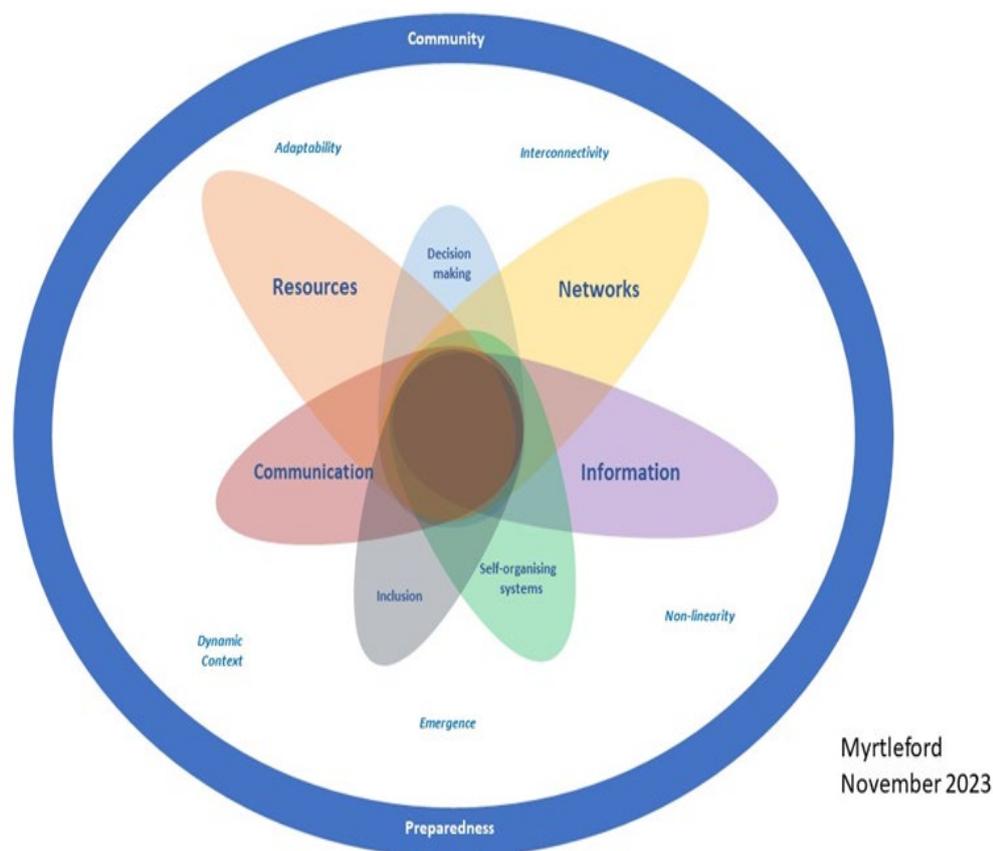


August 2022

A dedicated **Community Connector** was funded as part of DR:FR Victoria and was **based with the Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre** from January-June 2023. There was a noticeable **upsurge in activity to engage and learn from local community members**. During the six months of employment, the Community Connector focussed **on engaging community networks** about the possibilities of DR:FR; **greater involvement in decision making** (through the establishment of a 12-member community project advisory group); the **collection of information**; and building **communication pathways** to the broader community. Emerging from this work was an **interest in focusing on the immediate days following a disaster and identifying suitable place/s of “last resort”** in case of a future emergency.



At **November 2023**, ongoing financial resourcing of the project continued to be a primary concern expressed by both the MNC and the community leaders who participated in DR:FR Victoria activities. This is understandable, given the **very high level of active community involvement** that the **community leaders demonstrate**; comments about being **committed to the community but tired and time-poor** were expressed freely in meetings. The **momentum** built by the Community Connector was **hard to maintain**. With reflection on the previous Map, we consider that there is **little change at this point**, as **Resources** continues to be an area receiving the **majority of the group's energy**, possibly at the expense of the other domains.



The final action research cycle took place in **May 2024**. It appears that some **significant progress** has been made in the community project advisory group that is shaping action on community resilience in Myrtleford. The group appears to be **tapping into newer arrivals** to the community, many of whom bring significant skills. Although the issue of **resourcing has not been resolved**, the group seemed more **willing to move ahead** despite this uncertainty. Positively, other Dimensions are now **being acted upon, including inclusion, decision making, and self-organising**. It is important to note that this was a particular point in time and ongoing focus will be necessary to sustain resilience.



