

# We Recover Better Together

## POLICY AND PRACTICE BRIEF

July 2023 – June 2024

Part of the Community Recovery and Resilience Officers Program  
July 2024

Report written by Community Praxis Cooperative  
Peter Westoby, Howard Buckley, Natasha Odgers,  
Joelle Philippa and Jane Willis



Australian Government



Queensland Government



Community Praxis  
Co-op

This project was jointly funded by the Australian and Queensland governments  
under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

# Introduction

This Policy and Practice brief provides readers the lens and frameworks that the project team brought to the We Recover Better Together project. The project was jointly funded by the Australian and Queensland governments under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, and managed by the Sunshine Coast Council, focused on disaster recovery work in five communities that experienced hardship during the 2022 floods. Readers can refer to the primary Project Report for details of project objectives, initiatives, outcomes and lessons.<sup>1</sup>

By project team, we refer to the Community Praxis Co-op members, namely Howard Buckley, Natasha Odgers, and Peter Westoby – and the Sunshine Coast Council Community Development Team members, namely Joelle Philippa and Jane Willis.

By frameworks we mean a ‘set of good ideas that guide practice’. By lens we acknowledge that there are many perspectives, none of which are right or wrong - but there are better lenses than others.

# Background

In early 2023 the Sunshine Coast Council Community Development (CD) Team contracted Community Praxis Co-op to work with the CD Teams’ Community Recovery and Resilience Officer, Joelle Philippa, to co-design and implement a community development approach to place-based disaster recovery. This approach was targeted at the five communities of Eudlo, Mooloolah, Landsborough, Beerwah and Glass House Mountains [from now on named towns] that had been particularly affected by the 2022 floods.

Using a community development approach the whole team held the tension of both designing what could be done within the communities identified, but also adapting to what unfolded during the 12+ months that the project went for. Our design phase was guided by community development principles and the national disaster recovery principles and the four interrelated environments of disaster recovery: social, built, economic and natural.<sup>2</sup>

# Designing and doing the project

Some key elements of the process design and doing process included:<sup>3</sup>

- i. Ensuring all team members were ‘on the same page’ within regards to national disaster recovery principles and environments, history of activity and stakeholders linked to disaster systems in the region.
- ii. Mapping out stakeholders and key relationships that could be harnessed for the project; identifying where collaborative energies and relationships existed.
- iii. Identifying gaps in local recovery arrangements.

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<sup>1</sup> See Project Report on [www.communitypraxis.org](http://www.communitypraxis.org)

<sup>2</sup> Australian Disaster Recovery Framework Version 3.0 (2022, Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee) <https://nema.gov.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/ADR%20Framework%20October%202022.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Project initiatives linked to each of four disaster recovery environments are outlined in the Project Report.

- iv.** Convening monthly team meetings to ensure consistent planning, reflection, adaptation and responsiveness. As such, the team was able to hold the tension of sticking with our plan in a timely fashion, but also adapting and responding to what was not working so well and attending to new opportunities.<sup>4</sup>
- v.** Building a shared analysis of what a community development approach could bring to disaster recovery.
- vi.** Working with the pre-existing ‘community structures’ (e.g. Glasshouse Country Disaster Management Network, GCDMN) to further shared understanding of recovery processes and develop localised disaster preparedness and recovery arrangements.
- vii.** Awareness raising of disaster preparedness and recovery (e.g. ‘pop-up’ discussions in community spaces, public talks, display stalls, children’s book readings, media).
- viii.** Co-hosting workshops targeting particularly vulnerable population groups across the region (e.g. First Nations, homeless, migrants people with disability, children).
- ix.** Recruiting Community Connectors<sup>5</sup> to attend a Building Connected Communities (BCC) course with organisations and Community Connector (CC) courses with residents in each of the five towns. This was followed by supporting emerging initiatives and bringing Community Connectors together to celebrate and share learnings and ideas.
- x.** Involving a visual storyteller in some of these processes to ensure stories and learnings were not just auditory, but visual (see the Eudlo visual story on p8). ‘We Recover Better Together’ Project Report.

