

Northern Rivers

Risks & Vulnerabilities/ Assets & Strengths

Community Sector Disaster Capability Project

November 2023



Resilient Lismore's Disaster Ready Together initiative is supported through the Community Sector Disaster Capability project – a disaster resilience and preparedness project led by the NSW Council of Social Service with the LCSA and AbSec. Funded through the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund under the joint Australian Government – NSW Government National Partnership Agreement on Disaster Risk Reduction.

Purpose of this report

This Northern Rivers, NSW Disaster Ready Together Project *Risks & Vulnerabilities: Assets & Strengths* report outlines the findings from the first phase of the Community Sector Disaster Capability (CSDC) Local Project in the Northern Rivers, NSW and describes how these will inform the next phase of the project and the broader community sector disaster resilience and risk reduction efforts.

In this first phase, local CSDC Teams engaged with community, other local NGOs government and other agencies to identify:

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

These findings provide CSDC Local Teams with a framework from which the next phase of the project - capacity strengthening activities for local NGOs and vulnerable communities - can be developed. They represent evidence base which can ensure that these capacity strengthening activities are relevant to local communities and NGO services and complement other disaster risk reduction initiatives.

About the Community Sector Disaster Capability Project (CSDC) Project

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

The CSDC Project aims 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). Through a collaborative, networked approach to local disaster management, local community organisations and the communities they support will have the opportunity to bring their expert knowledge and connections into play.

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The CSDC Project is developing and implementing 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 are leading the work in 3 target locations (Hawkesbury, South Coast and Northern Rivers), identifying lessons learned from recent disasters and undertaking local engagement, mapping and capacity building activities. They are also seeking to strengthen relationships and two-way exchange between the NGO sector and local emergency management systems and agencies.

CSDC Project objectives are to:

- Increase understanding of the strengths and disaster risks for local communities, especially people experiencing vulnerability, by undertaking engagement and mapping activities and reviewing lessons learnt during recent disasters.
- Strengthen organisational and community capacity and networking to assess disaster risk for vulnerable population groups and work with these groups and other local partners to develop skills and reduce risks, enabling locally led and owned place-based disaster risk reduction.
- Promote ongoing collaboration to influence formal emergency management processes, promoting inclusion of the community sector and the vulnerable populations they support, in planning and preparatory risk reduction.

Further information including a Program Overview flyer 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

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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

1. Vulnerable Clients Focus Groups

In consultation with project partners, five focus groups with vulnerable clients have been planned, chosen on the basis of the following criteria:

- Three focus groups in smaller villages ‘forgotten’ or ‘overlooked’ in overall response and recovery initiatives (Kyogle, Coraki and Woodburn)
- One indigenous focus group (Lismore)
- One focus group with people with disabilities (Lismore)
- Participants experiencing one or multiple vulnerabilities: homeless, displaced, geographically isolated, aged, living alone, unemployed, complex health needs, carers, no vehicles, indigenous, living with disabilities.

We have completed four of the five focus groups, with 40 participants so far. A notetaker took notes at each focus group and a preliminary analysis of the first three is contained in the NR Lessons Learned Report submitted to NCOSS on 31 October 2023.

See attached Focus group questions. Note however that questions and discussions about preparedness proved to be triggering for some people in two focus groups and one focus group did not discuss preparedness at all.

Once the fifth and final focus group is conducted all findings will be synthesised.

2. Vulnerable Populations 2021 Census Data

A detailed analysis of the 2021 ABS Census was conducted according to place locations listed in the Northern Rivers Emergency Management Plan (2021). Data was extracted that related most closely to the DRT Project’s list of vulnerable populations. Find the method attached. The data is being presented as three at-a-glance pdf pages for ease of use. The data is overlaid with a three colour coding system that identifies vulnerable populations by place at levels higher than the NSW average.

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Data was checked three times within the DRT Project team and then peer reviewed by an external expert (a statistician who used to work for the ABS).

On receipt of feedback from both the sector and the external expert 13 extra SALs were analysed and added. ‘Lismore’ was broken down into nine SALs to better distinguish between the floodplain areas and those on higher ground. Four additional ‘higher ground’ SALs were added to Kyogle and Richmond Valley LGAs.

An additional data set for ‘All private dwellings’ was also added to all locations.

Additions were made in order to broaden the scope of locations from a focus on floods/floodplains to all locations, including those on ‘higher ground’ who may be affected by other disasters e.g. fires.

