

# CSDC Project Evaluation – summary results

## Northern Rivers

This is a summary extract of findings from the evaluation of the Community Sector Disaster Capability Project, specific to the Northern Rivers region of the pilot project and for the ease of reference of the Northern Rivers teams.

Extracts contain section references relevant to the Final Evaluation Report.

### **Key Evaluation Question 1**

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

a. **Specifically, for ‘Education’ activities:**

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

#### **NGO social services sector understanding and capacity**

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

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

In line with trends in combined survey findings, Northern Rivers survey responses suggest that stakeholders’ awareness of disaster risk management was mostly improved by project involvement (Figure 1). One-third of project respondents and 38% of event respondents from the target LGAs rated their improvement as 4 or 5 (improved or greatly improved). As most survey respondents rated their improved awareness as 3 or higher, this suggests that the Northern Rivers generally targeted the right stakeholders and improved their engagement with disaster risk management.

This is reinforced by the project evaluation survey finding that most respondents reported an increase in their expertise in disaster risk management as a result of project involvement (Figure 2).

Figure 1: To what extent has awareness of disaster risk management improved from the project/ Summit? (Northern Rivers)

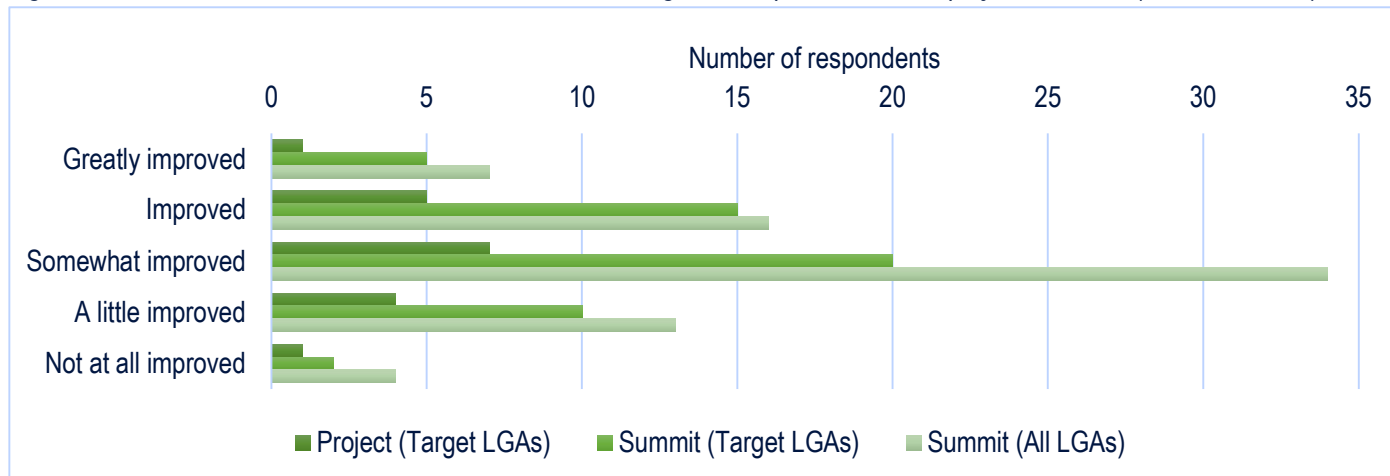


Figure 2: How respondents rate their level of expertise in disaster risk management, before and now (Northern Rivers)



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

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

valuable in helping them understand the evidence base for local disaster experiences and disaster management initiatives, which they hope to utilise in the future.

### **Community understanding and capacity**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a general sense from the interviews and focus group that the local collective capacity to reduce disaster risk for vulnerable groups (building on the individual/ organisational capacity described at Section **Error! Reference source not found.** above) is something that the CSDC Project in the Northern Rivers was ready to deliver – just as the project was coming to an end. More time was seen to be needed to maximise the return on investment.

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

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

- some saw the two initiatives as integrated and complementary, with the CSDC activities focused on ensuring that vulnerable groups are prioritised, and their needs are actioned in networks such as CRNs
- some saw the projects as duplicative and/or dividing scant resources, especially for organisations participating in meetings for both
- some highlighted broader issues with CRNs and other planning mechanisms such as Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs) and how the NGO community services sector –uniquely broad in the Northern Rivers, with a lot of large and small social services organisations – can have a voice, collective or otherwise, in local disaster planning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**b. Specifically, for ‘Risk assessment and strategic planning’ activities:**

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

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

A stakeholder from the local host organisation pointed out that the initial work undertaken to define the local NGO community services sector was a critical identification activity which ensured key sectors such as aged care, disability services and early childhood education and care were invited to be part of the workshop and Summit.