## Snap-shot lessons for policy and practice

- One of our key contributions would be nurturing active citizens as community connections and builders. We distinguished volunteering (which is important) to active citizenship. The latter is more focused on the informal spaces of talking intentionally to neighbours or convening a street-level conversation or BBQ to discuss readiness and recovery. Volunteers tend to have a more formal ‘role’ and are linked to an organisation.
- Many active citizens don’t want to join or create another group. They simply want to be supported to be active community connectors.
- We worked with the principle: ‘start with what’s strong, not wrong’ (see P6) – we knew there are people in community who want to contribute and play active roles. Our role was to simply convene space for people to have conversations for collective efforts (e.g. CC courses and BCC courses).
- We advocated for a shift from the traditional top-down and government ‘command and control approaches’ (which make some sense in the disaster response emergency spaces) to an experimental approach where people tried things, learned together, adapted and worked from the ‘bottom-up’.
- We noticed that community members know or feel when they’re in an authentic relational and emergent space, rather than ‘being done to’ or ‘recruited into’. They feel the vibe, and the former is more attractive. It does not then feel transactional nor extractive (extracting community energies for government purposes, rather than government convening and nurturing what wants to emerge from community and context).
- There is a need to invest in place-based approaches in building community networks at street-level; as well as population-focused approaches that target particular vulnerable groups.
- We differentiated and distinguished between a coordination approach, which is helpful at organisational levels - and a networking approach (supporting community connectors) at street level. The latter is more organic.
- We realise how in Australia most investment is in institutional change (build organisational capacity) or individual change (changing behaviours, e.g. ensure people have an emergency kit), but rarely is there pre-investment at a neighbourhood level. We saw the necessity to invest in community, based on where the community is at in terms of disaster phases (e.g. typically they’re at the place of preparedness) and develop into recovery, focused on what was relevant for the people participating. This included transitioning through people’s interests from household preparedness to neighbourhood connections to interconnections between community groups.
- Timing is of the essence – the project would have ideally occurred closer to the ‘event’. Hence, we have foregrounded ‘community building’ at this non-disaster period.

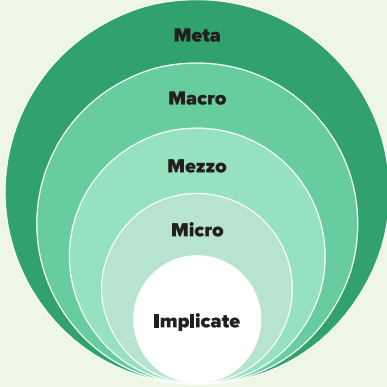
<sup>4</sup> One example of a new opportunity was to run a Community Connectors course with Beerwah State High School, ensuring the project engaged young people as well as the broader population.

<sup>5</sup> We are using the term Community Connectors informally – as simply a way of signifying a practice for active citizens (see discussion on active citizenship on p7). Some programs, for example in Compassionate Community work or Hospice work (end-of-life oriented community development) the term Community Connectors is used formally – people ‘trained’ and given the role of connecting people into networks.

# Getting started, and drawing on two key frameworks

## 1. The ‘CD method’ approach (implicate to meta)

The project team had a shared ‘method map’ for doing community development. This was very helpful as both a guide to our practice, but also as a way of reflecting. The nested picture and table below names and explains each of the five-levels of practice.<sup>6</sup>



### Questions for each level:

- **Implicate** What’s our own personal relationship to disaster and recovery? What are our own stories in this space? What matters to us in community?
- **Micro** What are the purposeful relationships we are building with residents/participants in each of the five towns which we can nurture in this project? What opportunities are we observing to nurture purposeful connections with others involved in disaster recovery?
- **Mezzo** What opportunities are emerging for people to act collectively on matters that are important to them? What new groups are emerging in this space?
- **Macro** What existing groups have an appetite to support community connecting rather than just promoting their ‘community service’? How are we ensuring our project remains participatory? What kind of supportive relationships do we have in our team? How are we communicating with Council and State Government about this work?
- **Meta** How can we support horizontal learning between the five towns? How might this project also influence policy?

