From the Fire into the Frying Pan: Reflections on Enhancing Resilience and Adaptive Capacity in Bush Fire Recovery

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Abstract

The repeated occurrence of natural disasters is impacting communities globally and these effects are expected to worsen as the global temperatures continue to rise. In Australia, communities on the East Coast are now bracing for another dry hot summer along with the accompanying threat of bushfire. In this context, many governments have promoted the idea of building resilient communities in order to try to mitigate the danger and threat to communities. The idea of enhancing resilience is both appealing and problematic: appealing, because it signifies the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity: problematic, because such a term can easily be exploited to support ideological beliefs about independence and self-sufficiency. This paper explores the notion of enhancing resilience in smaller rural communities, specifically in the context of recovery from the fires in 2019/2020. By adopting a case study approach, we argue first, that whilst the idea of resilience has value, it needs to be equalised by a robust understanding of the contextual factors that may increase vulnerability (Solangaarachchi Griffin & Doherty, 2012); with this in mind, we suggest that developing adaptive capacity is more fitting because of the way it draws our attention to the changes that are necessary for responding to the changes in climate. Second, we argue that if communities are to be assisted to adapt in order to survive the effects of climate change, this work will require an increased focus on community development in the medium and long-term stages of recovery, so that communities are assisted, supported and empowered to engage preparedness projects in the event of disasters occurring in the future.

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Keywords

Bushfire, resilience, adaptive capacity community, community development

Introduction

Recovery from the devastating 2019/2020 bush fires in Australia continues to be a work in progress for many individuals, businesses and communities. Since this time many of these same communities have also faced the impact of flooding as disasters continue to unfold, mainly due to the effects of changing climate. In a context of continuing "unprecedented disasters", recovery needs to be accompanied by preparedness for future events, a sentiment clearly stated in the *Bush Fire Royal Commission into Natural Disaster Arrangements* (Binskin & Macintosh, 2020). As well as individual preparedness, Binskin and Macintosh (2020) call for a unified system with "unbroken linkages in place from the highest levels of government to individuals in the community" (p. 7). This is an urgent issue requiring all stakeholders to commit to this common purpose as well as actually committing to putting this into action. At the heart of the recommendations, is the idea of enhancing resilience. Resilient communities it is believed, are better able to withstand the effects of adverse events and thus to bounce back from destruction more readily.

Since the idea of community resilience gained traction within climate change and disaster preparedness discourses, critics have drawn attention to the problematic nature of this concept (Manyena, 2006; Mikulewicz, 2019; Uekusa, 2018). In rural contexts, the idea of resilience is often underpinned by assumptions about a community's internal strengths and is frequently associated with the apparent hardiness of individuals and their ability to come together to form 'tight-knit' communities in order to respond to the uncertainties that nature presents. Such a perspective also aligns with the Neoliberal agenda of independence and economic self-sufficiency, which result in decreased welfare spending for those in need (Mikuleqicz, 2019; Uekusa, 2018).

The aim of this paper is to explore the idea of enhancing resilience in smaller rural communities, specifically in the context of recovery from the fires in 2019/2020. We argue Morley & Robertson: From the Fire into the Frying Pan: Reflections on Enhancing Resilience and Adaptive Capacity in Bush Fire Recovery.

that whilst the concept of resilience has value, it needs to be equalised by a robust understanding of the contextual factors that may enhance vulnerability (Solangaarachchi et al., 2012). This is particularly relevant in the context of climate change where "global temperatures are likely to surge to record levels in the next five years" (World Meteorological Organisation, 2023, para 1), thus increasing the risk of bushfires. Here, the idea of 'adaptive capacity' (Walter & Salt, 2017) is perhaps more accurate because it focuses our attention on a community system in the context of the changing environment. We suggest that if communities are to be assisted to adapt, this work will require an increased focus on community development in the medium and long-term stages of recovery (Lonne et al., 2017), so that communities are assisted, supported and empowered to implement preparedness initiatives in the event of disasters into the future. Without this kind of intervention to assist in preparedness for future events, many smaller rural communities in Australia may be going 'from the fire into the frying pan', meaning, if there is another severe bushfire season similar to 2019, communities like Torrington, could be facing exactly the same dangers.