3. Literature Review

A literature review of published and grey literature was conducted using two criteria:

1. Conducted in the Northern Rivers of NSW
2. Related to the 2017 flood, the 2019/2020 fires and/or the 2022 disasters
3. Related to the impact of disasters on vulnerable population groups.

A draft bibliography was peer reviewed by CEO Resilient Lismore and two researchers in the field on the Northern Rivers.

Since reporting a summary of key findings from the bibliography to NCOSS in the NR Lessons Learned Report (31 October, 2023), two additions have been made:

Rolfe, M. I., Pit, S. W., McKenzie, J. W., Longman, J., Matthews, V., Bailie, R., & Morgan, G. G. (2020). Social vulnerability in a high-risk flood-affected rural region of NSW, Australia. *Natural Hazards, 101*, 631-650.

Donnarumma, S., Doyle, K., & Russ, E. (2023). Community sector involvement in disaster management. Lismore, Southern Cross University. <https://doi.org/10.25918/report.315>

4. Lessons Learned So Far Survey

In October-November 2023 the NR Disaster Ready Together (DRT) Project designed, piloted and administered a 15 minute online survey (using Survey Monkey) to one key staff member in each of the 136 organisations on its database. Find survey questions attached.

The survey aimed to gather information about:

1. The impact of recent disaster/s on community sector organisations, their services, networks, staff and clients.
2. Lessons that community sector organisations have learned about their strengths and vulnerabilities regarding disaster risk reduction as a result of recent disasters.
3. What community sector organisations have implemented to reduce disaster risks for their organisations, their services, networks, staff and clients.
4. Community sector organisations' perception of current levels of preparedness for future disasters.

Response rates to individual questions varied between 40.4% for the quantitative questions and 30.4% for the qualitative questions.

Preliminary findings were presented at the DRT Community Services Sector Workshop on 6 November 2023.

The survey will remain open until Friday 1 December and a full report will be written during December and distributed to the DRT database. However, with response rates currently sitting at 40.4% for the quantitative questions, we can confidently use this data in this report.

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5. DRT Community Services Sector Workshop – Needs Analysis

On November 6, 2023, the DRT Project hosted a sector wide needs analysis for community services organisations on the DRT Project's database (136 organisations). 76 people attended the workshop:

Community services sector providers	43
External Facilitators	9
Notetakers	9
DRTProject/RL staff	8
Associated .gov agencies	7
Total	76

Community services providers attended from the following service types: indigenous, homeless, legal/financial, mixed, women's, mental health and wellbeing, disability, aged care, early childhood.

Community services providers attended from all three LGAs in the DRT Project footprint including Lismore, Kyogle, Nimbin, Evans Head.

Associated service providers attended from: Lismore Council, Australian Red Cross, Carers NSW, Legal Aid, DCJ, Southern Cross University, University Centre for Rural Health

Partners attended: NCOSS, LCSA, 4 x local partners

The aims of the workshop were to facilitate participants to identify two things:

1. What does your organisation need to build your (and your clients') resilience for future disasters and to reduce risks?
2. How can this project help you meet those needs?

Participants were introduced to ACOSS' Emergency Management Cycle resilience.acoss.org.au/the-six-steps/leading-resilience/emergency-management-prevention-preparedness-response-recovery

Participants were divided into nine mixed service groups of six, with a facilitator and a notetaker at each table. Two rounds of discussion took place with a focus on the Recovery and Preparedness phases of the Emergency Management Cycle. For each cycle participants were asked to think about:

- their organisation
- their staff
- their clients, and
- their networks.

They were asked to brainstorm, discuss and record answers to the following questions:

Recovery: What do you need to do to continue to recover from recent disasters? How can the DRT Project help you specifically?

Preparedness: What do you need to do to prepare for/reduce risks in the event of future disasters? How can the DRT Project help you specifically?

All ideas/needs were recorded on butcher's paper and notes taken by the notetakers. Notetaker notes have been transcribed. Quotes are included in this report. Contents from the two rounds of butcher's paper have been transcribed and thematically analysed. See attached raw data.

The DRT team and its partners held a three hour brains trust workshop on November 28 to use the workshop data to plan and design a DRT Project Plan for the remainder of the project.

