

# Flipping the script: young people mobilise adults to increase participation in disaster risk reduction

Dr Timothy Heffernan<sup>1</sup>

Kathleen Stewart<sup>2</sup>

Professor Clifford Shearing<sup>1</sup>

Professor David Sanderson<sup>1</sup>

1. University of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales.

2. Anglicare New South Wales South, New South Wales West and Australian Capital Territory.



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## Abstract

The established practice for increasing young people's inclusion in disaster risk reduction holds that adults play a vital role in realising young people's full participation. This involves providing young people with a seat at the table or facilitating their inclusion to ensure their voices are heard. However, when adults are both decision-makers and facilitators of inclusion, the drivers of exclusion often go unaddressed. This paper describes a co-design method used by The Resilient Towns Initiative to improve youth participation in disaster risk reduction. It was devised through working with young people in the New South Wales Snowy Valleys, an area affected by Australia's summer bushfires in 2019–20. The approach relied on supporting the conditions for young people to increase their participation via cultivating a youth voice, generating ideas, creating a vision, bringing in adults, and building legacy to sustain momentum. Outcomes indicate that this approach nurtured cross-generational relations, raised the profile and esteem of young people and built skills, knowledge and resources. This addressed some structural barriers to inclusion and, more broadly, social inclusion in a regional area.

## Introduction

Following the 2019–20 bushfires, numerous programs aimed at increasing the role of local communities in disaster risk reduction have been initiated, with community-centred approaches to recovery seen as the gold standard (Sanderson *et al.* n.d.). Yet despite the best intentions, there remains groups that are excluded from full participation, including young people (Young and Jones 2019; Gaillard 2021).<sup>1</sup> Across the scholarly and practice literatures on supporting youth participation, it is common for adults to mobilise young people so that their perspectives are included (Mitchell, Tanner and Haynes 2009). This demonstrates the central position of adults in decision-making and their influence over how excluded groups are involved. With 2 in 5 children affected by the 2019–20 bushfires (being either affected directly or knowing someone who was adversely affected) (UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West 2020:12), it is crucial that the drivers of youth exclusion are understood and addressed to ensure full participation.

Addressing youth exclusion in disaster risk reduction, we argue, is based on equity and promotes initiatives that are with, for and about young people (Gibbs *et al.* 2013). Looking to identify better youth inclusion in a regional New South Wales bushfire recovery program, The Resilient Towns Initiative developed a series of forums over a 20-month period to increase young people's participation. The forums 'flipped' the concept whereby adults would normally mobilise excluded groups. Instead, the forums supported young people, generated community recovery projects and, only then, brought in adults to help refine and build projects for actionable outcomes. Building young people's voice is important because, as Coudry (2010:vi) observed that 'voice is not merely about verbalising', but the process of 'giving an account of oneself and what affects one's

1. 'Young people' and 'youth' are understood here as community members between the ages of 12 and 30.



Local residents gathered at community halls to work together at the forums.

Image: T. Heffernan

life’, which is ‘an irreducible part of what it means to be human’. Through a focus on how excluded groups can generate ideas and work with authorities down the track, our approach showed how embracing the diversity of voices is important to maximise a community’s resilience (Mansfield 2020), which is important in hazard-prone areas. This approach prioritises excluded groups, advances their ideas about how positive change can occur and highlights youth as fully-fledged agents of change in disaster risk reduction (MacDonald *et al.* 2023). Outcomes for this example indicate that codesigned, youth-driven measures nurture cross-generational relations, raise the profile and esteem of youth and builds their skills, knowledge and resources. This can address structural barriers to inclusion and promote social inclusion.

## The Resilient Towns Initiative

During 2022, there was extensive flooding in Australia and all states and territories experienced flood events. The flood event that is the focus of this report was experienced in late February to early March. The greater Uki area is located in the Tweed Shire local government area in the north of the Northern Rivers region in New South Wales. The record flooding that was experienced followed a period of wetter-than-average conditions, with higher rainfall, greater soil moisture and higher groundwater levels.