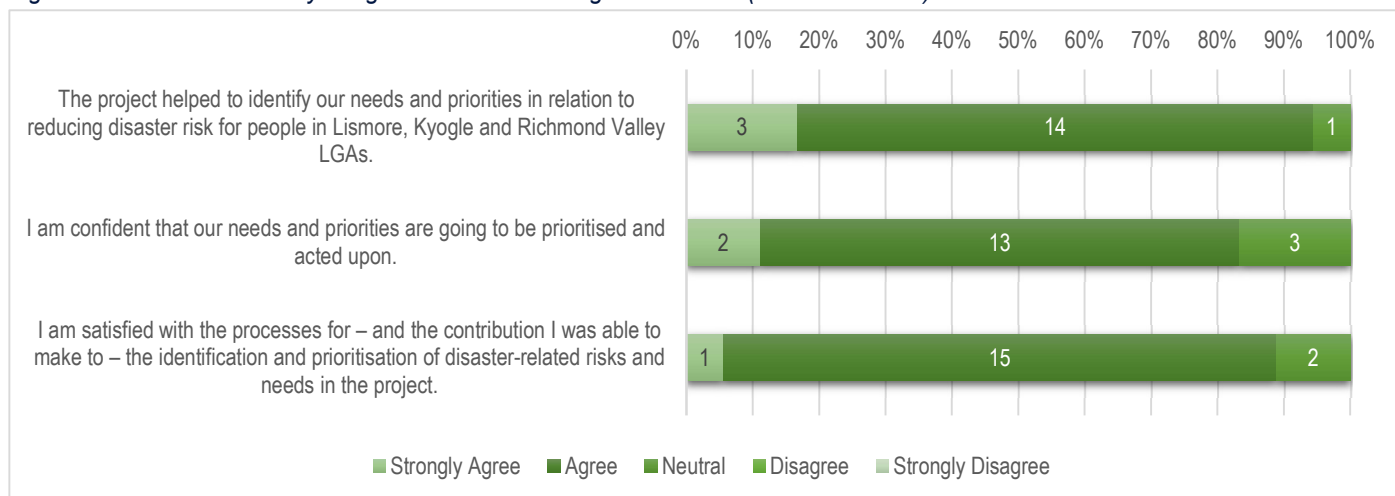
No project this size can meet the level of need that we mapped in this project. An outcome in itself is to map and define that need.

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

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

- 17 (94%) agreed or strongly agreed that the project “helped to identify our needs and priorities in relation to reducing disaster risk for people in Lismore, Kyogle and Richmond Valley LGAs”, and no respondents disagreed (1 was neutral)
- 15 (83%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident their “needs and priorities are going to be prioritised and acted upon”, and no respondents disagreed (3 were neutral).
- 16 (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were “satisfied with the processes for – and the contribution I was able to make to – the identification and prioritisation of disaster-related risks and needs”, and no respondents disagreed (2 were neutral).

Figure 3: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Northern Rivers)



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

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

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

Organisations need more detailed workshops about disaster planning.

Resources like a template that guides decision-making.

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

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

They have also been collaborating closely with the Reconstruction Authority and local Community Resilience Officers in developing a regional approach to roll-out of the P-CEP model. They reported that some local social sector NGOs had taken on the P-CEP model for their own client groups. One



local organisation had trialled the cultural appropriateness of the model for local First Nations communities and provided their findings to the service model developers at the University of Sydney.

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

Resilient Lismore:

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

Drawing on these new links with emergency management agencies and the sector development and capacity building activities of the CSDC project, professional networks between emergency management authorities and the NGO social services sector are growing in the Northern Rivers – faster with some agencies and authorities than others. Motivation was expressed on all sides during project evaluation interviews to work more closely together, especially in order to deliver joint work on disaster preparedness with vulnerable and traumatised groups.

A stakeholder from an emergency management agency highlighted the project's work in summarising vulnerability data (see Section **Error! Reference source not found.** above) as informing their agency's understanding of local need with regard to disaster preparedness. This is an example of the project's progress towards an intended medium-term outcome that local disaster management agencies and authorities demonstrate improved identification and understanding of local cohorts disproportionately exposed to disaster risk.

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

## **Key Evaluation Question 2**

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

### **Post-disaster NGO resources**

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

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



### **Project timing**

In order to do the early work of defining, mapping and joining up the vast landscape of NGO social services in target LGAs (the need for which is discussed at Section **Error! Reference source not found.**), the CSDC Project in the Northern Rivers area has been impacted by time limitations in delivering community and NGO sector capacity-building activities.

### **Key Evaluation Question 3**

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

- a. **for participating NGO social services?**
- b. **for Project Partners and funders?**
- c. **for Emergency Management and other local disaster management stakeholders?**

### **Lessons for participating NGO social services**

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

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

### **Lessons for project partners and funders**

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

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

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

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

## **Lessons for emergency management and local disaster management stakeholders**

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

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

## **Broader lessons learned from the pilot**

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

### **Recognise the value of a community development approach to disaster readiness**

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

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

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

### **Invest time**

Stakeholders valued the CSDC project's investment in relationships and acknowledged that the establishment of trust can take more time than the pilot structure provided, particularly with vulnerable groups experiencing disaster-related trauma (see Section **Error! Reference source not found.**). The community development approach of the CSDC project requires investment of time, and stakeholders had positive experiences with this approach and want the time to do the work of networking and capacity building properly and – when it comes to vulnerable groups traumatised by disaster - ethically.

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

The CSDC project approach and activities challenged local host and partner organisations to build new ways of working between the emergency management and social services sectors. This has

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

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

### **Resource disaster preparedness in everyone's work**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **Key Evaluation Question 4**

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

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

- 83% of survey respondents from the target LGAs (43 of 52) said they had new connections from the Summit
- 28.5% from the target LGAs (15 of 52) said they had new connections from the project as a whole
- including respondents from all LGAs, 86.5% (64 of 74) said they had new connections from the Summit.

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

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

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

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

A lot of the organisations had been going so hard on their own recovery and sky-rocketing client loads. They had been working out of their usual offices and homes and been asked for more at a time when they had less. The workshop and the Summit gave them the opportunity to take stock and make connections.

Grassroots workers were able to connect and talk. Sure, there is stuff going on at the leadership level, but it was great to network informally and network around preparedness.

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

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

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

### **Key Evaluation Question 5**

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

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

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

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

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