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Key findings

1. Vulnerable populations are still in recovery

Vulnerable populations in the footprint of Northern Rivers Disaster Ready Together Project are still in early recovery from the 2022 disasters, confirming all evidence that disasters amplify, complicate and prolong pre-existing inequalities. The cumulative impacts of the 2017 flood, the 2019/2020 fires, COVID and then the 2022 disasters remain heavy and immediate, evidenced by ongoing trauma, housing uncertainty, displacement, poverty and anger/frustration at emergency and government services and recovery/reconstruction programs. Many are not yet ready to engage in conversations about preparedness and risk reduction.

'Vulnerability has amplified tenfold. If they weren't already vulnerable, they are now.' Service provider

'You're so trodden down already. When things like this happen you just stay down a little more.'
Vulnerable homeless client

2. Social cohesion in communities matters

Again, confirming all evidence, strong pre-existing social cohesion in communities, particularly smaller more isolated communities, mitigates against the impacts of disasters and plays a significant role in a community's capacity to prepare itself for future disasters. This is the case irrespective of the degrees of vulnerability and socioeconomic disadvantage within a community. Recent disasters in the Northern Rivers have, at one end of the continuum, strengthened pre-existing social cohesion in some communities, whilst, at the other end of the continuum shattered already fragile social cohesion.

'Once you distil it down, people just need to connect. Depression and loneliness are the most debilitating things in the western world.' Vulnerable homeless client

'The crime rate has gone up since the flood.' Vulnerable client

3. Heavy impacts of disasters on community services

The community services sector that supports vulnerable populations in the footprint of Northern Rivers Disaster Ready Together Project are also still in recovery, with many services and their staff directly and heavily impacted by recent disasters.

Findings from the DRT Lessons Learned so Far Survey demonstrate the degree to which recent disasters have impacted on community service organisations in the project's footprint:

Overall impact of the three most recent disasters in the Northern Rivers:

2017 Flood	68.4%
2019/20 Fires	61.4%
2022 Flood	98.2%

49.2% of survey respondents reported impacts ranging from moderate to severe to complete disruption.

The 2022 flood and related disasters had a particularly high impact on community services' capacity to deliver services:

Moderate impact	19.3%
Severe impact	26.3%
Complete disruption	42.1%

Survey respondents reported the following specific impacts of recent disasters on their organisations:

Premises unusable – service relocated	52.6%
Records lost or damaged	36.8%
Physical assets lost or damaged	54.4%
Staff resignations	31.6%
Staff disruptions	78.9%
Complete disruption to client service provision	35.1%
Temporary/partial disruption to client service provision	56.1%

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Services have had to, and continue to, focus on organisational recovery whilst continuing to support their staff and clients through their recovery.

4. Capacity for preparedness

The capacity for both vulnerable populations and the community services sector to prepare for future disasters is limited and uneven across sub sectors. For example, whilst NDIS services are required to do P-CEP, and there is early uptake of P-CEP in some aged care facilities, other sub-sectors have not yet embedded P-CEP or any other preparedness resources into their work with their clients. Preparedness work with vulnerable clients is more ad hoc than systematised. Many clients who are prepared are doing so on their own initiative or at their family's insistence.

'...difficulties moving to preparedness whilst still dealing with trauma of recovery.' Services provider.

'I can't even think about it.' Vulnerable client.

'I'm still bringing stuff back in [to house] – thinking about it [preparing] but not doing anything.'
Vulnerable client

'My prescriptions are all digital now. It's still so new having a bag packed. You're thinking 'I need to have this now'.' Vulnerable client

5. Roles for the NR DRT Project

Feedback from November 6 Community Services Sector Workshop participants shows that the sector would like to see the NR Disaster Ready Together Project fulfil the following roles:

- Information sharing
- Advocacy - *'being a voice to government to inject increased funding into organisations', 'need region-sized up-management to government and funding organisations.'*
- Training and support for staff, organisations, clients and networks
- Central brains trust - *'steering and overview of local wisdom.'*

Risks & Vulnerabilities

1. Extraneous structural issues amplify and prolong disaster impacts

Pre-existing national crises like housing, and the cost of living crisis amplify, complicate and hamper efforts by services, staff and clients to recover from the impacts of recent disasters. Workforce shortages in low paid and gendered service industries like aged care and early childhood were also already acute. The Northern Rivers suffered a significant shortage of affordable and social housing prior to recent disasters. The triple impact of a lack of affordable housing, a low paid workforce, and disasters is having a significant impact on staff recruitment and retention in the Northern Rivers community services sector. Childcare services are also in crisis.