Communities as Complex Systems

Key findings on the way attention to each of the Resilience Dimensions tracked over the life of the project are critically important, however, this sits in a broader framework where the dynamics and interactions we see in complex systems offer us an additional **understanding of how communities can be supported to work on resilience building over time**. Analysis of individual dimensions must be **considered in the context of the complex systems in which they can be observed**. By understanding these dynamics together, we start to see some of the ways communities can be better supported to build resilience over time.

Within the dynamics of complex systems, **projects rarely unfold in a straight line**. New ideas and sometimes roadblocks emerge as projects unfold, both negative and positive feedback loops are created through action, which can amplify unhelpful processes and also positive momentum for change and growth. In all three communities in DR:FR Victoria, we can see the ways in which these **complex dynamics both assisted and sometimes hindered** the resilience building work of communities. In this part of the report, we provide some examples from each community, which illustrate the **important relationships between the resilience dimensions and broader complex systems**, and we outline key learnings from the data for anyone interested in community resilience building.

Korumburra

Complexity dynamics

- Non-linearity
- Emergence
- Adaptation
- Interconnectivity
- Positive Feedback loops

In Korumburra, **consistent attention to inclusion, communication, multi-way information generation and network building** enabled the KSS group to gather ideas and experiences from a wide range of community members, and to connect with the local school and new community groups as they developed ideas for action. Although specific project ideas (including work on the pedestrian tunnel and railway precinct) emerged early and energy, time and planning went into these, the group was able to adapt their work to focus in new areas as the challenges in these projects emerged and Council's capacity and role in each of these projects became clearer. Rather than these challenges being seen as an end to the project, KSS responded by supporting Council to take up these projects, while they refocussed their energy in new directions.

Broader community information gathering by KSS had revealed a number of other potential focus areas for the group and close attention within group discussions to their strengths, time, skills and interests enabled the group to quickly adapt to a **new project focus on Korumburra Helping Hands** and setting up a **website for cross-community information and connection**.

Interconnectivity between KSS and other groups and organisations in Korumburra (including Council, Korumburra Round table and others) allowed KSS make decisions and adapt both their own work and their support for Council on the tunnel and railway precinct work, where skills, resources and processes required were more effectively mobilised by local government. This dynamic capacity to adapt to changing circumstances would have been difficult if the group had adopted a fixed and linear set of goals. **Locating themselves and their work as part of a larger complex system enabled them to take advantage of newly emerging circumstances and focus on a different aspect of the resilience building work where they could see a good fit with their skills, capacities and flexibility**.

During the process of adaptation, **KSS revisited their strengths, values and capacities, tested some new directions and acted on positive feedback** they received from community members, Council and others. Building on their work in local information gathering, sharing and communication the group organised a community event following the success of their initial community connecting day. In this event, we can see the ways in **which momentum was gained through building on positive feedback**. The second event acted simultaneously as a launch for the KSS website, an opportunity, after COVID lockdowns to bring community members and groups together, and to seek new feedback and information about where KSS should focus their efforts next. This **feedback loop** was grounded in ongoing **listening to and acting on community ideas** shared with KSS. From each of the community events and the website, **new and sometimes surprising**



connections emerged, and KSS closely attended to building these new connections and acting as they were able to, in response to new ideas. The group **became attuned to noticing the unexpected and emergent**, which was central to **building local multi-directional networks**. For example, the second community event was held in the Italian Club in Korumburra as the weather meant an outside event was not possible. From this very practical action KSS connected with the Italian Club and vice versa adding a new dimension of inclusion to the work of both groups.

Alongside the work of the group, Council was developing a significant local infrastructure project (the Korumburra Community Hub). **KSS stayed in contact with and supported Council** as this facility was built. The group **saw the Hub as part of the larger system** to which they were connected and continued to develop communication and networks linked to this project as community members. The group was **able to differentiate its role and scope from Council** but build connections between the broader community in Korumburra with key local leaders and Council. This **interconnectivity work undertaken by KSS, was intentional and central from the beginning** of the project but also followed emerging opportunities and directions at different times over the four years KSS has been growing.

