

Community-led and place-based approaches to building resilience: The policy gaps and opportunities

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Introduction

The Australian Black Summer bushfires in 2019/2020 burned more than 24 million hectares, killed 33 people directly, and almost 450 more lost their lives from the effects of smoke inhalation (Whittaker et al., 2021). The January–July 2022 floods in the Australian states of New South Wales and Queensland left many communities devastated, with some areas being badly flooded multiple times in only a few months, leaving inadequate time for communities to recover or prepare for the next natural hazard (Taylor et al., 2023). Australian communities are being exposed to natural hazards at a frequency and intensity that is unprecedented and likely to escalate in the context of an unpredictable climate future (IPCC, 2023).

There is a need for an urgent policy response that supports and builds the resilience of Australian communities in the face of experiencing exposures to multiple, ongoing and escalating natural hazards. This paper outlines a policy response approach to building community resilience to natural hazards and climate change that is centred on three key policy development principles:

1. Informed by a system thinking approach
2. Integrated across policy sectors, policy tiers and the policy life cycle
3. Community-led and place-based policy development

Finally, this paper concludes by identifying some of the potential challenges with applying these policy development principles in practice.

1. Informed by a system thinking approach

Community resilience plans and policies need to be informed by systems thinking, particularly in the context of building resilience to multiple escalating hazards (bushfires, floods, heatwaves, cyclones, droughts).

There are a number of system thinking models and frameworks that can be drawn from to inform a systems thinking approach to community resilience to natural hazards. For example, Ma, T., et al., (2022) uses Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory to describe the multiple layers of risk and protective factors involved in the relationship between climate change and young people’s mental health and wellbeing. Lawrence, E., et al., (2022) built upon multiple frameworks including Dahlgren and Whitehead’s model for determining health inequalities (Dahlgren G, Whitehead M., 1991), Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, U., 1992) and the Lancet Commission for Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development frameworks considering the life-course (Patel, V., 2018) to develop a framework for the determinants of mental health and wellbeing in the context of climate change. This framework contains nested layers of determinant categories that all interactively influence each other and ultimately the mental health and wellbeing of an individual while allowing for changes over time across the determinants, their interactions, and their influence on mental health and wellbeing (Lawrence, E., et al., 2022). When developing policy that seeks to build community resilience it is important to understand how various system layers, from

demographic and personal traits, family, household and lifestyle factors, community and social network factors, broader living and working conditions and finally the socioeconomic, political, cultural and environmental conditions, all interact to shape resilience outcomes for an individual, their household and their community. While using systems thinking and understanding the complexity is critical, it is also important that the complexity doesn't prevent implementable solutions from being identified and applied.

2. Integrated across policy sectors, policy tiers and the policy life cycle.

Community resilience policy needs to be integrated across policy sectors. Similar to health, community resilience to natural hazards and climate change is a cross-cutting issue that requires consideration across all policy sectors. Health in All Policies (HiAP) recognizes that population health is not merely a product of health sector programmes, but largely determined by policies that guide actions beyond the health sector (WHO, 2017). Policy in every sector of government can potentially affect health and inequities in health. This health in all policies is reflected in Australia's recent National Health and Climate Strategy which sets out a whole-of-government plan for addressing the health and wellbeing impacts of climate change, whilst also addressing the contribution of the health system to climate change (DHAC, 2023). One of the four objectives of the Australian National Health and Climate Strategy is health in all policies to support healthy, climate-resilient and sustainable communities through whole-of-government action which recognises the relationship between health and climate outcomes. Community resilience is a component of the climate change and health relationship and hence also requires a health in all policies approach that cuts across all policy sectors.

Community resilience policy needs commitment and alignment across all policy tiers. Federal, state and local governments all have a role to play in building community resilience to natural hazards and climate change. This requires collaborative governance arrangements particularly around the coordination of funding, resources and skills in the preparation for and the immediate and long term recovery from natural disasters. The commitment across government tiers to building community resilience needs to be a sustained, long-term effort that considers the bigger picture of communities facing both multiple hazards events (e.g. experiencing repeat extreme flood events as happened in northern New South Wales in January–July 2022) and multiple hazard types (e.g. bushfires, floods, cyclones). Similarly, equal, if not more, effort needs to be focused on the 'preventative measures' and building community resilience and preparation for natural disasters. Currently, in Australia a lot of funding mechanisms are limited to funding the recovery phase and building back infrastructure damaged during the natural disaster.