The Snowy Valleys area in southern New South Wales was severely affected by the 2019–20 summer bushfires with almost half the local government area (4,500 km<sup>2</sup>) being burnt and

260 dwellings fire-affected or destroyed. The Resilient Towns Initiative was a university-led, locally implemented initiative undertaken over 2021–23 that involved collaboration between researchers from the University of New South Wales and RMIT University, the Red Cross, Anglicare and local and New South Wales governments. The initiative involved 7 towns and villages in the area and aimed to support these communities to build their recovery. A series of public activities was developed using participatory action methods (Wates 2014) that were later refined after feedback from participants about what worked for them (see Table 1). At the heart of these activities was the question ‘How can we make our communities safer?’, which required attendees to identify local hazards and increase community capacity and preparedness.

The initiative was not established as a research project but sought to co-design and implement a series of activities with communities to instigate locally driven recovery. Facilitators of The Resilient Towns Initiative provided a ‘light-touch’ approach to encourage people to play a larger role in local emergency management, including disaster recovery. The literature on disaster recovery, for example, shows that a key problem often lies in top-down command-and-control approaches by responding agencies that can be poorly suited to community-centred recovery (Sanderson 2019a). Ongoing systemic change is underway that is reshaping how recovery is framed, including the narrative on who ‘owns’ recovery, namely communities. Extending this, established principles from community

development and humanitarian assistance were used to guide each of the phases:

- Disasters are not natural (hazard + vulnerability = disaster) (Kelman 2020).
- Disasters are part of daily life; bad things happen every day, but people recover.
- Marginalised and excluded people are especially at risk (Wisner *et al.* 2014).
- Strong communities comprise cohesive, organised groups with a plan (Sanderson 2019b).

These principles focused attention on the existing strengths of the community and highlighted the need for additional measures to promote safety and inclusion. The initiative loosely relied on adaptive management principles (Bixler *et al.* 2023) including building a local theory of change. While no age restrictions were placed on people’s participation, few young people attended. This prompted the team to adapt activities to specifically cater to young people’s needs and aspirations.

## The process: building youth participation

A co-design methodology (see Robinson, Halford and Gaura 2022) was used and involved the pooling of technical and local knowledge to catalyse change and to influence the conditions for improved youth involvement. This was supported by collecting and integrating youth feedback to further support the co-design process and ensure young people felt heard and represented. Adults were excluded from discussions, acknowledging the well-established barriers to young people being consulted and heard, and therefore their ability to contribute to community planning. The methodology also embraced physical spaces where youth congregate. These approaches helped to adapt and progress each engagement phase listed in Table 1 so that they suited young people’s needs and their preferred style of working.

### Stage 1: Cultivating a voice

Participants attended a 2-hour introductory session to understand when and where young people felt their voices were heard the most and least in their communities. The online real-time feedback website, Mentimeter, was used to gather

and present anonymous responses. Participants could then speak to the ideas generated, which was a safe and peer-focused environment to share information. Couldry’s (2010:vi) observation about the centrality of voice to one’s individual agency and what it means to be human highlights how the ability for some groups, such as young people, to contribute and influence community planning is often at odds with local power dynamics, including age and social hierarchies that impose and perpetuate inequalities. For this reason, it is not enough to be able to communicate; voice must be exercised and defended. In the case of young people, this includes voice and agency maturation. The maturation of voice and agency requires providing opportunities for young people to be heard and considered, their agency acknowledged and their ideas noted. Hosting an event without the presence of adult members, including parents, school staff and after-school carers, meant barriers were temporarily removed. Barriers include young people not being properly consulted, adults being the main decision-makers and the sense that young people’s ideas would come under adult scrutiny.

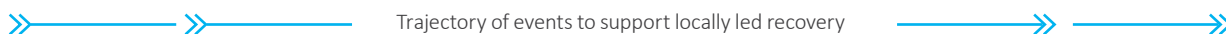
### Stage 2: Generating ideas

In an environment where young people lack a platform to be included in disaster risk reduction initiatives, events that garner their ideas and deduce the main themes are important. At a subsequent forum, young people worked in small, self-selected groups to generate ideas to a focus question about enhancing community safety. From the perspective of organisers, keeping the identified barriers at bay during activities was important. This was achieved through emphasis on ‘blue-sky thinking’, embracing ideas wholeheartedly and entertaining both serious and non-serious ideas.

