HOW TO ENHANCE COMMUNITY RECOVERY AFTER DISASTERS

ABOUT THIS PROJECT
The Recovery capitals project began in 2017 and aims to support wellbeing after disasters by providing evidence-based guidance about factors influencing the recovery process for people and communities. This research is a collaboration between the University of Melbourne, Massey University (Aotearoa New Zealand), Australian Red Cross, and other researchers, government and non-government agencies, and emergency management agencies from across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

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SUMMARY
Using an adapted version of the Community Capitals Framework, the Recovery capitals project promotes a multidimensional and inclusive, systemic approach to disaster recovery. The research emphasises the interactions between natural, cultural, human, social, political, built and financial capital resources (see ‘What is a capital?’ on page 2) in disaster recovery.

Researchers are developing a set of evidence-based resources to guide recovery workers, having launched the first guidance document in July 2020 to support current Australian recovery from the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic – now available on the Disaster Mental Health Hub.

This user-oriented project involves authentic collaboration between end-users and academics at every stage, from framework development and evidence mapping to resource design and piloting. The resulting resources will consider people, geographies and temporality, while interweaving issues of access, equity and diversity.
WHAT IS A CAPITAL?
In the context of this research, capitals are assets or resources that can be used to generate more or new resources for the purpose of supporting wellbeing. For example, social capital refers to the connections and trust among people and groups that can be thought of as a resource at both the individual and community level.

CONTEXT
The complexity of disaster recovery processes is well established – it is multifaceted and dynamic, far from being a linear process with a single outcome. For the past decade, four recovery environments (built, social, economic and natural) have been used to recognise the multiple aspects of recovery. However, often recovery efforts remain siloed, with little attention paid to the interconnected and diverse layers which collectively contribute to the process.

In recent years, ‘capitals’ approaches have been applied to disaster recovery as part of continuing efforts to develop integrated understandings of the many factors involved, with notable attention given to social capital.

In the absence of pre-existing definitions of each of the seven capitals in disaster contexts, researchers developed new disaster-focused definitions in collaboration with end-users. The capitals were defined broadly to allow for fluidity of meanings and relationships between the different capitals, and to represent the richness and diversity of experiences amongst people and communities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Definitions of the capitals can be seen in the first Recovery Capitals resource (discussed on page 4).

While developing these definitions, researchers identified that traditional capitals approaches tend to frame production and accumulation of capital as inherently valuable, whereas the Recovery capitals project assumes that the value of capitals lies primarily in their usefulness to support and sustain wellbeing (a complex concept central to disaster recovery, as discussed by Gibbs et al., 2015). Accordingly, the Recovery Capitals project outputs not only include evidence of how each capital may influence other capitals, but also evidence of influences on wellbeing.
‘Social capital’ refers to the connections, reciprocity and trust among people and groups. There are three types of social capital: **bonding** (strong ties between similar people e.g. family and friends), **bridging** (looser ties between a broader range of people, often cutting across race, gender and class) and **linking** (ties connecting people with those in power, such as decision-makers). Social capital can be thought of as a resource at both an individual and community level.

### Relocation decisions

#### What we know

Social networks and connection to a community can influence people’s decisions about relocating or living locally after a disaster. Neighbourhoods with high levels of social capital tend to repopulate more quickly after disasters. Following Black Saturday, strong sense of community was a reason people chose to stay locally, while for others damaged sense of community arising from disagreements and changes to the local area led to decisions to relocate. After Hurricane Katrina, survivors relied on information about the plans of their neighbours, friends and store owners when deciding whether to return to New Orleans or relocate. Decisions about relocation may be further complicated for Aboriginal people with connections to Country in the disaster-affected area.

In addition to the ramifications for social, cultural and political life, these decisions are influenced by the distinctive nature of the formally recognised rights and interests held by Aboriginal people – such as native title, which cannot be bought or sold – as compared to non-Indigenous land ownership.