To present our argument, we adopt a case study approach, which allows for rich and nuanced analysis of an event or phenomenon (George & Bennett, 2005). The case study is autobiographical and is based the first author's experience of living in the small remote community of Torrington, which was impacted by fire on 8th November 2019. The fire destroyed 12 houses and burnt through around 30,000 acres of bushland. The second author is a community development scholar, who was also fighting fires in communities throughout our region during the same 2019/2020 bushfire events. Whilst our insider positioning is not without challenges in terms of our blind spots and biases (Costly et al., 2010), our perspectives also allow us to identify and explore issues that may not otherwise have been accessible to those outside of the bushfire experience and subsequent recovery process. What the Torrington experience demonstrates is that the community of Torrington is highly resilient (according to our definition of resilience) but in the absence of the longer-term community development support needed for assisting the community to increase its adaptive its capacity (Lonne et al., 2017) there is a risk that the community could be unprepared to meet the challenges of the future.

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We begin by defining the key terms of 'community' and 'disaster' before going on to outline our conceptualisation of resilience and adaptive capacity. We then consider what it might mean to enhance resilience and/or adaptive capacity by examining the kind of processes needed to undertake these tasks. We then present the case study, before going on to reflect on the events and the lessons learnt and the implications for community development in this area of practice.

Defining terms: Community, Disaster, Resilience

We use the term 'community' in this paper to refer to a group of people brought together in a specific geographic location in a rural area, such as a town, village and the surrounding areas associated with that town or village. As with other communities, rural communities are "self-organising systems" (Walker & Salt, 2017, p. 165) that consist of a complex myriad of interrelated internal subsystems that interact with each other as well as with the broader regional, societal, global and environment systems. All communities are unique; not only are the human beings who inhabit communities unique, but geographic location always presents a distinctive set of challenges and opportunities for inhabitants.

The term disaster is used to refer to an event or disturbance such as a bushfire or flood that damages a community in some way, which in the current global context, is most likely to be the result of climate change. The extent of damage can vary for it to be called a disaster, but we draw from the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) (n.d) which can include "human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts" (para. 1).

Walker and Salt (2017) define community resilience as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, and feedbacks; that is, it is to have the same identity" (p. 164). Whilst such a definition is useful, the authors take the definition further by incorporating the surrounding contextual factors into the definition. Such a systems perspective of resilience offers a multi-dimensional conceptualisation that includes psychological, social, cultural, economic, institutional and environmental resilience (Payne et al. 2021) as well the structural environment within a given community (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2020). Our conceptualisation of resilience embraces Walter and Salt's (2017) multi-dimensional approach along with the recognition

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that the different variables will factor in how resilience is understood and measured within a particular area or community (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2020). A systems perspective thus invites us to consider the complex interplay between the different systems and how change in one system can impact the status quo in another. This is an important consideration in the context of the climate change and resultant disasters where the broader environmental and institutional systems play such a pivotal role shaping communities' experiences of disaster events and recovery.

A systems conceptualisation, which allows for the myriad of variables that influence community resilience, facilitates what Walter and Salt (2017) refer to as 'resilience thinking'. Rather than seeing resilience as a fixed quality, resilience thinking is more a way of being and doing within the context of changing systems and subsequent movement between them. Such change and uncertainty is never smooth and unproblematic as systems continually organise and re-organise in response to continual changes. From this perspective, resilience is more about the 'adaptive capacity' (Walter & Salt, 2017) of a system to adapt in order to absorb the movement created by the surrounding systems and to maintain its identity in the process of this change.

Adaptive capacity is a growing area of study (Siders, 2019) that refers to the knowledge, awareness and skills that are inherent within a given community. As with resilience, adaptability is multidimensional in that it can be applied to all the different parts of community life. Unlike resilience however, it draws more attention to the changes that are needed within communities to respond to challenges brought about by climate change, the effects of which are predicted to worsen in the coming years (UNDRR, n.d). Adaptability is key to understanding what it may mean to enhance resilience.