**Blue-sky thinking:** This is a core part of building young people’s ideas about positive change and is premised on solution-focused ideas that highlight what is important for achieving a shared goal. Answering a question about creating safer communities, participants were encouraged to ‘think big’ and not constrain themselves by focusing on idea logistics and feasibility. At the same time, the co-design nature of the events meant young people understood that not all ideas would succeed to the project building phase. This lessened the degree to which participants felt disillusioned.

Table 1: The phases and outcomes of co-design to support locally led recovery.

Townhall meeting	Action planning 1	Action planning 2	Check-in meeting(s)	Preparedness plan
The initiative is introduced.	Community response: ‘How can we make our community safer?’	Community identifies opportunities to address themes.	Identify additional capacities (if needed).	Plans written by community, based on a local not-for-profit template.
Questions fielded and likely outcomes identified.	Core themes compiled.	Who, what, when, where and why attributed to opportunities.	Nurture cross-sector and community relationships.	Storage and upkeep of the plans discussed.



**Embracing ideas:** It is crucial to acknowledge participation and affirm and promote a youth voice to help young people feel their participation is warranted (Forbes, Simmons and Willems 2018). For this reason, all ideas were embraced and noted down to champion the credibility to young people, their ability to brainstorm and their confidence to present ideas.

**Humour:** Throughout the forums, silly and humorous (i.e. non-serious) ideas were encouraged. As voice is about ‘giving an account of oneself’ (Coudry 2010:vi), one way to build agency and presenting skills was to avoid unnecessary scrutinisation and to encourage self-expression, even if it was obvious that an idea was said in jest. The forums reinforced trust, credibility and safety outside of school and home environments and the process was more important than the ideas generated.

Ideas were summarised at the end of the forum and the overarching themes were teased out and endorsed by participants, including:

- more things to do that are safe in the town
- improved public safety precautions (e.g. better lighting, fencing, footpaths)
- additional resources and facilities to improve the quality of life of people in the town
- establishing a regular communication channel or youth committee.

### Stage 3: Values and vision

A follow-up meeting was held where young people collaboratively developed a vision for making their community safer while considering the established themes, ideas and opportunities. The vision was:

*A safer community will promote the strength of our town, the connections between people and good communication channels. This will lead to community growth, cohesiveness and resilience.*

This vision was used to frame the work young people had embarked on ahead of a meeting with adults, framing it in a language that was understandable to adults and, more broadly, to community decision-makers, such as council.

### Stage 4: Bringing in the adults

At the final event, adults attended a community forum where young people presented their vision and project ideas. Invitations and an overview of the previous forums were sent to parents, school staff and teachers, after-school program coordinators, local businesses, local non-government organisations, community societies and clubs as well as to local government councillors and council staff. Attendees were encouraged to mingle and sit among each other to reduce generational or family clustering. The ideas were then presented and attendees were encouraged to use the session to help build young people’s ideas into actionable projects. Project ideas included:

- improving the skatepark (where young people spent a lot of time)
- updating lighting and fencing in public spaces
- establishing online youth spaces, such as a Discord server
- assembling a youth committee that could feed into adult committees.

Participants embraced the philosophy that the solution to resourcing or other issues could be found locally. This inspired them to think about how social networks could be harnessed and what resources were needed for each of the ideas. At the close of the community forum, attendees worked together to select 2 projects under each theme, identify the next 3 steps involved, designate a project timeline and nominate interested parties or groups who could own or support the project from idea to implementation.



Young people worked in small groups at the forum to brainstorm ideas.

Image: T. Heffernan



Young people and adults working together finding possible solutions to risk reduction projects.