For example, during this period KSS was able to utilise FRRR funding to **pay a local community member** with community development experience to **set up and manage a new Facebook page** for KSS and work on how the group could **further expand local networks and support self-organising and communication** between community members. Focussing on **building local relationships**, using **technology** to connect people, continuing to **gather information** from community members and **respond to this** either in their own work or in sharing information with others, KSS very **effectively supported and encouraged local resilience** by responding to feedback loops through their information gathering, adapting to emerging new opportunities and direction changes, and generating interconnectivity between players at a local level. This **process was in no way linear** and because of this it was able to generate new relationships and connections, transport information between community members and organisations, and mobilise action both by the group and through Council.

Outcomes here were illustrated very clearly towards the end of the project when serious storms hit the region resulting in **power outages, flash flooding and damage to houses**. With the Hub newly opened and community connections and networks well established, **KSS was able to act as a**

conduit for information, communication and community support via social media and local self-organising, as well as **acting in concert with Council and other agencies** in responding to local needs. This process **both enhanced community knowledge and communication** during a crisis and also **revealed a number of areas for improvement and additional resources required** at the Hub and across the community to be ready for future extreme weather events.

Again, the work undertaken by KSS on inclusion, communication and network building was **shaped**, not by linear project planning, **but by attention to the ways in which complex systems operate**. This supported and made space for an approach to resilience building which was able **to adapt, generate action and build long-term connections much more effectively in the context of unpredictable circumstances**, than linear for fixed project planning approaches can manage.

Key learning from complexity thinking in Korumburra

Early attention to inclusion and network building established a positive feedback loop in Korumburra which gained momentum over time supporting self-sustaining and expanding local relationships. These were drawn on in a recent storm event.

KSS adapted to changing context over time, recognising their strengths and redirecting efforts from infrastructure projects better co-ordinated by Council to network building, self-organising and inclusion work connecting and expanding local knowledge and capacities.

Whittlesea Township and surrounds

Complexity dynamics:

- Non-linearity
- Emergence
- Adaptation

In Whittlesea Township and surrounds, where there was **a strong and consistent focus on decision-making, information, resources and self-organising** throughout the life of the project, uncovering the complex systems processes that underpinned the work of this community group required paying close attention to the long-term work of the group, which dated back three decades. On the surface the Whittlesea Township and surrounds community group was focussed on what appeared to be a clear and linear process – approval of the community emergency management plan by the formal MEMPC for the area, and the development of a CERN. Ripple mapping data, however, revealed a much longer and more complex history of work in a range of forums **over 30 years, focussed on recognition of community members as legitimate, and included contributors and decision-makers in relation to disaster resilience building, response and recovery**. Responding to ongoing experiences of misrecognition and exclusion of local knowledge and local people across crisis events, **over many years, this community group remained committed to achieving formal recognition of community members for their work**. At the beginning of this project, the **group had been working together for an extended period** and had developed their Plan and a process for establishing a community network to respond to any future disasters.

Rather than being able to walk along a clear path for recognition, the **group had to follow winding and multi-directional processes** to firstly **find a way into formal systems** to outline their case, and then **navigate through those systems, clarify** opaque and often confusing procedural **requirements** and **complete the required planning documents** for approval. Alongside this, group members **sought and found allies and supporters inside and outside** formal emergency management systems, who provided critical assistance, advocacy and advice throughout the life of the project.

During the four years of the project, group members **had to continually adapt to new developments, opportunities and relationships** that were not visible at the beginning of the project but emerged over time. A key example here, and one that is commonly experienced by community groups, is the **adaptation required by community members to continuously develop new relationships** with workers who may only stay for a limited time in their particular position. For the Whittlesea Township and surrounds group, a strong relationship developed with an ally inside the local formal emergency management system who both understood and practically supported the community effort to be recognised. The ally assisted by providing information clearly and advocating for the community, as well as supporting the community efforts to complete the planning and procedural documents required for recognition. This relationship between community members and someone inside the formal system played a critical role, and community members reported that strong progress was being made towards their goal during this period. When the **person left that role**, and was no longer the key contact, the community **group had to adapt quickly** without clear guidance and connection directly into the system.

Rather than the process continuing predictably with plans following an instrumental or procedural set of steps towards completion, **disruption was experienced** at multiple levels. Proactive **flow of information and communication between the group and the emergency management system paused at a critical time** when the group was seeking guidance in completing detailed planning documents requiring approval. This work then fell back to community volunteers to complete without a vital insider to assist navigation.

