

Impact Case Study

Resilient Towns Initiative

Introduction



In a nation that often experiences natural disasters – from drought and bushfires to severe storms and flooding – Australians often rely on emergency services for aid and recovery. However, preparing in advance of a potential emergency is a key element of disaster management.

Communities in potentially affected areas are often best placed to plan ahead because of local knowledge of both the environment and community needs, as they are in most cases, the first responders to events.

In fact, research shows that the collaborative networks that form a community-led approach to disaster management, which can augment traditional government-led approaches, tend to allow these communities to recover more quickly.

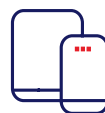
Background



For this faster ‘return to normal’ to occur, several stakeholders – including local and national government, local and national NGOs, businesses, faith-based groups, academic and research institutions, armed groups, community committees, and local leaders – need to establish effective communication and cooperation well in advance of an emergency, even if the likelihood of disaster is considered remote. Such close collaboration in planning, information sharing, and building of trust can help to reduce both the risks of disaster and the costs of recovery, as well as foster more resilient communities.

“This initiative has been a remarkable journey, driven by the spirit of collaboration, determination, and resilience within our community. [It] has been a testament to the power of community resilience, collaboration, and the unwavering spirit of our people.” ~ Marco De Sisto

The Project



Led by the University of New South Wales, partnered with RMIT, the Resilient Towns Initiative (RTI) was launched in November 2021 after receiving a grant from the NSW Bushfire Local Economic Recovery (BLER) Fund. The application was endorsed by the Snowy Valleys Council.

RTI, collaborating with the Red Cross, Anglicare, and NSW Reconstruction, worked with youth, communities, emergency services and local businesses among seven towns in the Snowy Valleys region of NSW, to explore the question: “*how can we make our communities safer?*” The project partners met every week for two years during the course of the project.

RTI focused on four sub-streams:

1. stakeholder disaster management mapping exercises
2. each community’s own bushfire preparation plans
3. business continuity
4. youth program.

RTI held community events to support disaster preparedness, including business recovery workshops, youth forums, events for drafting, finalising and initialising plans, and one-day ‘disasters aren’t natural’ training events. Given the influential role of local businesses in their communities, local enterprises were engaged in discussions about disaster recovery planning.

The RTI team also engaged with emergency services to explore the dynamics of power and influence within a community’s disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. For this sub-stream, RMIT’s Dr Marco De Sisto, an expert in strategic and emergency management, began by mapping the roles of different stakeholders, from emergency services agencies, government and council bodies to businesses and individuals within the communities.

The project has highlighted the work that needs to be done to bring together the concepts of community-led disaster management and the existing model where agencies lead disaster management. RTI is now focused on fostering a cultural change within agencies to create a community-centred model, where different stakeholders with valuable contributions to make can work more effectively together.



Overview of the impact



This project has achieved a considerable amount of impact since its inception. Many of the impacts centre around improvements in township's disaster preparedness levels, which have improved dramatically as a result of this project. Some of the more significant impacts are listed below:

- Over 400 residents are now trained and certified in First Aid, advanced First Aid for emergency responder personnel, and chainsaw, generator and pump maintenance, through partnerships with local TAFE and other government-funded course providers.
- Workshops helped over 500 residents gain a better understanding/awareness of how to be prepared for and recover from disasters by working together as a resilient, inclusive, and supportive community.
- Twenty local businesses have developed business continuity plans in case of a disaster.
- An ongoing youth forum was created in partnership with Anglicare. The local council is also proposing the establishment of a youth committee.
- Towns such as Batlow – labelled “undefendable” during the Black Summer – were helped to develop tailored emergency preparedness plans which have been integrated with the Red Cross's emergency preparation plans.
- Contact lists and ‘telephone trees’ have been created to support each town's connectivity and communication. In Courabyra, this was extended to include each contact's key skills and training so that people know who can assist in particular areas during times of need.
- A stakeholder map has been drawn by emergency agencies and local residents to clarify the main actors and their level of power and draw attention to those excluded from the decision-making table. This has been pitched to NSW Reconstruction and the Cross Border Commissioner with whom negotiations for future projects (extension of the current one) are in place.
- Numerous small grants totalling around \$20,000 have enabled communities to implement small infrastructure improvements to make them more secure, including first aid kits, emergency defibrillation equipment, training costs, emergency signage, and renovations to town ‘safe place’ hubs.
- The research has also resulted in the Resilient Towns Snowy Valleys Facebook page. The RTI newsletter was made available through that page. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/624693208681444>

“Through these grants, we enable the transformative power of grassroots initiatives,” says Andrew Rae, NSW Reconstruction and member of the RTI team

Project outcomes



As a result of workshops, forums and other community events, many communities now have disaster management plans.

Publications

Three papers, co-written by Marco De Sisto, Timothy Heffernan, David Sanderson and Clifford Shearing, have been submitted for publication to top tier journals and are currently under review.

- “Reshaping Disaster Management: An Integrated Community-Led Approach”
- “Community-centred disaster recovery. A call to change the narrative on how disasters are framed”
- “Building effective cross-sector collaborations in community recovery: The importance of embracing and linking diverse capacities after Australian bushfires”

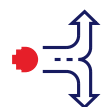
RTI also produced a monthly newsletter throughout the project.

Funding support and/or institutional support



Resilient Towns Initiative (RTI): how can we make our communities safer? was funded 2021-23 with over \$600,000 from the Bushfire Local Economic Recovery (BLER) Fund.

Next Steps



The HowWeSurvive project, based on the findings of the RTI project, was launched in mid-2023. Through HowToSurvive – led by UNSW and funded by Judith Neilson Chair of Architecture – the RTI team members will continue to support local communities and emergency agencies in the recovery.

HowWeSurvive will be based on the principles tested in RTI to support communities and to build evidence to leverage policy change in NSW and wider, on how genuine community centred recovery is best achieved.