The idea of enhancing resilience and/or adaptive capacity refers to the actual practice of working with communities in collaborative ways in order to identify inherent strengths and weaknesses and to problem-solve. As the Natural Hazards Research Australia (2020) suggests, community engagement is key. A community development approach to engagement would be grounded by principles of empowerment and valuing local knowledge; the process of achieving any kind of goals would need to be grounded by the principles of inclusivity and

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of self-determination (Ife, 2016). Understood in this way, the deployment of a community development worker would be undertaken to facilitate democratic, inclusive processes through which all community members have the opportunity to participate and to engage in decision making and action.

One of the challenges of involving all stakeholders in dialogue about climate change is the willingness of individuals to engage. Many people, for example, continue to deny the urgency of climate crises and others may not acknowledge it as an issue at all. For community development workers, this may mean that the engagement process involves including people in a learning process (Lauzon, 2017). Such a process cannot be achieved without some discomfort and this involves patiently listening to diverse views from community members and building trust in order to develop a culture of respect for diversity as well as "collective thinking and inquiry" (Lauzon, 2017, p. 1328).

In the context of climate change, all communities need to be engaged in dialogue about preparing for a changing future (Lerch, 2017). But for communities that have already been affected by a disaster, the timing and resourcing of recovery activities and subsequent engagement is crucial (Lonne et al., 2017). In writing specifically in the context of disaster recovery, Lonne et al. (2017) suggest that community development workers, or 'recovery managers', need to be deployed at the beginning of the recovery period and located as close to the community as possible. Not only are there more resources available during this period, but it is also a time when the impacts of the disaster are still being felt by individuals and where the desire for support and engagement in dialogue about change is likely to be the strongest (Lonne et al., 2017). The recovery process also requires continued funding into the future, for years if necessary, until all aspects of infrastructure re-construction, and public and mental health have been addressed and that the community is fully prepared for future events (Lonne et al., 2017).

Case study

In the section that follows, the case study of Torrington exemplifies what happens when longer term support is not forthcoming. Following the fire, there are some changes in the community profile and infrastructure, yet following the initial shock of the fire, the

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community seems to recoil back to its existing social structures and norms. Opportunities for further enhancing adaptive capacity within the community were lost without the provision of longer-term community development.

The case study begins with a profile of the village of Torrington, NSW, which is informed by Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. Following from that, an account of the fire and the recovery process is presented. The first author consulted with community members in writing this paper and sent drafts for their endorsement. Through this process, some of the details, especially those relating to individuals were de-identified or fictionalised in order to protect identify.

Community profile

Torrington is a small village, which is part of the Local Government Area of Tenterfield Shire Council in the Northern New England Area of NSW. The following image from Google maps shows its location in relation to the larger rural towns of Tenterfield and Glen Innes, which are located on the New England Highway. Tenterfield is approximately 20 kms south of the Queensland/New South Wales border.