Losing a strong and trusted relationship with a committed ally was deflating for the Whittlesea Township and surrounds group at a time when momentum to achieve their long-term goal was accelerating. Seeking out and **finding new support** within the system, **regathering energy and commitment** to **build trust** with another new worker, **managing uncertainty** around whether the replacement person would share that commitment, and having to **retell their story to yet another new person** or set of people are just some of the complex processes that emerge for communities as a result of an everyday occurrence such as someone leaving their job.

The Whittlesea Township and surrounds community group continued the work to submit their Plan; gain formal recognition for their role in disaster preparedness, response and recovery; and develop a community emergency response network, **adapting to the changing context, building new relationships** with Council workers and emergency management networks and shepherding the community emergency response plan through a range of procedural decision-making processes. As in Korumburra, research data reveals that this work in Whittlesea Township and surrounds is **fluid, dynamic and agile**. Community members engage in ongoing adaptation, shifting direction, focus and practical effort as new challenges and opportunities emerge.



Key learning in complexity thinking in Whittlesea

Recognition of community knowledge, skills and decisions required multi-directional and adaptive negotiation, information gathering, communication and network building. This process was far from linear and required long-term, responsive and creative work by community group.

Support from allies in the system created momentum for change and connected community efforts with formal emergency management in new ways.

New strategies for change emerged and were taken up by community group through the project.

Myrtleford

Complexity dynamics

- Interconnectivity
- Emergence
- Feedback loops

In Myrtleford, the research data highlights the **important role of catalysts in complex systems as amplifiers of connection, action and change**. In complexity thinking, the butterfly effect is well known – **where a small change in a system creates larger and unpredictable impacts** in different parts of that system (Lorenz, 1993).

In this community, FRRR funding was able to support the **employment of a Community Connector**, who, in a very short time, **created links, common ground and common purpose** amongst a range of community groups who were interested in and committed to work on disaster response. As a new worker in town, but with some local knowledge – both as a community member and with professional expertise in understanding emergency response processes and in network building - the Community Connector **made contact with a diverse range of local groups** over a very short period of time (3-5 months). Using social media, one-on-one contact, attending community workshops, meetings and events, as well as proactively seeking conversations with many community leaders and groups, the Community Connector **developed rapport with community leaders, knowledge about each group**, and began **assessing where common ground might be identified**.

Here, the Community Connector **created a dynamic space** into which diverse groups were able to find a **common conversation and direction**, which acted as a **catalyst for new connectivity** between groups. This led to the emergence of **shared knowledge and energy** to develop a community-led response during the first 72 hours post a disaster event.

When this **role finished**, there was a **noticeable loss of momentum**. The Community Connector effectively **built interconnectivity** and facilitated the emergence of new positive **feedback loops linking groups** that had been doing their own work but started to see the potential for working together in resilience building. During the last phase of the project, those feedback loops and connections regained some strength. There was also clear evidence that the **networking** supported by the Community Connector was starting to emerge as an **ongoing support for community resilience building** in Myrtleford, which had resulted in the activation of other resilience building efforts in the wider community.

Key learning from complexity thinking in Myrtleford

Focussing resources on developing interconnectivity between groups through the Community Connector was a catalyst for supporting community disaster resilience building.

Longer term allocation of resources and support for Community Connector role would have enabled consolidation and further momentum to continue in communication, networks building and self-organising.

Overall learning from applying a complex systems analysis across communities

In each of the participating communities there is little evidence that linear project planning approaches - where project objectives led to a predictable set of actions, outputs and outcomes - were helpful. Instead, data over the life of the project revealed **communities consistently responding to changing circumstances, shifting direction** as new opportunities and possibilities emerged and **making creative and adaptive decisions** in real time to link their community aims and vision to practical action for change. Applying this kind of complexity analysis reveals a number of important processes and dynamics which can be hidden when we only apply program logic and project evaluation approaches, as the discussion above demonstrates.

Critical learning in this context from DR:FR Victoria about what supports communities in localised resilience building includes:

- Resilience building rarely proceeds in a straight line through predictable stages.
- Planning and support for community resilience building initiatives must be flexible and allow for adaption and even direction change over time in response to changing circumstances.
- Planning and support for community resilience building must pay attention to and recognise the layered and multi-directional processes experienced in community life and the array of actions and relationships which must be mobilised to achieve outcomes.
- Over simplifying project processes risks poor outcomes and community frustration as the complex negotiations required of community members are not recognised and accounted for.
- Where funding, governance and support recognise and engage with the fluid dynamics of community life and make space for adaptation and the emergence of new ideas and directions over the life of a project, community resilience building is more sustainable and able to thrive and grow over time.