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<b>Implicate: Self</b>	Knowing who you are and why you do what you do. Being conscious of what values inform your way of working and the communities and histories you are linked to
<b>Micro: Relationships</b>	Building relationships through deep listening, dialogue, joining, and hearing common themes
<b>Mezzo: Groups</b>	Taking collective action together which could include forming or strengthening participatory action groups
<b>Macro: Organizational work</b>	Establishing people’s organisations that structure the work; and enabling organisations to support participatory programs
<b>Meta: Connecting work</b>	Establishing networks, alliances, federations beyond the local; linking with social movements; policy influence

## 2. Foregrounding and backgrounding – why we foregrounded ‘community building’ and ‘street-level’ connecting as key

We also brought what we call a ‘living thinking’ framework to this project. By this, we mean that perception (what we see, sense and focus on) *is a participatory process*. As such, we never just see ‘reality’ – we see some of it, and it’s good to be conscious about what we focus on. We can therefore shift the lens of perception and change the focus. For example, recognising early on in this project that people were not ‘worried about recovering from the 2022 floods’ [time had moved on for most] we shifted our thinking, lens and focus to ‘community building’. And we simply backgrounded the ‘floods’ [for a time] recognising that people’s energies are linked to what’s unfolding right now.

Our analysis and this living thinking frame enabled us to recognise that ‘for now’ we would focus on what mattered to people – which was community building. Yet, at times conversations did reach into community recovery. We held lightly the idea that if a disaster took place during the project, we would be able to adapt and move into different conversations.

<sup>6</sup> The CD Method Framework is from *Participatory Development Practice: Using Traditional and Contemporary Frameworks* (2018, Kelly, A. & Westoby, P., Practical Action Press, UK)

## But as we conducted research and also listened to people's stories of recovery what became clear was a number of gaps

These included:

- i. The challenge of the **intersection between** what we think of as the systems world of government, regulations, policy and procedure, and the lifeworld system of community, which is about relationship, trust, fluctuating energy.
- ii. The necessity of NOT only **community-neighbourhood level connections** of relationships that links need to resource at time of necessity, but ALSO place-based **street-level connections**. As we listened to people, community-neighbourhood level connections supported recovery over the months after a disaster, but not necessarily the days and weeks immediately after a disaster.
- iii. Access to information, networks and resources among **particularly disadvantaged groups** necessitating population based focused interventions.

### Building on these gaps we drew on some other frameworks:

#### 3. Systems worlds and lifeworld and the challenge of the intersecting space – Jurgen Habermas

The sociologist Habermas suggests there are two spheres at play in modern societies and lives. The first is what he calls the lifeworld which is the space of community, relationships and trust. It's a non-transactional space in which people act based on values, energy, relationship and even love. Community has historically been an imagined space where the lifeworld thrives. In contrast, Habermas suggests there is a systems world which is the space of policy, procedure, transactions, bureaucracy, and so forth.

Significantly, his analysis problematises modern society arguing that the systems world is colonising the lifeworld. More and more spaces are now soaked with systems thinking. For example, even neighbourhood centres, once a 'community space' are increasingly governed by systems world thinking with people needing to 'sign-in', become 'registered volunteers', where risk management, work-place health and safety regimes shape how people relate to one another.

We have found this framework helpful because in the disaster space both worlds are very important. The systems world of top-down 'command-and control' policy, procedure, quick action, clear roles, agreements/ MoUs etc. are predominant. HOWEVER, in every-day practice during a disaster the lifeworld of community is the key space of action. Neighbours help neighbours and will often be both first responder and be there for the long-haul. Friends checking in on friends are crucial, or more accurately, people being friendly can check in on one another regularly. What is tricky is WHERE THESE TWO WORLDS INTERSECT.

A key finding of this project was that the traditional model of the systems world sitting *on-top* of the lifeworld, guiding it, ordering it, wanting 'it' to participate does not work for most communities. In fact, clear feedback came with comments such as:

“

**we don't want to be coordinated by government.**

“

**we're tired of attending government meetings; what energises us is when we create our own community spaces.**

As such, our reframing led to putting these two spheres *alongside* one another (not one on-top) and getting creative about the intersecting space. This framework also helps us identify the different kinds of people who engage in community building:

- There are **systems people**, and they get involved in groups, are good to attend meetings, don't mind the linearity of systems-worlds
- There are **connector people**, who don't like systems, but love just being in community, connecting with people or between people, who thrive on relationships
- There are **linking people** – those few who thrive working between community and systems. These are the people who in our project are up for attending the Glasshouse Country Disaster Management Network as well as being in interconnected community organisations.

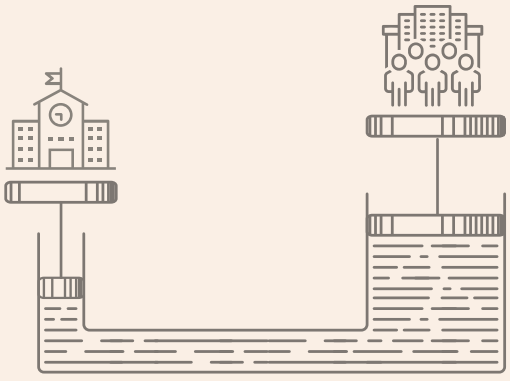
## 4. The Mantra ‘start with what’s strong, not what’s wrong’, and the image and wisdom of the hydraulic - from Cormac Russell

Aligned with the Habermas framework we also applied some key frames from Cormac Russell’s approach to community development and ‘rekindling democracy’.<sup>7</sup>

The key elements from his work include:

### 4.1 “Start with what’s strong, not with what’s wrong”:

As such, we focused on finding people who had energy and time to invest in building better connected communities. We never started with lists of problems. We always started with what’s your story (not what’s your need), what vision do you have, and how can we shape a shared vision.

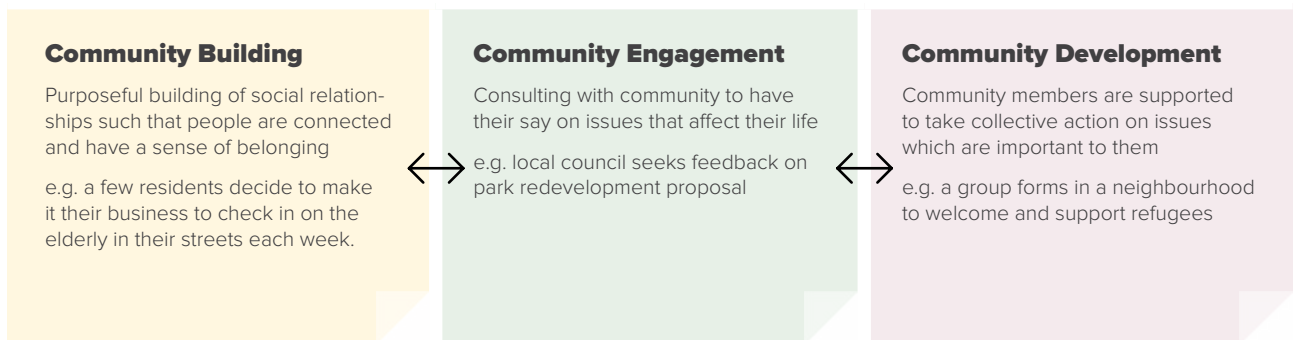


### 4.2 The image of the hydraulic

The idea behind the image of the hydraulic is that we need to get a balance between investing in community and institutions. If we over-invest in institutional responses to social issues, then community is not incentivised to respond. For example, if government over-invests in disaster recovery services, then the community does not need to pro-actively support one another. Ideally, there is a balance between institutional and community investment, with the key role of the former being to convene community spaces to tackle social issues. An example of this is how government – through this project – has enabled the convening of citizens in the BCC and CC courses.

## 5. The CB–CE–CD Continuum

Our approach also acknowledges the contribution and difference of each of these three ways of thinking about working with communities. Each has a different role and while not suggesting one is better than the other, we see it as important to know the differences, and be clear which one on the continuum is being drawn upon. Our approach incorporated community building and community development.



<sup>7</sup> See Cormac Russell’s work such as *Rekindling Democracy: A Professional Guide to Working in Citizen Space*, (2020, Cascade Books) – and Cormac Russell and John McKnight (2022) *The Connected Community: Discovering the Health, Wealth, and Power of Neighbourhoods*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

## 6. Active Citizenship and Volunteering

Finally, our project foregrounded the idea of active citizenship. While valuing volunteering we recognised early on the limits of this because of the emphasis on organisational links and formal roles. As already mentioned, many people we engaged with did not want to join another or any organisation, nor did they want formal roles. So, aligning with the philosophy of our community connector courses, active citizenship became our language and practice. See the table to contrast the two:

Active citizenship	Volunteering
Relationship oriented	Role oriented
Located in a place or within networks	Linked to an organisation
Acting within networks of thin or thick trust with no obligations	Subject to systems world regulations, risk management and so forth
Is focused on community interaction, reciprocity	Is often focused on community service, helping
Understands citizenship as democratic practice	Understands volunteering in context of the particular organisation linked to

## Place-based intervention: The community connector courses and supporting active citizenship

At the heart of our community development approach was the Building Better Community Course and the subsequent Community Connector Courses in each town. These courses, with people sitting in circle, engaged in dialogue explored topics such as:

- What are the values and a vision for a healthy community
- What stops or blocks us getting involved in community
- What is community (as our individual story and experience; as social networks; and as finding a place and base that we love and give to)
- How to weave and nurture connections on our street, and in our neighbourhood
- A way of seeing what the people see, joining through dialogue and finding shared concerns or dreams
- Ways and times of connecting (e.g. opportune times and planned times; the Cs of Chance, Crisis, Conflict, Cycles, Celebrations, Change)
- Building small purposeful groups for action
- How social networks and community connections help in community recovery
- What makes an effective group

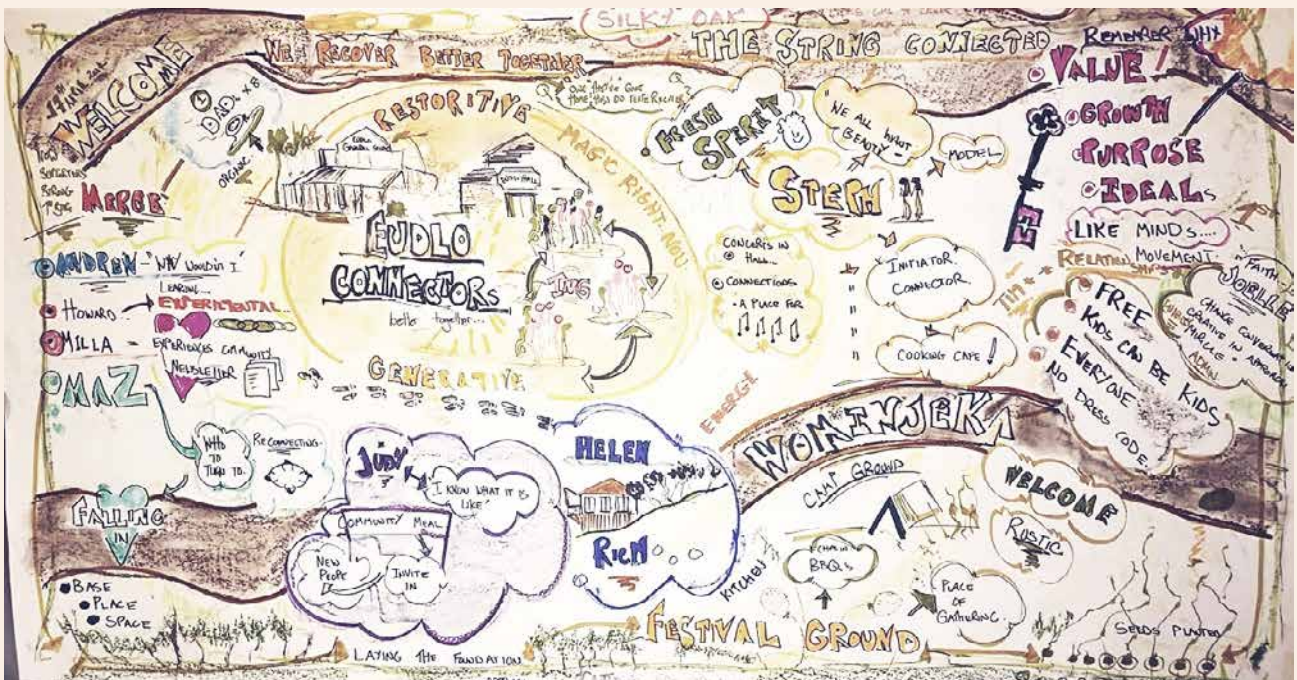
From these courses people reached out to others in their street or neighbourhood or cooperated with others doing the course to experiment with small initiatives.

Importantly, these courses aim to support active citizenship.

## People who did these courses said things such as:

- “ It reconnected me to my community; and I came in with fear about disasters and emergencies but fell in love with Eudlo again. I found a couple of like-minded people and no ‘I’m the boss rubbish’.
- “ I learned how to hold things lightly and this applies to my whole life so it’s very helpful.
- “ I got a lot out of the Putnam stuff on social capital – and we all need friends in 3rd places. I’m really interested in creating spaces in Beerwah where people can connect.
- “ I loved the course and its constant reflection on remembering the marginalised. It’s easy for us who are socially competent and yet this value of including the difficult people and to communicate with them non-violently sits with me. It’s a big challenge to include people who are obstacles to most things, who ‘white-ant’, yet they’re part of the community.
- “ I’ve learned how community can be created and then quickly fade and needs reviving.
- “ Y’day I went to the Eudlo post office and then Eudlo General Store and had chin-wags and dropped off boxes at the cafe, and then went to the library bus as it was there and chatted, and bumped into Stephanie and I thought, ‘this would never have happened in Brisbane’. To have this wonderful community is so significant. It’s the smallest thing, yet so significant.
- “ There were so many teachings that are transformational for me. They’re so helpful in my community of friendships and navigating conflicts. It’s helped me open up cliques which are not building blocks for sustainable inclusive community. Closed is unsustainable. And also, they’re helpful and transferable to family. The feelings of power and lack of power are so transferable. I’ve got a whole new lens to look at the world, and tools to navigate it all.

## Some of these ideas from the Eudlo CC course were captured beautifully in visual story-telling sessions



Eudlo community visual story



# Some key wisdom about community and disaster recovery – from the perspective of active citizens attending BCCs and CCs

While foregrounding community building rather than disaster recovery, we did often arrive in conversations about community recovery. Some key wisdom learned from these conversations include:

- Build community networks prior to disasters so people aren't scrambling after
- Community is often the first response (it takes a while for official responders to arrive)
- People come out of the 'woodwork' to support recovery efforts
- Local proximity matters – that is, street level connections
- Locals often do open their doors in hospitality
- You can ask neighbours for help
- Disasters definitely can bring community together
- The established community networks link resources and information to those in need through organic networking
- Community are the long-haul responders
- Locals see what's going on accurately
- It's great to trust people will have your back
- It's important to know the vulnerable people, so we can check in and make sure they're ok.

## Population-oriented interventions: Vignettes

The project also supported interventions and activities working with particular population groups that are often described as vulnerable. Here are a few examples:

### Targeted initiative #1: Homeless

Partnering with someone who was homeless themselves, the project supported the development of information packs and dissemination strategies to people who were homeless. An idea that came from a homeless person themselves, the project simply worked alongside that person.

### Targeted initiative #2: First Nations

The project collaborated with First Nations organisation, Nungeena Aboriginal Corporation for Women's Business, to co-design a lunch for First Nations elders. This collaboration was an opportunity to share disaster preparedness and recovery information and distribute Council disaster information packs to First Nation elders to be shared with their communities.

### Targeted initiative #3: Migrants

A significant amount of energy and momentum has been generated from the project working in partnership with Nambour and Caloundra Community Centres, particularly their work with migrants. Supporting the migrant-focused workers of those two neighbourhood centres, three dialogue workshops were supported which examined key words in English relevant to disaster preparedness, response and recovery, ensuring literacy; and also access to information and resources about recovery work.

## Targeted initiative #4: People with disabilities

Two significant projects were delivered for people with disabilities. The first was a partnership with a local disability organisation to co-create the ‘Bug Hotel’ workshops. These workshops invited people with a disability to come together and enjoy a conversation around disaster recovery. This enabled participants to identify the strengths to being connected and being visible in the community, especially during disaster recovery.

The second project was the delivery of Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness through Queenslanders with Disability Network. This project supported a tailored disaster preparedness plan for people with a disability and disability services.

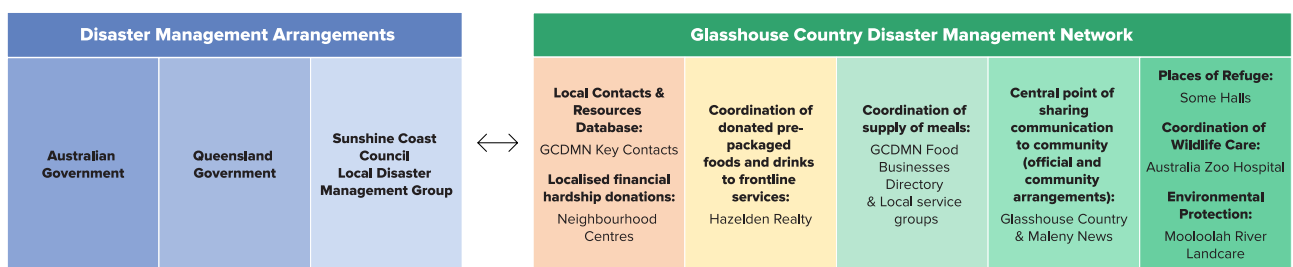
## Targeted initiative #5: Environmental Care

A collaborative event with Mooloolah River Landcare, Australia Zoo and a cluster of neighbours provided opportunities for community education and connections. This workshop identified the increased localised disasters risk due to climate change. It gave participants knowledge and skills to prepare their property to be resilient for the future, as well as provided information to regenerate riparian areas that had been damaged during the 2022 floods. Australia Zoo discussed current impacts on wildlife and how to care for injured wildlife after a disaster. Stories and strategies to build neighbourhood connections were discussed. Site visits highlighted the connections and work of three neighbours in Mooloolah Valley who have a shared goal of regenerating their land and supporting each other.

# Structuring linkages between government and community

The key structure developed before this project, but nurtured during it, has been the Glasshouse Country Disaster Management Network (GCDMN). Building on earlier discussion, this network is crucial for those who thrive working between community and systems.

The diagram below depicts a community-led set of arrangements in the bottom box, with clear roles and responsibilities which are integrated into local government disaster management arrangements. The blue arrow between the government and the network portrays the existing arrangement for two-way communication.



## In conclusion

Some of these frameworks shaped our work from the beginning. Some emerged in our monthly team meeting reflections as we made sense of what was unfolding. Together they guided our practice as any good frameworks should. It has been an absolute joy to go on a learning journey with so many active citizens in these five towns. We are very grateful for profound partnerships.

Please reach out to us at Community Praxis Co-op ([www.communitypraxis.org](http://www.communitypraxis.org)) for any further discussions.