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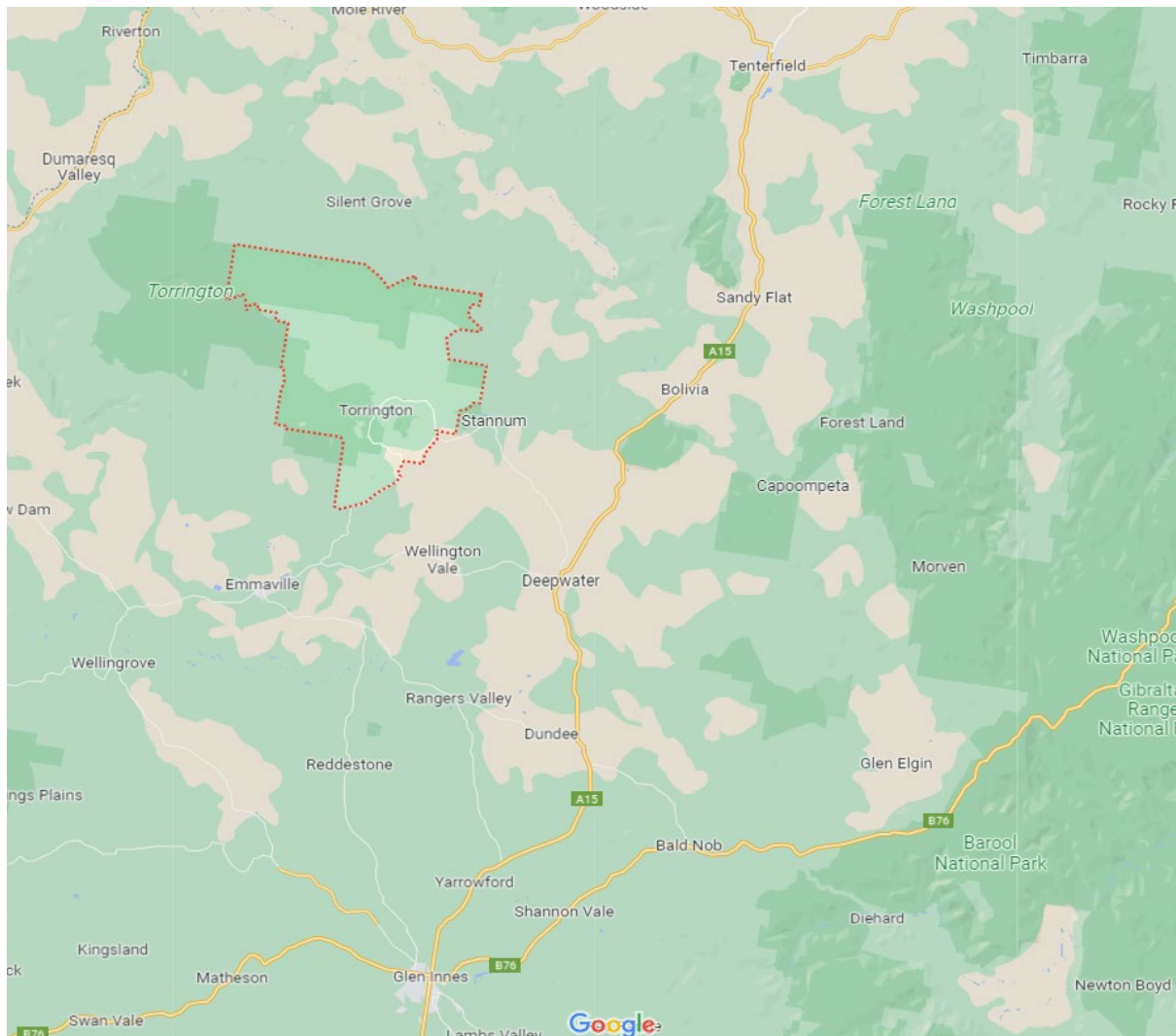
Figure 1. Torrington location in NSW in relation to nearby major towns. Source: Google Maps 2023

Historically, the village was founded because of the rich mineral deposits of tin, topaz, tungsten and bismouth, making it a thriving community from the late 1800s with a workforce of approximately 500. The village was populated with shops, hotels/pubs and a post office (Alt, 1981). In the 1930s Crown Land was opened up for grazing and, in the current context, there remains Crown Land leases available for grazing livestock, which is run by a local committee appointed by the NSW Lands Department. Most of the area surrounding the village consists of dry sclerophyll forest, which includes the Torrington State Forest

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Conservation Area (31,000 hectares) and the smaller Torrington State Forest and remnant bush, which attracts some tourists to the area for bushwalking and fossicking.

The last hotel/pub in the village closed down in 1999 and, currently , there are no shops located in the village. There is also no industry or post-office. These are all located in Deepwater, which is approximately 30kms away. Until 2021, there was no mobile reception in the village and, even after 2021, the reception only reaches some of the houses. Some fibre to the node internet access is available, although most people rely on NBN satellite services for the internet.

In terms of the village's sociocultural character, many residents continue to live there owing to their intergenerational ties with the community. There are also groups of longer-term residents who do not have family ties, but who moved there in the 70s and 80s, attracted by the natural beauty and remote location. The first author exists within this group, although no longer lives in the village full time. In recent years, the subdivision of the main farm allotment has attracted people looking for cheap land on which to build and a quieter life.

The functional aspects of managing the village infrastructure mostly relies on small committees made up of community representatives. There is the local Torrington Hall Committee, the Committee that manages the Common Land in the village and the local RFS. The make-up of these management groups tends to be those with family ties to the community or who are long-term residents; for example, most of the RFS members are from one family.