'Need to find ways to attract and retain staff. There's a cost of living crisis, housing crisis.' Service provider

'Staff shortages have nowhere to put staff. Can we have a block of units put aside to house staff who need to come in?' Service provider

'Need transitional housing, more staff.' Service provider

'lack of all rentals' Service provider

For vulnerable clients, particularly for homeless clients, the housing and cost of living crises is particularly acute.

'I want to put the spotlight on the forgotten ones. There's a lot of them down at the park. When it rains and there's water coming in your tent... I'd like to see some \$\$\$ go to the people that have got nothing that are getting forgotten.' Vulnerable homeless client.

'I was burnt out in 2019, so was already living in a tent on my property when the floods hit in 2022. There's no point coming into town where there is already a rental crisis.' Vulnerable homeless client.

2. Funding issues

Participants at the DRT's Community Services Sector Workshop (6 November) identified a number of issues related to funding that are impacting on their capacity to deliver services, recover and plan for continuity with confidence, and prepare for the future.

Disaster management is now core business

'There needs to be recognition of disaster recovery needs within each organisation's day-to-day operations.' Service provider.

'Our organisation has changed post floods.' Service provider

'Federal/State governments are pushing more responsibility to NGOs but with strict funding criteria that limits service delivery.' Service provider

'Services kept going but there was a long line up to wait.' Vulnerable client

Temporary/short term grants vs core funding

'As recovery programs wind down we need a lift for remaining established organisations.' Service provider

'We need stable multi-year funding.' Service provider

'Funding [RSS] is coming to an end, need consistency of funding, hard to continue if money is coming to an end, recovery takes many years. Trauma means some people are only now coming forward.' Service provider

'It's not like we're going to get over this in a year. Sometimes you might not ever recover. You just learn to live with it.' Vulnerable client.

Competition for grants

'Needs to be fairer brokerage as big organisations Hoover up all the funding whilst smaller groups do the work with barely any funding.' Workshop participant.

'More dollars needed to grow existing services, not new ones – they don't have relationships/standing in the community.' Workshop participant.

'Governments need to shift focus to support existing organisations.' Workshop participant.

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3. Exhaustion/fatigue

Participants at the DRT's Community Services Sector Workshop (6 November) mentioned staff exhaustion and fatigue many times. It is worth noting again the results of the DRT Lessons Learned Survey about impacts of disasters on staff. 31.6% of respondents reported staff resignations and 78.9% reported staff disruptions.

'Sector is burnt out by repeated disasters, housing and staff shortages. Working triply hard.' Workshop participant.

'Staff are exhausted, burnt out.' Workshop participant.

'The team are tired, the region's staff are exhausted, we all need a break, a two-week period where the whole region of organisations just rest.' Workshop participant.

4. Juggling recovery and preparedness

Whilst the Lessons Learned Survey tells us that many services are building resilience as a result of recent disasters, services report the challenges of juggling recovery and preparedness.

'Some services just getting back to full functioning.' Workshop participant.

'We are in recovery phase but have to do preparedness because of bushfire season so we are actually doing both.' Workshop participant.

Assets & Strengths

1. Organisations are building resilience

Responses in the DRT Lessons Learned So Far Survey demonstrate a jump in the number of organisations who have implemented measures to build their organisational resilience since recent disasters. Whilst 48.1% of respondents reported having resilience/disaster risk reduction measures in place prior to recent disasters, 85.2% reported having done so post the recent disasters.

Respondents listed the measures that they have implemented:

Organisational level: emergency response and action plans, flood proofing premises, disaster-proofing data storage systems – moving online/to cloud, evacuation plans, moved premises, switched to solar/batteries, business continuity plans, redesigned services so they can be delivered remotely and in collaboration with other services, adequate insurance, developed avenues to relocate, IT servers relocated permanently to Melbourne, adapted some COVID online service provision, risk assessment and management plans.

Staff: workforce support, wellbeing initiatives, training, satellite tracking of staff in vehicles, staff upskilled to support clients, all staff equipt for remote working, mental health first aid training, RSS and Red Cross resilience training, apps on staff phones for rosters, leave forms, IT help etc, increased external staff supervision, established a Wellbeing Committee

Clients: disaster, evacuation planning in all client support plans, navigating housing assistance, emergency response training and awareness, resilience resources, distributing information about emergency services, disaster preparedness conversations, creating one client support node, staff contact details to all clients, RSS support, identifying vulnerable clients and documenting what plans are in place.

