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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Critical dimensions for community-led resilience building

Communities are vital to finding local solutions to local issues. When communities lead and drive resilience building efforts (whether it is focused on natural disasters such as cyclones, bushfires, floods, or storms or community shocks including major services or industry leaving town, accidents, or conflict) these efforts are sustained for longer, have ongoing positive impacts across the community and build local strengths which can adapt to a range of challenges.

There is an increasing focus across communities in Australia and the world on building disaster resilience which will become more urgent as climate change impacts become more widespread. A strong body of research evidence as well as extensive community knowledge on the ground demonstrates that local community led disaster resilience building enhances more general resilience building and vice versa. We also know from research that resilience-building is a dynamic process, not a static state. In other words, resilience is not a goal for communities to achieve, but rather a community's resilience might develop in a bumpy, messy way, with setbacks and challenges as well as times of thriving. Community resilience includes:

- capacity of a community (either geographic or cultural or interest based) to withstand a crisis or shock, to mobilise effectively in response to the crisis and over time to recover or heal.
- paying attention to, connecting and mobilising community strengths and resources so everyone in local communities can contribute to vibrant and healthy community life through times of adversity and uncertainty.

Working in a community led way to build local resilience means that local community members act as equal decision makers with a range of other stakeholders (local government, emergency services, service providers, business) to address issues which are priorities for that community. Rather than a top-down approach where decisions are made outside a community or are made by government or other formal authorities, community led resilience building starts and continues with listening and collaborating on the priorities of community members. Genuine ownership by the local community requires their active involvement in all aspects of resilience building, not merely consultation.

One question often asked by community members is, "how do we work on resilience in everyday life effectively?"

Drawing on research with communities experiencing disasters and other shocks in Australia over time as well as a growing body of published research, University of Sydney researchers have documented and developed a set of key areas, or dimensions, which are helpful in guiding and supporting community led work in disaster preparedness and resilience building. With FRRR we have seen these dimensions in action in communities in NSW impacted by disasters.

You can start with any dimension and work on others over time. They offer check in points over time and across different aspects of community life (environment, cultural, social and economic) for anyone interested in effectively working on local resilience building.

Inclusion

It is important to be mindful of who is not around the table when a community starts to work together and to actively seek out people who are missing. This means thinking creatively about how different people might be involved and listening closely to groups who will often be impacted most by any crisis but who may feel excluded from local decisions.

Networks

Ideally communities are working on an ongoing process of expanding and connecting networks both locally and with others outside the community. It is worth mapping the networks that community members are involved in and the ones known about when starting work together and then checking in on how these have changed over the life of activities. Networks underpin local reciprocal relationships, or social capital which is always drawn upon in times of crisis. These are gold for any community led activity.

Communication

Multi-way communication between equal collaborators is an ongoing feature of successful community led resilience building. This means keeping all those directly involved in the project in discussion with each other and having a continuing conversation with people in the wider community.

Information

There is a mountain of information available on disaster risk but like communication locally generated information is important. Drawing on local knowledge to design information and working with information as a discussion rather than a one-way process effectively builds support for community led work more generally. This enables community members to tailor information to their local context.

Self-organising systems

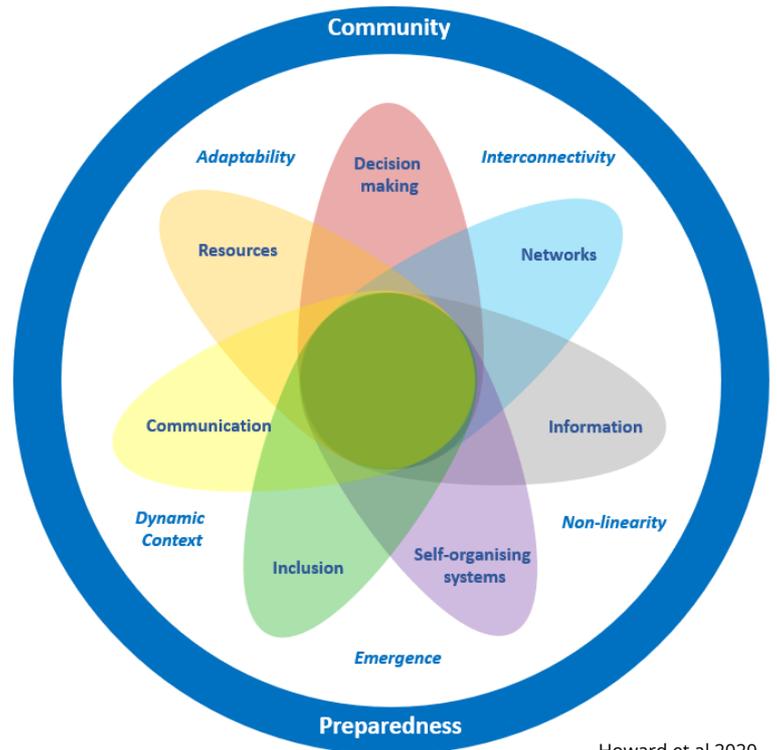
People organise themselves in communities all the time outside of (and sometimes in spite of) formal institutions. Looking for where people have informal networks, relationships, and ways of organising things and tapping into these is useful. Research has found informal self-organised activities are often invisible but do a lot of heavy lifting both in supporting everyday resilience and when a crisis comes.

Decision-making

Local inclusive decision making is the foundation of community led resilience building and can be challenging. It means services and government must step back and listen to the voices of community members and that decisions and action reflects community priorities. It is also worth developing some decision-making processes for community and activity groups which include the ideas and views of the wider community.

Resources, tools and support

Trust, community contributions (skills, knowledge, effort and time) and external support (financial, expertise and practical tools) in combination, are a critical foundation for building (and sustaining) successful and inclusive community-led efforts that enhance resilience.



Howard et al 2020



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For more information or to learn more about the Disaster Resilient: Future Ready initiative, visit: www.frrr.org.au/drfr