Social data and evidence and community collaboration needs to inform and drive all stages of the policy cycle. Typical policy development tends to involve a community consultation phase during the drafting of the policy. In the Australian context, community consultation on policy can occur via a number of means (e.g. townhall events, information sessions, stakeholder workshops, pop up engagement events) and often includes an online submission process (e.g. via a local government 'have your say' webpage) where typically community can complete a feedback survey and/or provide a written submission. The community consultation phase tends to conclude upon finalisation of the policy, when the policy document is then shared publicly, often with a 'what we heard' community feedback document. In the context of community resilience, successful policy outcomes require an engaged community who have ownership of the policy issues, visions and objectives. As such, community consultation isolated to just the development phase will not be sufficient. Local

social data, insights and stories need to be used to inform the policy need and framing right from inception. The consultation phase needs to progress beyond simply informing and consulting community and instead needs to achieve collaboration with and even empowerment of communities (as described in the IAP2 spectrum of public participation). Finally, community need to be actively involved in the implementation of policy solutions that aim to build their resilience as well as active participants of monitoring, evaluation and learning efforts. Sound social science, that uses utilises mixed methods drawing on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative lines of enquiry needs to drive and inform all phases of the policy cycle. Similar approaches have also been seen in complimentary sectors, for example, the IPBES's recent Methodological Assessment Report on the Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature (2022) aims to integrate evidence across the all policy phases by seeking to provide different types of knowledge to policymakers and stakeholders throughout the policy cycle.

3. Community-led and place-based policy development

Community-led and place-based approaches should be applied when developing community resilience plans and policies. Community-led policy development is shaped by lived experience, informed by distinctive contributions from people with diverse perspectives and supported by academic and community expertise. Place-based approaches are about local people, government, service providers, and other stakeholders working together towards a shared vision to create a thriving community. They rely on teamwork, shared decision-making, and everyone being accountable for positive change. Place-based approaches work best when:

- the focus is on fixing the entire system, not just specific programs or services,
- local people are empowered to take part in decision-making and actions, and
- all stakeholders are open to experimenting with new ideas.

4. Policy Development Challenges

The policy development principles outlined in this paper are the recommended approaches for delivering community resilience plans that are likely to be effective in achieving the policy objectives and community ownership of the policy plans. However, delivering on these policy development principles can come with a number of challenges:

- **No one size fits all** – Each policy development effort needs to be tailored to reflect the context and needs of local communities, their risk profiles and understanding of the unique ways that various system levels interact to drive outcomes within that community. Similarly, work will need to be undertaken to identify and develop the collaborative governance mechanisms that are appropriate (i.e. reflecting local stakeholder landscape) and likely to enable place-based and community-oriented collaboration to occur in that context. This can be challenging for organisations that are seeking 'scalable' solutions that can be repeated and implemented easily across different contexts.
- **Needs time and resources** – Authentic collaboration is resource and time intense and requires long term outcomes which often exceed the political and funding cycles of government. The political and funding cycles can lead to 'rushed' and often ineffective attempts at collaboration. At worse, ineffective collaboration can lead to detrimental

outcomes for building relationships and trust with stakeholders and community and even to lead to an undermining of government's social license.

- **Needs sustainable funding models/mechanisms** – The financing of these policy development principles outlined in this paper is a key challenge. However, evidence suggests that collaborative processes that foster a long-term sense of ownership are an effective way of developing sustainable financing and operating models.
- **Need implementation and outcome** – Applying these policy development principles requires a lot of upfront planning and collaboration. However, it is important to not get 'stuck' in the policy planning and formulation stage and to move to the implementation and evaluation and learning phases of the policy cycle. When building collaborative processes with stakeholders and community it is important to keep momentum and to demonstrate progress and impact. Failing to move to the implementation phase within the agreed timeframes can lead to frustration among stakeholders with stakeholders ultimately losing trust in the collaborative process.
- **Risk** – Applying the policy development principles outlined in this paper requires a different way of doing things with the need for experimentation and permission to fail and learn. Documenting, sharing and learning from what has and hasn't worked, for example through setting up sensible monitoring, evaluation and learning processes from inception of the policy need, is critical. This may be a challenge for very risk-adverse stakeholder organisations. Collaborative processes also require shared decision making, which again may be perceived as a risk by certain stakeholder organisations who may have particular reporting requirements or legal considerations.

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