Networks: built networks and connectedness with other services and Council, detailed community response and recovery plan, formed the Nimbin Disaster Resilience Group, established Nimbin Emergency Radio Network, developed a Community Care Team, made contacts with other aged care facilities for mutual support.

2. Strong appetite for networks and collaboration

‘Collaborative approach, networking is important.’ Service provider

‘Excellent coworking with other services, they understand all the ins and outs of recovery, have established relationships that work.’ Service provider

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Findings from the DRT Lessons Learned So Far Survey tells us the following about the impact of recent disasters on networks:

- 77.2% of respondents reported an impact from recent disasters on their organisation’s formal and informal networks with other community services, Council and/or emergency services
- 30.4% of respondents reported a permanent expansion of their networks suggests a sector that has become more connected as a result of recent disasters.

Participant evaluations of the DRT Community Services Sector Workshop showed a high level of satisfaction with the networking opportunities the event provided them. Participants particularly enjoyed networking with organisations that were new, diverse and outside their normal networks.

Workshop participants discussed many ideas about networking which fall into the following themes. Networking:

- Avoids duplication
- Means we can share clients, cover them all better
- Builds and links services together
- Helps services share information

Workshop participants understood the need for different types of networks - both place-based and sector wide. They highlighted the advantages of networking in face to face contexts.

3. Place-based community services, charities and community-led recovery hubs

Participants in all four vulnerable client focus groups spoke highly of their local community services, charities (for example faith based charities, CWA, Food Pantry, Red Cross, Smith Family) and community-led recovery hubs. The combination of the three creates a safety net for vulnerable clients, who described them in glowing terms as accessible, non-judgemental, and providing them with exactly what they need without question - food, clothing, assistance with navigating government recovery services and forms, social and emotional wellbeing support, and case management. Vulnerable clients made very clear distinctions between place-based community services and government services.

'The thinnest thread in this picture is between the community services and the government. Kyogle Together [a neighbourhood centre] is open. You can come in and get what you need. But that doesn't go up the line.' Vulnerable client

'Rekindling was the only service that reached out to us and contacted us to check on how we were and what we needed.' Vulnerable client

4. Disasters can improve access to services

Some of the vulnerable clients we spoke to in the focus groups had not ever used any services before the recent disasters. Whilst they fit within definitions of vulnerable populations like aged, geographically isolated, indigenous, they were independent and proud about 'not needing or asking for help.' Recent disasters threw them into the safety net of place based community recovery services who introduced them to mainstream services to which they were entitled but did not know existed.

Some were referred for aged care assessments and were now getting regular ageing-in-place support like cleaning and lawn mowing. One woman who lived on a farm with her husband with a disability was referred to Carers NSW and was thrilled to discover she was entitled to support to replace flood affected whitegoods.

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'I didn't realise the services I need - I just come and say all the problems I'm having and staff can say what they can help with. You're already fragile from a million things before something like this [disaster] happens.' Vulnerable client

5. Positive and established relationships with emergency management sector

The NR DRT Project is benefiting from the relationships that Resilient Lismore has built up over the last few years with emergency management services.

Recently the DRT team met with our DCJ Regional Senior Disaster Welfare Officer to share feedback from the DRT Community Services Sector Workshop about evacuation centres and how they might be improved.

The DRT Project's Vulnerable Populations 2021 Census Data is being considered for inclusion in the current review process of the relevant NR Emergency Management Plans.

Implementation of a regional Community Resilience Network (CRN) Model is underway with CRNs at varying stages of maturity in each of the LGAs. Kyogle has a well-established community based CRN that is currently chaired by Council Community Recovery Officer (CRO), Richmond Valley has an established CRN that has more council representation and less of a community make up, and the Lismore CRN is re-establishing after a transition from the previous Local Emergency Recovery Committee which formed shortly after the disaster in 2022. There is some thinking about the formation of a Regional CRN and willingness from the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) to establish operational communication flow and reporting from community organisations and networks to and from the LEMC through the emerging CRN structure.

Next steps

The DRT Team and its partners held a three hour 'brains trust' meeting to analyse the needs collected and recorded at the Community Services Sector Workshop on 6 November 2023. Find attached the Draft Project Plan generated at the meeting, driven directly and explicitly by needs expressed at the workshop.