Image: T. Heffernan

## Stage 5: Legacy building

Given that the project lifecycle of the initiative was determined by external funding, it was important to ensure youth engagement and project ideas could be sustained. This was achieved in 3 ways. The first was to build momentum and buy-in at each event through young people being seen by their community as taking seriously the management of the community and its hazard profile. Secondly, momentum was achieved by identifying the priorities and anticipated outcomes for each project so that a timeline could be created, providing direction and accountability to achieve project outcomes. Finally, organising existing community groups to take ownership of each project helped to instil purpose and drive. A youth after-school program<sup>2</sup> was tasked with coordinating documentation and future meetings.

## Outcomes: building agency and ensuring legacy

Effectively ‘flipping the script’, that is, changing the starting point from which disaster recovery is carried out, requires engagement of young people as under-consulted and often excluded. In doing so, both young people and adults play a vital role in recovery after disaster. Young people raise novel ideas or frame things in different ways, which offers a different perspective. Young people were passionate about improving public safety (theme 2) such as public lighting and fencing around play areas. Poor lighting or the risk of balls rolling onto the road highlight a lack of physical infrastructure but also draw the attention of adults who may not frequent these areas. If safety is improved in any area it benefits the entire community. A change in this perspective deepens a community’s understanding of their risk profile and can establish stronger cross-generational links.

By embracing these ideas, young people could engage with their peers and adults at the forums and outside the context of home and school. Forums are an example of an emerging focus on addressing disaster risk reduction exclusion through non-formal

education opportunities (Seddighi *et al.* 2023). Disaster risk reduction is today embedded in formalised education<sup>3</sup>, however, not all students excel in this environment. Some feel excluded by it or, due to absenteeism, miss out on important education. Forums are a means of filling knowledge gaps and mobilising young people’s ideas outside the context of home and school and reinforces that risk and hazards are a part of life and that everyday solutions can be identified by working within communities. For this reason, while ‘disaster’ was rarely the explicit focus of brainstorming and discussions at the forums, the positive social relations and opportunities for young people to give an account of themselves and what affects their lives, created the potential for collaboration and networking. These positive interactions, networking opportunities and collaborations were aimed at improving safety and will pay dividends in the future.

## Conclusions and next steps

This paper outlined a codesigned method for working with young people to increase their agency and participation in disaster risk reduction. The method was adapted based on activities designed by practitioners, government and non-government representatives working as part of The Resilient Towns Initiative in the New South Wales Snowy Valleys region. Disaster risk reduction initiatives need to be with, for and about young people and a series of forums provided opportunities for participants to ‘flip the script’, develop youth agency, grow a pool of ideas and to enact disaster recovery differently. In a world where young people are often viewed as vulnerable and in need of protection, this project demonstrated the critical role that young people can play in contributing to understanding and responding to their local environment needs. Parents, teachers and community groups have expressed interest in developing projects further and establishing youth councils and ways for young people to be heard at formal events for community planning. While ameliorating the exclusion of vulnerable groups would appear to be a complex issue, codesigned, community-centred and youth-focused projects demonstrate great promise.

More information about the initiative is available at:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKO78FeVcWo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKO78FeVcWo).

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2. Starting F.R.E.S.H, part of the Anglicare NSW South, NSW West and ACT bushfire recovery program.

3. For more information, see the ‘Local links and learning’ report in the reference list by the James Martin Institute for Public Policy and the NSW Department of Education.

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### About the authors

**Dr Timothy Heffernan** is an anthropologist working with under-represented groups affected by environmental disasters and social and political conflict. He has worked with communities in Australia and Europe to support the development of community-centred recovery, especially among young people.

**Kathleen Stewart** supported the Snowy Valleys community following the 2019–20 bushfires, working as a recovery officer for Anglicare and for the local council. She assisted the community in rebuilding and recovering from the bushfires, including through youth outreach programs.

**Professor Clifford Shearing** is a visiting professorial fellow at the University of New South Wales Law and Justice and has published on bottom-up and polycentric governance arrangements, particularly relating to how people contend with contemporary 'harmscapes' such as the Anthropocene and artificial intelligence.

**Professor David Sanderson** has over 30 years' experience working in disaster resilience, recovery, mitigation and preparedness. He has worked at the Oxford Centre for Disaster Studies, CARE International UK and the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice.