

Snowy Monaro Summary Report

Disaster Risks, Vulnerabilities, Assets & Strengths

Community Sector Disaster Capability Project

June 2024



monaro **family**
support service



ncoss
NSW Council of Social Service

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Purpose of this report

The *Snowy Monaro Summary Report: Disaster Risks, Vulnerabilities, Assets & Strengths* report outlines the findings from the engagement and needs assessment phase of the Community Sector Disaster Capability (CSDC) Local Project in the Snowy Monaro.

CSDC Local Teams were tasked with engaging local social service non-government organisations (NGOs), community members and groups, and emergency management and government stakeholders to identify:

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

These findings provided the foundation for capacity building activities, resources and engagement delivered through the project aimed at strengthening disaster resilience, preparedness and risk reduction among community service organisations, their communities and clients.

The findings provide an evidence base which can be used to inform a range of disaster capacity strengthening and adaptation activities in the CSDC locations into the future.

About the Community Sector Disaster Capability Project (CSDC) Project

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

The CSDC Project aimed to strengthen the role of local community service organisations in disaster risk reduction to better support the wellbeing and safety of vulnerable community members (who can be hardest hit by disasters). Delivered across four locations over 12 months to June 2024, the CSDC Project developed and implemented a range of local approaches, activities and resources to strengthen organisational and community disaster risk reduction capability and leverage local disaster management expertise to reduce the impacts of disaster, particularly on those most vulnerable.

Local, place-based organisations were identified through a competitive Expression of Interest process across three target locations (Hawkesbury, South Coast and Northern Rivers) and engaged to deliver the project, working in collaboration with other place-based organisations.

Monaro Family Support Service was engaged to lead the CSDC Local Project in the Snowy Monaro LGA.

Further information about the CSDC Project can be found at www.ncoss.org.au/disaster-capability/.

Definitions

Hazard

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

Disaster Risk

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

Disaster Risk Reduction

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

Vulnerability (in the context of disaster risk)

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

Capacity (in the context of disaster risk)

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

Strengths and Assets

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

The Snowy Monaro CSDC Local Project Team at Monaro Family Support Service focused on disaster preparedness and conducted qualitative research alongside discussions and information sessions held for community groups and service providers on preparedness. They worked closely with recovery staff based at the Snowy Monaro Regional Council, bringing the perspectives of local services and vulnerable communities and community members to the project. Engagement activities included P-CEP (Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness) sessions to educate groups and leaders on what's needed for a preparedness plan. Monaro Family support also conducted a Community Services Workshop *Disasters Are Our Business*, bringing many services together to discuss and plan.

Across all the activities to May 2024 the groups involved were:

- Nimmitabel Advancement Group (NAG)
- Werri Nina Centre Cooma – run by Snowy Monaro Regional Council
- Alpine Uniting Church and Op Shop Jindabyne
- Bombala Mums and Bubs group
- Cooma Mums and Bubs group
- Jindabyne Mums and Bubs group
- Jindabyne Playgroup
- Cooma Challenge
- Disability Trust
- Monaro Community Access Service (MCAS)
- Rural Fire Service (RFS)
- Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ)
- Southern Health
- Cooma Multicultural Centre
- Southern Cross Community Housing
- Mission Australia
- NSW Office of Sport
- Red Cross
- Snowy Monaro Regional Council (SMRC)
- Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCS)
- Monaro Family Support Service (MFSS)
- Eden Access Centre (EAC)
- Katungal Aboriginal Service
- NCOSS
- Salvation Army
- Reconstruction Authority
- Shoal Coast Legal Centre

Key Findings

Disadvantage and location puts communities at greater risk during disasters

The Snowy Monaro region has a broad cross section of Australian society and like many places in Australia those with vulnerabilities have been pushed to the geographical fringes. These communities have less access to services, transport and resources putting them at greater risk during disasters. This lack of access also means that their ability to engage with disaster preparedness activities is greatly diminished.

Community services have been left out of emergency management (EM) plans

In a disaster the trusted, respected community services of the region are on the front lines of disaster response but their role is not officially recognised. In the past, community services have experienced very little communication from EM, making the efforts of EM agencies efforts less effective. However, through the dialogues created by the CSDC local project, barriers between community services and EM are starting to break down and collaborative plans are beginning.

Risks & Vulnerabilities

Disadvantaged populations in remote villages

In some of the smaller villages of the Snowy Monaro, such as Nimmitabel, there's a higher concentration of vulnerable residents who are unlikely to have taken any steps toward disaster preparedness. Due to lower costs of housing, these villages attract many people on lower incomes and on aged and disability support pensions. With few services in the village the residents have to take a lot of personal responsibility for their preparedness. Community members see a need for specific outreach and more disaster planning education for these groups. Community leaders see the need for development of their own skills and knowledge in order to assist other community members with disaster preparedness.

Lack of transport for evacuation

In some communities within the region 20-25% of the population either do not drive or have no vehicle or mode of transportation. Without transport of their own and with public transport also lacking, people experiencing poverty or disadvantage may not be able to leave a dangerous situation easily. In one session for a specific village, the participants calculated that two coaches would be needed to evacuate these people. This type of localized information could be included in emergency management plans for the area.

Mobile phone blackspots mean communication in disasters is problematic

For residents of Numeralla and Rockton a lack of mobile phone reception poses a real risk to their safety in a disaster. These communities deal with continual mobile black spots making them more vulnerable due to a lack of access to warnings and information.

Geographic location and preparedness

CSDC Project engagement found that some people on isolated properties appeared to be under-prepared considering the high degree of risk in their locations. The team also found that some people in towns were not well prepared at all. They did not see the risks and dangers and devastation from fire that happened in isolated places out of view from towns. They therefore had a false sense of safety and security due to living in towns and villages, and as a result, many people have not seen a need to be prepared for disasters.

Visitors and vacant properties

Concerns raised about vacant properties and the high volume of holiday homes and the visitors inhabiting them. Visitors' lack of awareness around disaster preparedness left residents worried about who would be available in an emergency to assist them or whether they would need to assist the visitors. Participants said that in some streets in the town of Jindabyne, they believed that around 60% of properties were used as holiday accommodation.

People experiencing homelessness

While people with housing can prepare emergency kits that include important documents, people facing

homelessness often lose or misplace documents. There are options to help them safely store important documents such as the Post Office safe storage app, or within services. Services can assist clients to store items in email or via the cloud. For people with multiple issues, one on one on preparedness engagement may be the best and most effective option, rather than in groups.

Lack of safe spaces and clear evacuation plan

For many residents in the villages and remote areas there's no allocated place of last resort or evacuation centre in their area. With no identified community safer place, many may need to travel large distances to Cooma or Bombala for an evacuation centre. It was reported that many people had little knowledge of what was happening during the 2019/2020 fires and those choosing to evacuate were sent on from places such as Jindabyne, to Cooma, then to Canberra almost three hours away from Jindabyne and Thredbo, because Cooma could not accommodate them. Driving these distances during a bushfire was also quite dangerous.

The lack of clear directions also meant small villages were inundated with evacuees from the south coast, during the 2019/2020 fires. Thousands of people travelled to or stopped in the villages that were not equipped to support them.

Participants and community groups expressed a need for a clear community plan around evacuation, which may include cross LGA and State border evacuation planning.

Poor communication with local services

Community service organisations working with groups who may be more vulnerable to disasters (e.g. people experiencing homelessness, people with disability, families with new babies or young children, older people) reported a lack of communication between emergency management and community, and say this has been raised repeatedly by community services. Services would like to be better equipped to serve their communities during disasters but the lack of communication from emergency management led to confusion. Project engagement provided opportunities for people with complex circumstances to consider these and the planning and support needed to prepare for a disaster.

Social service staff lack knowledge in preparation and experience in responding to disasters

The Snowy Monaro region has experienced historic disasters but much of that knowledge has been lost with staff changes and poor sharing of information. Project engagement revealed that staff of social service organisations were not necessarily prepared for an emergency themselves. Many reported that they were in contemplation stages but hadn't done a lot to prepare their own plans or prepare home/families/evacuation requirements.

Lack of funding for disaster preparedness in community services, including disability services

The Snowy Monaro region is fortunate to have a large number of grassroots community service organisations and while almost all see the value of disaster preparedness, they don't have the funds needed to carry it out. For many, the clients they serve would need a series of one-to-one sessions to understand disaster preparedness and to develop individual plans. Their resources are already stretched thin so they don't believe they can do what's needed with the funding they currently have. The competing priorities of delivering the service they offer and executing disaster preparedness plans while understaffed means that these risk reduction activities are unlikely to be completed.

This was particularly the case for disability services where NDIS funding is paying the bills. Their funding only covers specific services which do not include individual P-CEP sessions for vulnerable clients. These providers also believe their clients would not forfeit services they receive via NDIS in favour of a session on preparedness. This means some very vulnerable people with disabilities and their families may miss out on personal preparedness planning for disasters and may rely heavily on that service and/or emergency management during a disaster, greatly reducing their agency.

Assets & Strengths

Strong, supportive community groups exist in the region

The community services and NGOs of the Snowy Monaro region have long been an essential resource for vulnerable people in the area. When it comes to disaster preparedness, response and recovery, the community sector's impact in the Snowy Monaro region is vast. They continue to be:

- A trusted conduit to the community
- A potential grassroots source of information about the needs of disaster affected communities
- A source of deep knowledge of community and organisational networks
- A source of knowledge about local vulnerabilities at a community and individual level
- Empathetic and professional in working with people experiencing vulnerabilities
- A source of significant collective knowledge

A strong regional interagency network

The Monaro Regional Interagency is a longstanding and important forum for social services across the Snowy Monaro. It is a mechanism for input, feedback, communication, and strengthening referral pathways. This forum was identified through the CSDC Project as a key mechanism to continue strengthening sector disaster preparedness capabilities and preparedness. However, funding uncertainty has highlighted that even identified disaster resilience assets may not be in place into the future.

“Critically the region relies on the Monaro Regional Interagency Network (MRI) for networking and the co-ordination of support services amongst NGO/community groups in the region, and being a conduit of information with Council. Key elements of the local disaster planning relied heavily on the work of the MRI. However, it would appear that Council is in the process of cutting this crucial community development role.” – Workshop participant

Community sector has a strong willingness to work with each other to support the most vulnerable

The CSDC Project 'Disasters are our Business' workshop brought emergency management agencies, community services and community members to discuss disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Participants appreciated the opportunity to network and collaborate and indicated that they intended to follow up these conversations and to continue working as a strong and united group.

Participants voiced a desire to create a network of agencies willing to work together to learn more about disaster management, and to work towards making plans for the future.

“It was good to realise what we actually have in our community and the benefit of our community organisations pulling together to be able to assist the vulnerable in our community” – Workshop participant

Local Emergency Management engaging social services regarding disaster vulnerability

Through the collaboration between Monaro Family Support Service and the Snowy Monaro Regional Council, progress has been made in recognising the valuable contribution social services can make to emergency management. Council has included the CEO of Monaro Family Support Service as a non-voting member of the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) and have committed to establishing a Vulnerability Subcommittee of the LEMC.

Learnings & Reflections

Governments are unaware of the crucial role community services play in disaster management

Following recent disasters such as the 2019/2020 bushfires, NGO services, community champions and community groups reported that they had no official or designated role in supporting their communities and the residents that they already work with.

Community services in the region had no allocated funding for this type of work, and they saw bigger organisations coming into the region to conduct work. There needs to be an increase in understanding among local, regional, state and federal government and emergency services agencies of the critical role played by community services organisations across the phases of disaster management, not just in response and recovery centres.

Local services can increase the 'vulnerability literacy' of governments and external agencies around the needs and strengths of vulnerable members of the community and those members with diverse needs. This makes local services necessary partners in effective engagement, planning and recovery.

Many residents have not started planning and preparing

Six months of information sessions across the Snowy Monaro LGA with a variety of groups and communities indicates that 70-80% of the population are either in Pre-contemplation or Contemplation stages of preparedness/disaster planning. Another 20% have taken some steps such as mowing the grass, packing photos in a box and cleaning gutters. Only 5% say they feel truly prepared. These people have a written plan, have equipment and homes prepared and have reviewed their plans.

When emergency management meaningfully engage with community services, barriers disappear

Sessions where emergency service representatives were actively participating, instead of just speaking, opened up discussions and built trust between community services, agencies, and community members. These sessions created an opportunity to meet and discuss experiences and ideas together. Through these dialogues, community services can also assist and educate emergency service and government agencies about how to identify and understand social vulnerability in the disaster space, especially beyond available data sets. It encourages emergency services to understanding the real, practical barriers many people face to planning, preparing and staying safe during emergencies.

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Next steps

Continuing preparedness sessions

The Snowy Monaro CSDC team conducted a large number of P-CEP (Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness) sessions. They were held to assist community groups prepare, as well as alleviate some fears by empowering them to develop their own emergency preparedness plans. These sessions will continue as part of the project. It was also identified that services need to engage staff regarding their individual preparedness so that they feel confident of their own plans in a disaster. Additionally, services to examine their organisational preparedness, policies and procedures to better service their communities in a disaster.

Preparedness outreach for vulnerable communities

The CSDC team recognize the need for disaster preparedness sessions in small villages such as Nimmitabel which has a higher proportion of vulnerable residents, and Creewah which is geographically isolated, and identified as an area of high concern by combat agencies. Discussions with a local group, Nimmitabel Advancement Group (NAG) were undertaken and a community meeting to seek out ways that community can support residents during a disaster was planned. This allowed NAG and CSDC to work towards community solutions as few services exist in the village.

Continuing regular meetings with the SMRC Recovery Team and Coordinator Engagement

The CSDC team will continue meeting with Snowy Monaro Regional Council Recovery Team as this has been invaluable in getting on-the-ground information regarding the community gaps and needs as a result of the bushfires of 2019/2020.

Better connection and communication with government and agencies

At the *Disasters Are Our Business* workshop the following actions were proposed to give community services better visibility and understanding of the response to disasters at a government and agency level:

- Request presentation from NSW Reconstruction Authority on the State Recovery Plan Request a presentation from the LEMC/relevant government representations on emergency management arrangements
- Request a presentation from relevant response agencies on accurate information in a disaster
- Establish communication mechanisms and pathways with agencies, starting with the LEMC
- Add a 'disaster management' regular standing agenda item to the Snowy-Monaro community sector interagency