Myrtleford DR:FR program participants.

Recommendations for future projects

- What worked well in each community and across communities.
- Ideas from communities for refining project design and approach.
- Key elements and processes that support long-term community disaster resilience.

The Victorian iteration of the DR:FR program built on the NSW pilots in the design and implementation of the program. In this section of the report, we discuss the positive elements of the program, as well as some ongoing challenges. We also make suggestions to be considered in future disaster related programs that support community-led action.

Design and implementation

The Victorian iteration included a select Expression of Interest process with specific communities invited to submit an expression of interest. Pre-EOI community engagement took place initially with eight communities: Myrtleford; Whittlesea Township and surrounds; Korumburra; Beaufort; Mt. Beauty; Paynesville; Yarra Junction; and St. Arnaud. A commencement workshop was held in July 2021, with Paul Ryan as the keynote speaker (FRRR, 2021b). Following extensive pre-EOI and EOI development, three communities were shortlisted for participation as they were better placed to engage with the objectives of the DR:FR program.

The EOI process was complicated considerably by the COVID-related lock downs that impacted Victoria in 2020-21. Much of the early engagement work with groups that had expressed interest was done remotely, through Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other technologies. This, of course, hindered the ability of the project staff to be on the ground to verify the EOIs. Of particular importance here is the ability to 'sound out' others outside the group that submitted EOIs about priorities and networks within the local area.

The process in relation to decisions about community partners remained unclear to participating communities and greater transparency about the selection process may be helpful. The group in Korumburra, for example, remained unclear why they had been 'chosen' throughout. As was the case in New South Wales, there was some uncertainty about what groups were 'signing up to'. This may reflect the current lack of familiarity among many communities of 'community-led' rather than 'funder-led' grant making processes. It would be helpful to address this in communications with communities in 'community-led partnerships or programs'. The EOI process was protracted with multiple meetings being held and extensive re-drafting of the EOI required with a view to articulating projects from the commencement. From the community perspective this pre-funding stage was in excess of six months, despite communication that the process would be 'simple' and 'quick'. This delayed action and risked disengagement and loss of momentum but also ran counter to a community-led process in which actions emerged over time.

We recommend that the EOI process be streamlined to:

- simplify the process through the use of a two-page template that can be easily completed by community members.
- clarify expectations, roles and responsibilities of all parties.
- indicate what staffing resources are available from FRRR to support the partnership.
- clarify and simplify the process for accessing resources, including funds, and accountability requirements.

In the Victorian iteration of DR:FR, Community Coaches were recruited and allocated to support the work of three community groups. The Community Coaches brought significant experience to their work with communities having worked in similar roles previously. They provided important support and guidance to community groups in the early stages of their project development.

We recommend that community partners have access to:

- community coaches during the initial three months of the partnership a minimum of one day per week,
- community coaches with local relationships and community development skills.
- three to five facilitated workshops (with consistent curricula and processes), including at least one workshop aimed at engaging others outside the EOI group.
- resources on other communities taking action on disaster.

Action Research

This evaluation, like the NSW pilot, was informed by action research methodology. This methodology positions program staff and community members as co-researchers with the academic research team. It enables knowledge building through ongoing reflection, testing, and action. This was done with program staff, including the Community Coaches and Community Connectors (as appropriate), as well as with community groups. This approach was acknowledged by some program staff as providing a valuable 'sounding board' for their ideas. For other staff and initially some community members, however, there was some wariness about the evaluation. This is likely to reflect action research's departure from traditional judgmental evaluations.

Over time, community groups became much more engaged with the action research. Through repeated collaborative data processes (such as Ripple Effect Mapping), community members became aware of the value of this research approach. Community members asked questions of the researchers and of each other. A safe and respectful space for reflection enabled community members to have difficult conversations about the progress (or otherwise) of their activities. Multiple points of dialogue and reflection (through six cycles of action research) allowed the unfolding of the community story in its complexities. Through research products such as the dimension and ripple effects maps community groups felt their work was valued and recognised. These action research products also created greater clarity among the community group about their next steps.

We recommend that action research methodology be built into DR:FR through:

- inclusion of the methodology in the initial workshops.
- If budget is sufficient, providing support and mentoring on action research methods.
- research capacity building through partnerships with local education institutions.
- access to 'how to' resources.