In terms of social connectivity, The Torrington Hall Committee organises weekly gatherings that are open for all community members; larger social events are organised for Christmas and New Year and occasionally at other times in the year. Whilst the different demographic groupings in the village do connect socially, they tend to be divided by ideological differences. These differences are not generally discussed openly, but in the past have resulted in disagreements and divisions over land management practices, the keeping of stock on common land, as well as hazard reduction and fire-fighting practices.

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According to the 2021 Census, the usual resident population is 77 people, of whom 53% identified as male and 47% as female. The median age was 64 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022a). This was a change from the 2016 Census where there was a reduction in population from 81 to 77. Despite this reduction, the number of dwellings increased, from 48 in 2016 to 73 in 2021. Table 1 below shows the difference between 2016 and 2021 data.

Table 1. Characteristics of Torrington between 2016 and 2021 Census.

Census year	Person count	% Female	% Male	Median Age	Number Dwellings	Number families	Rentals
2016	81	49.5	50.6	55	48	24	4
2021	77	47	53	64	73	14	0

Source: (ABS, 2017b; 2022b)

The reduction in population and an increase in dwellings is intriguing. One explanation could be a difference in what was recorded as a dwelling on the Census forms one year to the next and certainly the influence of Covid could have impacted. But it is important to note that the fire occurred in 2019 and 12 dwellings were destroyed in the fire. Certainly, several residents left Torrington after losing their house in the fire, and the increased number of dwellings could be explained by the sub-division of farm land for residential purposes and the building of new dwellings since the fire.

Despite the increased number of dwellings, other changes also occurred. As can be seen in Table 1, there were a reduced number of families living in Torrington following the fire and a reduced number of properties being rented. In addition to these decreases, there was an increase in income and a decrease in mortgage payments. Between the two Censuses, the average household income increased from $492.00 to $612.00 and the median monthly mortgage payment reduced from $992.00 to $650.00 (ABS, 2017a; 2021a). This change is also reflected in the *Socio Economic Index for Areas* (SEIFA) (ABS, 2018; 2023). Torrington's ranking in NSW changed from 716 in 2016 to 596 in 2021, suggesting the Morley & Robertson: From the Fire into the Frying Pan: Reflections on Enhancing Resilience and Adaptive Capacity in Bush Fire Recovery.

relative economic disadvantage for the village decreased during the period following the fire. So, whilst Torrington suffered decreased numbers in the population, the standard of living appeared to have improved.

The changes in standard of living are purely economic. It is important to note that the loss of population is potentially a loss in terms of the village's adaptive capacity and/or resilience in the context of fire. Less people in the community, for example, means a decreased ability to fight fires and to adapt to the changing environmental conditions. For example, the survival of the local Rural Fire service (RFS) relies on volunteers within the community. A decrease in community numbers can potentially mean a decrease in the numbers of people volunteering to join the RFS to engage in hazard reduction and other bushfire preparedness activities.

The reported decline of population and families could influence how the level of resilience in Torrington has been measured. The *Disaster Resilience Index* was designed to measure resilience in Local Government Areas (LGA's) by measuring coping capacity, (factors such as social character, economic capital, emergency services, planning and the build environment, community capital and the information access) and adaptive capacity (social and community engagement, governance and leadership (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2020). The disaster resilience scale ranges from 0 to 1 and is broken into 3 classes; being 0 to 0.4461 for Low; Moderate 0.4462 to 0.6598 and High 0.6599 to 1.000 (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2020). As shown in Table 2, the overall disaster resilience measurement for the Tenterfield Local Government is in the low range, for adaptive capacity (just) moderate and low for coping capacity (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2020).

Table 2. Disaster resilience scales for Tenterfield LGA.

	Disaster resilience range 0 to 1 Low 0-0.4461	**Adaptive capacity range 0 to 1 Low 0-0.4515**	**Coping capacity range 0 to 1 Low 0-0.3945**
Tenterfield LGA	0.3740	0.4534	0.3510

Source: (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2020)

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The Tenterfield LGA's strengths in this index are Social Character; Community Capital and Social and Community Engagement. The weaknesses are Economic Capital, Information Access, Planning and Built Environment, Governance and Leadership and Emergency Services (Natural Hazards Research Australia, 2020). The issue of access to Emergency Services and information are both highly relevant for Torrington and the community's ability to cope with the fire on 8th November 2019. Not only was there no mobile reception when the fire arrived, but the closest Fire and Rescue NSW stations are in Tenterfield and Glen Innes, both at least 50 minutes away. Those services that were assisting the small RFS Brigade were not able to access water for fire fighting when the fire came through.