#### Consider

- **What local groups, spaces, resources and activities help people connect with each other socially?** How can these be supported? Be sure these opportunities are culturally sensitive and support marginalised groups.
- **Facilitate ways for people to connect** (e.g. through free local events) even if they are far apart (e.g. community pages on social media).
- **Are there people who will have less opportunity to decide whether to stay or relocate than others** (e.g. those in public housing or in rental homes)? Identify opportunities to help these people to connect and access support.

### Evidence mapping

With the framework established, the next stage of this research was to review the literature and map evidence against this framework. Given the enormous amount of literature relating to disaster recovery, researchers focused on relevant findings from project collaborators. This includes the Beyond Bushfires study and related research conducted by the University of Melbourne, Resilient Wellington and related research conducted by Massey University, from the CRC’s Australian Disaster Resilience Index and Optimising post-disaster recovery interventions in Australia project, and the work of social scientist Prof Daniel Aldrich (Northeastern University). In addition, using the Recovery Capitals Framework to identify key gaps in the literature, researchers specifically sought out evidence relating to important topics such as Indigenous peoples’ recovery experiences.
Resource development
The final stage – the development and piloting of guidance resources – has commenced and will continue into 2021. The approach to resource development has been highly collaborative. In a Recovery capitals workshop in August 2019, end-users discussed the content and format of useful resources from the perspective of recovery workers. Discussions from this workshop informed a plan for a series of complementary tangible and online resources to share evidence-based findings.

End-users stated they are most likely to use resources that start with simple core messages, backed up by additional evidence and then more detailed guidance.

In keeping with the Recovery Capitals Framework, it was agreed that resources would be designed to accommodate diverse groups, community contexts and multiple hazards. End-user support and commitments of in-kind contributions to Recovery Capitals resource piloting and development have since supported additional funding for resources beyond the scope of the original project agreement. Draft versions of the pilot resource have been presented to end-users in recent months, leading to further iterations.

RESEARCH FINDINGS
In order to support end-users in recovery efforts from both the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, the first of the Recovery Capitals resources was released earlier than originally planned, in July 2020. The Australian pilot edition of the Guide to Post-Disaster Recovery Capitals is now available via the Disaster Mental Health Hub. Limited numbers are also available in hard copy on request. The Guide provides visually engaging overviews, based on the evidence, of the role of each of the recovery capitals, highlighting the complex interplay between them all. It also includes prompts for those involved in disaster recovery to consider when planning practical recovery options. See an example of the Guide’s pages in Figure 2, page 3.

The final project output will be a set of disaster recovery resources in different forms, enabling users to engage with the material in a variety of ways. This will include online and hard copy formats, high level key messages, evidence summaries, cases studies and podcasts.

To ensure the appropriateness of the resources in both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly relating to the Indigenous peoples of each country, resources are being adapted to the two countries separately, as necessary.

HOW COULD THIS RESEARCH BE USED?
Integral to this research is a new set of evidence-based resources being developed through collaboration between academics, end-users and creatives across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, which will continue to be released throughout 2021. The Recovery Capitals resources are designed to encourage practitioners and policy makers to consider all the recovery capitals in the context of their own work, emphasising interconnectedness in order to support a shift towards more holistic approaches to recovery.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS
The Recovery Capitals project is still in progress. The first resource was released in July 2020, and is being distributed to end-users who are piloting it and providing feedback about feasibility, appropriateness and usefulness. In the meantime, development of the complete set of resources and adaptation into Aotearoa New Zealand editions continues.

END-USER STATEMENT
"Recovery planning has long been based on intuitive decisions. Research undertaken over the past decade has improved our decision making, as it is now more evidence informed. Despite best efforts of recovery managers around the country, often key recovery decisions, i.e. about rebuilding or infrastructure are taken without consideration of the psychosocial or cultural dimensions. This research and the supporting resources enable us, as decision makers, programmers, and practitioners, to make decisions understanding the complexity of recovery, and to reduce the potential for downstream unintended consequences from decisions taken without the full picture."

John Richardson, National Resilience Adviser, Australian Red Cross

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