Divergent paths

The Victorian iteration of DR:FR was marked by the divergent paths followed by the three community groups. FRRR is commended for allowing this diversity in approach, allowing community-led action to emerge rather than being imposed through prescriptive program logic. Again, like the NSW pilot, there is clear evidence of the 'messiness' of community life as well as the value of trusting the process. Community action was affected by legal frameworks, institutional hurdles, historic factors, pandemic operating conditions and personal experiences. What was evident over the three years of community action, however, was the ability of community groups to problem solve, network, organise and deliver benefits for their local communities. Korumburra provides an excellent case study of the value of this approach.

Despite early uncertainty, Korumburra Staying Strong has emerged as a serious contributor to local resilience and disaster preparedness. The group has carefully tailored their activities to local circumstances and strengths. They have been particularly mindful of language and communications. This is reflected in their name which deliberately acknowledges the existing community strengths ('staying strong') rather than focusing on deficits. They have used multiple modes of communication – face-to-face, letter box drops, local media and existing networks, as well as electronic and social media. Their actions have continually sought to create opportunities for others within the community to contribute to KSS directions. This has included serendipitous connections with the high school, the Italian club and young people with disabilities. Practically, they have held two very successful community events, reaching out to new networks, bringing people together and creating a process for identifying local priorities for action. They have established a web presence and created the infrastructure to connect across the community through establishing a network of interested volunteers (Helping Hands).

Despite the divergent paths taken by each of the communities in Victoria there was a strong interest in connecting with other DR:FR communities and learning from each other. In the early stages of implementation (just post EOI decisions) a program wide Zoom meeting was held. The desire to share experiences and learn from others working collectively is a common experience across communities not only in DR:FR but other programs as well. With the widespread use of technologies such as Zoom, granting organisations in programs such as DR:FR could create accessible and affordable opportunities two or three times over the life of engagement.

We recommend that future programs:

- include flexible, context specific project milestones and priorities.
- allow for adaptation over time as new opportunities emerge and initial focus areas change in response to community action and learning.
- include resources for cross community connections and ideas sharing as local projects develop.

Resourcing: timing, process and implications

The DR:FR model draws heavily on volunteer buy-in and future programs need to be mindful of how these are balanced with the contributions of granting organisations. Clarity about what resources (including staff time) are being allocated through budgeting direct and in-kind contributions of both partners may be useful. Another aspect of resourcing highlighted in the Victorian iteration is that of administrative burden. Although highly prioritised by local groups at the start of the program, retention of short-term project staff within the funded projects in each location proved very difficult due to the number of hours and contract length. In Whittlesea Township and surrounds, for example, community members had to repeatedly go through the recruitment process to engage staff. This was time consuming, as was orienting new staff to the activities of the group. The issue of administrative burden needs careful attention if programs are to be genuinely community-led.

We recommend that future programs include:

- streamlined processes for communities to access funds and clearer guidelines at the beginning of projects regarding this process.
- recognition of community in kind contributions as part of budgeting and planning processes to provide accurate costing of projects and valuing of volunteer hours and contributions.
- administrative support for participating communities to ease admin burden on local volunteers.

Building a network of community support

At the commencement workshop held in July 2021 FRRR indicated an intention to develop a *Community Network*. During some of the action research cycle visits and at the completion of the DR:FR engagement, there was strong support among community members to share with and learn from other participants. It appears that resource limitations (particularly staff time) and communities working at different speeds hindered the development of the Community Network as initially envisaged. Efforts to find the most suitable time for the various community groups also was challenging. In this context a much less ambitious and self-organised approach might have been more successful. For example, this might have included, with permission, exchanging phone numbers and email contacts.

We recommend:

- collaborative learning between communities involved in DR:FR be supported.
- future community-led resilience building activities plan and resource at least two opportunities for community-to-community conversations.
- FRRR develops opportunities for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing between participating communities and other communities.

The value of long term, place based work DR:FR is designed to work differently with communities in building resilience to future disruptions or disasters. Establishing respectful relationships based on trust and partnership is essential to its success. This led to significant time being allocated to the engagement and development phase of the program. Throughout the research in both States, it has been evident over time that community members – often the leaders of initiatives such as DR:FR – provided the greatest consistency and stability within communities. Institutions (such as local government or emergency services) on the other hand are much more unstable due to staff changes and political shifts. This stability and often long-term commitment by community members to place is a resource that, in the main, is under-recognised.

We recommend:

- program-based initiatives, where possible, be placed within a long-term, place-based, partnership with communities.

What's next?

Building community capability in resilience and preparedness will continue to be an area of focus for FRRR, particularly as disasters increase in frequency and severity and have such disproportionate impacts on remote, rural and regional communities. It is widely accepted that investing in preparedness, including building community resilience, strengthens capacity to move through recovery following a disaster event - and mitigates the impact of future disasters and disruptions.

The DR:FR model is a proven place-based approach that aims to enhance the resilience and disaster-readiness of communities. Each of the DR:FR Victoria communities is in a strong position to continue strengthening resilience.

Korumburra

- The Korumburra Staying Strong (KSS) group appears ready to play a significant role in building community resilience into the future.
- A focus over the next year for KSS will be maintaining the momentum built through participation in DR:FR Victoria.
- The creative use of local resources and networks is likely to assist, as will avoiding the drive to formalisation.
- Staying consistent to their values of inclusion and place (Korumburra) will ensure the activities of the group remain genuinely community-led.

Whittlesea Township and surrounds

- Over the life of the DR:FR Victoria program, the group had been able to use resources well to make progress on their clear goal.
- While focussed strongly on the dimension of decision-making in the earlier stages of DR:FR, over time we saw a more balanced array of activities being undertaken by the Whittlesea working group.
- Despite formal support, advocacy will still be required to ensure genuine community participation in decision-making. Establishing and strengthening a robust and active network to support the CERN requires ongoing work (and resourcing).
- The success of the CERN will rely on the ability to communicate both 'up' (to institutions) and 'across' (to the broader community).

Myrtleford

- The political and service sector context prompted additional considerations for the initiation of DR:FR in Myrtleford. A careful approach was required to ensure this program complemented disaster-related planning already underway.
- At the completion of the DR:FR program, significant progress has been made in the community project advisory group that is shaping action on community resilience in Myrtleford. The group appears to be tapping into newer arrivals to the community, many of whom bring significant skills.
- Although the issue of resourcing has not been resolved, other Dimensions are now being acted upon, including inclusion, decision making, and self-organising.

Afterword

In terms of the overall DR:FR program, FRRR is currently working in six communities in the Burnett Inland region of Queensland alongside Red Earth Community Foundation, thanks to the support of the Australian Government and Minderoo Foundation. We continue to learn alongside communities and remain focussed on playing an enabling role that strengthens local capability, confidence and systemic influence, as climate and disaster extremes continue to intensify.

Learn more about the Disaster Resilient: Future Ready program at: www.frrr.org.au/DRFR.

To discuss the program or partner with FRRR in another region, please email info@frrr.org.au or call 03 5430 2399.

Natalie Egleton

CEO

On Dja Dja Wurrung Country

APPENDIX: Background to action research methodology

FRRR partnered with University of Sydney to undertake action research in Victoria, as in NSW, to document and share ongoing learning from the program and its local projects. This approach supports learning between community members, program managers and academics. Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that supports groups to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives (Stringer, 2007). It differs from traditional research in important ways: it aims to increase collective understanding and research capacity with everyone involved, and focusses on the specific situation and localised solutions. This means asking, among other questions (for example):



- How can the community of [...] be more prepared for disasters?
- What changes need to occur to support this resilience?
- What change is a priority and how might it be achieved?
- How can organisations support the community to achieve these identified changes?

Action research is structured in cycles rather than in a traditional linear design. This means that research data is able to be gathered, analysed and fed back into the project in real time, making information immediately available to communities and FRRR for project refinement and ongoing improvement. In this way, over the life of the project the questions above are complemented with others such as:

- What can we observe about how a community is working on disaster preparedness over the last six months?
- What are the changes we are seeing that support or hinder resilience building?
- Where is the community focusing its energy for change and what are the emerging outcomes we are seeing from this effort?
- What evidence have we been able to gather about effective ways for organisations to support disaster resilience building?

Data gathered about each and all of these questions was shared regularly with communities and FRRR to assist with decisions, planning and priorities for the next phase of the project.

In this context, questions that are relevant to communities emerge over the life of the project, and the research is able to investigate and respond to these alongside the overarching research questions, which were:

1. What supports or hinders community resilience building and preparedness for disasters and disruptions in local communities?
2. What kind of frameworks and approaches can be adapted and applied in different communities and contexts to effectively support disaster resilience building at a local level?
3. How do participating communities understand, act on and plan for disasters effectively at a local level?
4. What elements and processes in DR:FR were most effective in supporting communities to build resilience together?
5. What elements and processes in DR:FR were less effective in supporting communities to build resilience together?
6. What are key learning insights at a program level which FRRR can incorporate into future programs to support community resilience building?

A wide range of research data was collected, shared and analysed over the life of the project. Data gathered during the six action research sessions was shared with both FRRR and participating community groups and used to inform and refine community projects and the broader work of FRRR throughout the four years. In cases where confidential information was gathered through interviews or focus groups, a process of anonymisation and de-identification was undertaken before data was shared. This process required some data to be shared as themes across communities and the program in order to ensure confidentiality. Where we were not confident that data could be properly de-identified, the data remained confidential.

The table overleaf provides a summary of the data collected over the life of the project as part of the action research. Data sources are diverse and provided a strong triangulated set from which this report has been developed. Some data tracks movement and change over time, some provides important information at points of time during the project and other data provides information gathered for the research overall or particular aspects of DR:FR.

Data source	Timeline and Details
Reflective sessions – coaches	Fourteen sessions focussed on specific resilience dimensions and coach reflections on work with communities
Community Interviews	A total of 22 interviews over six action research cycles. Point of time interviews conducted with community members at commencement, during and at the end of the project.
Observations – community meetings, events	Researcher observations at each community visit, community events and meetings attended, context, community life and environment observations (n= 40+)
Ripple Maps	Six ripple maps completed
Resilience Dimensions maps	Total of 12 maps completed, tracking changes in focus and results across dimensions over the life of the project - 4 maps for each community at point of time in each action research cycle from beginning to completion of project.
Action research meetings with communities	Total of 30 meetings (Zoom and face to face) with communities over project life – Korumburra (13), Whittlesea Township and surrounds (10), Myrtleford (7)
Documents – planning documents, demographics, project documents, policy	Council plans, ABS Statistics, FRRR project documents, local disaster focussed documents, community group information, EM policy documents in Victoria, published research literature.
Key informant interviews and focus groups	Three key informant focus groups, 8 key informant interviews
Emails, phone calls and Zoom conversations with community members, groups and key informants	Regular emails and/or phone calls from community group members and key informants (n=30+)
Project Team Meetings	Nine meetings – project progress, use and adaptation of resilience dimensions, links between disaster resilience and broader resilience building, project challenges and solutions, program reflections
Community generated data	Korumburra (community conversation data, Facebook data, data from two community events). Whittlesea (CEMP plan. CERN plan), Myrtleford (Community Connector engagement report)

APPENDIX: Grants awarded

To support the communities in implementing their ideas, thanks to the support of Sidney Myer Fund, Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation, Maple-Brown Family Foundation, Simon Kucher and Partners, Ronald Geoffrey Arnott Foundation, H & L Hecht Trust, Suncorp, Pinnacle Charitable Foundation and the Doc Ross Family Foundation., FRRR awarded a number of grants.

Date	Organisation	Project Title	Summary	Grant
17/10/2022	Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre Myrtleford, Victoria	DR: FR Community Connector and Coordinator – The First 72 Hours project	Contract a DR:FR Community Connector under the auspice of Myrtleford Neighbourhood Centre. The role will explore / document the processes and networks that the Myrtleford community follows in the immediate aftermath of an emergency and what they draw on to support each other through these times.	\$37,850
31/05/2023	Whittlesea Community House Inc Whittlesea, Victoria	Whittlesea Prepared - Community Led	Strengthen community plans and networks to support Whittlesea to prepare for emergencies and natural disasters by employing a project worker and developing resources and tools.	\$49,950
14/7/2023	Milpara Community House Inc Korumburra, Victoria	The Korumburra Helping Hub	Enhance community participation in volunteering, build community access to skills, goodwill and a matched network through the creation of the Korumburra Helping Hub.	\$30,200
16/9/2024	Milpara Community House Inc Korumburra, Victoria	Helping Hands - Strengthening Community Co-ordination & Collaboration	Support the Korumburra community to be more prepared for, and resilient to, the impacts of disasters through collaboratively developing a Community Resilience Plan (for times of emergency) and a Community Plan.	\$17,001

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