Whilst the resilience index is useful for looking at the strengths and weakness of the community, it does not capture the nuances of how disasters play out in communities and how communities respond, recover and prepare. In the section that follows, the first author's account of what happened on the day of the fire and in the recovery process is presented.

The day of the fire

The fire had been burning for weeks in the nearby State Forest and residents had been receiving warnings that the risk of the fire coming to the village was extremely high. As the psychological notion of fight/flight or freeze responses to danger suggests, different people reacted to the warnings differently; some began frantically cleaning around their houses in order to protect them; others fled the village in order to seek refuge in a safe environment; others seemed to freeze, probably hoping the problem would go away (Chroust et. al., 2015). The first author had been assisting a friend to prepare his house for when the fire came through and, as the fire approached, she sought shelter in the RFS fire shed, along with several others. As the fire ball destroyed the houses behind the fire shed, scrap cars in one of the yards began to explode and old tyres ignited billowing toxic smoke towards the direction of the fire shed. Inside the shed, that toxic smoke as well as embers blew inside through the gap between walls and the roof and quickly filled the confined space. One of the media reports said that people in the shed 'huddled together praying" (Cockburn, 2019), but, this was not the case. The tasks at hand were several: one was to ensure the embers inside the

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shed did not ignite material; another was to seal a space in the bathroom area to minimise the smoke for a person suffering from severe asthma; the other was to go outside to put out the spot fires that were burning in the tall grass and threatening property.

When going outside of the fire shed to try to get fresh air to breathe, the first author noted ten or twelve fire trucks queued up in order to refill with water. This was also accompanied by a sense of confusion and panic because the water that the fire fighters were accessing had run out and fire trucks were being turned away and told to drive back to back to Glen Innes, 70kms away, to refill. Many individuals were offering water from their own personal tanks to help, but the equipment needed to get the water out of these tanks was not available. There was a common dam near the fire shed, but there was confusion surrounding the OH&S rules about taking the trucks down to the dam to pump the water out. One of the local residents resorted to cutting the fence down with bolt cutters so the trucks could access the little water that was left following months of drought; by the time this issue had been resolved, the fire had passed and most of the damage had been done.

Recovery and preparedness

In the days following the fire, the first author stayed in the village with friends to process what had happened. Services and volunteers descended on the village to help: for those who lost their houses there was immediate financial support and accommodation arranged, together with emotional support. In the village itself mental health workers and financial counsellors visited, while volunteers offered food parcels and fresh water; there was no shortage of kindness and goodwill. But the clean-up was slow. Approximately six months passed and the burnt remains of people's houses, several of which were contaminated with asbestos, were still laying amongst ashes; the roads in and out of the village remained littered with refuse and burnt trees. Many residents became anxious and understandably angry; not only were the remains posing a health hazard, but after such a devastating event, people needed to see a physical recovery and hope for the future. To boost morale, the State Government funded several community events at the Village Hall. For many, these events were important because they allowed them to tell and re-tell their stories, share their disbelief, their anger, and their gratitude for being alive.

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Approximately nine months following the fire, the first author became involved in preparedness efforts. There was a consultation visit from Federal and State officials lead by the Deputy Coordinator of the National Bushfire Agency. The purpose was to visit Torrington to 'check-in' with residents and hear their stories of recovery. However, the visit was not advertised to the whole community, so only a few people, including the first author heard about it.

An on-going problem in the village has always been communication; the lack of mobile reception limits communication via social media and the monthly hard copy newsletter, which is usually delivered via mail box, is not timely. Those community members that did attend the consultation visit aired their concerns about the clean-up, about hazard reduction management and about the safety issues being experienced. In response, the visitors shared information about the funding available for bushfire recovery and preparedness projects and that the local Council was responsible for assistance in preparing funding applications. For many attending that session, this information was uplifting because it signalled hope and resulted in the formation of the Torrington Bushfire Recovery Group. The group consisted of longstanding locals from Torrington as well as newcomers, all of whom bought ideas to the table. Based on the traumatic experience on the day of the fire, group members agreed that a good starting point for action would be to first establish a designated evacuation point in the village so all people knew where they should go in the event of another fire, and secondly to secure funding for a village bore, for fire-fighting purposes, so that in the event of another drought, there would always be water available to fire fighters.

There were many challenges in trying to achieve these goals. When the group embarked on finding out more about the eligibility criteria for the grants available, contrary to the advice given at the community consultation, the funding previously discussed was not for infrastructure projects but only social development initiatives; he infrastructure funding had already closed. In addition, contrary to being informed that the local Council would assist with preparing a grant proposal, the group was informed that the Council had limited resources and was not in a position to assist with recovery preparedness efforts, apart from providing information about further funding. The group decided to prepare a proposal so the community would be ready for when the next round of funding came available. As with any

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community project, the process needed to begin with the whole of community and include ALL the relevant stakeholders, i.e. the committees that function to manage and maintain the village infrastructure, the local Rural Fire Service (RFS) and the local Council. Including all stakeholders was crucial: first, because there needed to be input from key groups such as the local RFS and other committees about where the bore was to be located and how it was to be managed and second, this was a solution that would impact the whole community; so, as Binskin and Macintosh (2020) suggest, including all community members could potentially contribute to building a more resilient community by increasing adaptive capacity.

Despite the rationale for bringing all stakeholders to the table, the process was fraught with complication. The newly formed bushfire recovery group was made up of like-minded people who all agreed that there was a need to prepare for future events. But not everyone in the village, and certainly not all the key stakeholders, agreed with this position; many seeing the drought and the fire as a 'one off' event. In addition, the social and material resources in the village were fragmented by differing ideologies and thus split between different committees and groups and there was also perceived territorial problems surrounding the existing committees' roles and responsibilities in the village. Navigating this complexity was exhausting for the Bushfire Recovery Group members and the group died a quick death, not for want of effort, but because pushing through this resistance was too difficult in the context of the trauma that came with the fire.

Dialogue about the evacuation space and the need for a village bore continued amongst members within the community for many months with little or no progress being made. In 2023, during the writing of this paper, the first author was informed that the local Council had sourced funding for the bore and that they were in the process of developing the installation plan and that this project had been underway since the fire event in 2019. This was welcome news at one level because the residents in the village will be safer: however, the process of achieving this was top down and the first author cannot but feel a sense of disempowerment at this news.

Reflections on Recovery

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What can we learn from the Torrington experience and how might this learning inform what it means to "enhance resilience" in small rural communities in the context of disaster preparation? Seeing the case study through a systems lens allows us to identify the nuanced interaction between the various systems, consider strengths and vulnerabilities and also consider the village's adaptive capacity into the future.

Despite what the Australian Disaster Resilience Index (2020) says, Torrington is a resilient community because not only did it survive the fire, but it was also able "to absorb disturbance and reorganise so as to retain essentially the same function, structure" (Walter & Salt, 2017, p164). In relation to psychological resilience, many residents were traumatised owing to the severity of what transpired, especially those who lost their homes, but individuals also came together to sooth the trauma by supporting one another. In relation to physical resilience, the physical appearance of the village may have changed, yet, with the effort made from people who were able to protect their homes as well as other landmarks, it maintained its essential infrastructure so that life could carry on as usual. Indeed, with the local Council now having funded the village bore, it is arguable that the village of Torrington has increased its physical resilience levels since the fire. In terms of social resilience, the community as a whole was able to absorb the disturbance in order to maintain the existing social infrastructure, which includes the ideological divisions.

If we take a step back and consider the community of Torrington in terms of its positioning within the context of the broader systems that surround it, vulnerabilities become evident. The unpredictability of the changing climate meant that the institutional systems deployed to respond to the 2019/2020 bushfire were caught off guard; the fire fighters on the day of the fire, for example, were overwhelmed, and, without water, were not able to do their job effectively; the local Council was in unchartered territory, perhaps owing to a lack of resourcing and planning and was not able to provide responses to the community in a way that the latter expected. Although the State and Federal departments endeavoured to reach out to provide support to the community in the medium term and offered useful support, the poorly coordinated effort did not eventuate into meaningful change. The Torrington experience draws our attention to the disturbing fact that governments are still scrambling in

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their efforts to prepare their response services to cope with the effects of climate change and this increases the levels of vulnerability of smaller communities as well as response workers.

The case study also draws our attention to longer-term phases of recovery and the opportunities that were lost for supporting the community to increase adaptive capacity. In addition to making grants available, for example, it is evident that the Federal government made a concerted effort to reach out to the community. But that gesture was underpinned by the assumption that the community was able to organise, bring stakeholders together and problem solve through democratic processes, as well as navigate the complexities involved in understanding funding structures and applying for funding. In contrast, the 'top down' approach taken by the Local Government to organising and installing a bore in the village was underpinned by a different assumption that the community was not willing or able to engage in the process of ensuring its own safety. By working towards the goal of establishing a safe place to shelter during a fire and securing a water supply for firefighting, the local Council, collaborating with other government departments to implement the recommendations from the *Report into NSW Bushfire Inquiry* (Binskin & Macintosh, 2020), may have increased the material resilience of the community. Yet, by taking control of the process, members of the community were denied the opportunity to participate in the process. Such participation could potentially strengthen social resilience within the community. Along a similar vein, facilitating processes that involved community dialogue with all community stakeholders and through democratic decision-making processes could have also led to reducing the social fragmentation in Torrington, which in turn, could also begin to increase the community's adaptive capacity.

Implications for Community Development

Although efforts were made to reach out to the community by various levels of government, Torrington was effectively left to its own devices following the fire. This is perhaps reflective of how ill prepared governments are for responding to disasters. As previously suggested, the people of Torrington are highly resilient in many ways, but the social divisions and the lack of cohesiveness amongst groups impeded the dialogue that was needed for increasing

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adaptive capacity in the context of climate change. The Torrington case study reminds us of the pivotal role that community development practice can and should play in assisting communities to enhance their resilience and/or adaptive capacity.

In the event that community development workers are employed and charged with the task of developing adaptive capacity, workers need to be versed in the facts about climate change and also equipped to understand the complex nature of smaller rural communities. In this context, community development workers could begin by engaging all stakeholders in dialogue in order to assess what is needed for that unique community. Then they need to involve all stakeholders, including the key services on the ground and facilitating 'bottom up' processes where all community members engage in learning process that will lead to increased adaptive capacity and resilience into the future. The apparent inflexibility often inherent in Government departments may mean that this role is best suited to the non-Government sector (NSW Parliament, 2022). Organisations such as the Australian Red Cross (2020), for example, have already started to work with communities to encourage and support them to organise in order to bring about the changes necessary.

Community development in the context of disaster recovery and preparedness is long term work and thus needs to be resourced by State and Federal Governments as such. For communities like Torrington, that have experienced an extreme disaster, community development needs to be implemented soon after the event in order to assist the community to recover by tapping into the available resources and for building the relationships needed for setting and achieving long-term goals related to recovery and preparedness (Lonne et al., 2017). For communities yet to directly experience disaster, work needs to begin to engage communities and other key stakeholders in dialogue and learning about the effects of climate change and to start identifying the potential risk factors that may arise in the event of disasters.

Conclusion

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In this paper, we have explored the idea of enhancing resilience by examining the case study of Torrington. What the Torrington experience demonstrates is that whilst people in rural communities are already resilient, the context of climate change adds a different dimension. By considering the broader systems that are there to support smaller rural communities, we can see that even these systems are vulnerable in the event of extreme disasters. Ultimately, rural communities are only as resilient as the support systems that are able to assist them. Whilst supports remain essential in short-term disaster responses, there is also an urgent need to fund and support long-term community development initiatives so communities are able to decrease their vulnerability by adapting to meet the challenges of the future. The key is dialogue. Depending on the individual community, there first needs to be dialogue that facilitates learning about climate change and the risks that this may pose in certain localities. Then there needs to be processes that bring stakeholders together to problem solve and plan for the future. As was evident in the Torrington experience, achieving goals aimed towards preparedness in the future cannot be achieved by 'fly-in-fly-out' community development. Development needs to be localised and sustained over a period of time so that residents are able to participate in the process of adjusting in order to meet the challenges that may lay ahead.

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