Life Course Centre

Community organisations, volunteers, and the road to disaster recovery

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Research Summary

Why was the research done?

Despite substantial monetary and non-monetary investment in disaster recovery support services by community organisations, little is known about their processes and efforts. Even less is known about the impact of community organisations' efforts on disaster-affected people. This study enriches the academic and practice-related discussion by investigating how a community organisation (CO) in Queensland supports disaster-affected people in disaster recovery, providing deeper insights into Queensland's disaster recovery system, CO's role in supporting recovery, and what recovery looks like in practice.

What were the key findings?

Using a qualitative approach that involved semi-structured interviews with CO volunteers, stakeholders and disaster-affected people, the findings reveal how different disasters need different recovery approaches. While many believe that community organisations often fill the support gaps for disaster-affected people, this research shows that CO support for disaster recovery is anything but residual or secondary. Indeed, the CO's DA program actively assists affected people, who are often marginalised, to rebuild their lives, houses, and connections after nature-induced disasters. Since vulnerability and disaster recovery are interrelated, recovery can take a long time; it is imperative that affected people have the opportunity to express their evolving (and often compounded) recovery needs through a trauma-informed, need-based and relational approach that helps preserve the agency and dignity of disaster-affected people.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

CO's empathetic, need-based, and dynamic approach demonstrates that even amid anxiety and anguish, there is hope and optimism. For organisations providing disaster recovery support, collaboration and coordination with other stakeholders help create a robust setup that minimises duplication of effort and enables a rapid response to support those affected. The key findings hold important lessons across different recovery contexts as we learn that continued good practice and new learnings will lead to improved and more comprehensive disaster assistance strategies and plans within the CO and more widely.

Citation

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise their continued connections to land, sea and community.

Disasters occur when communities face overwhelming disruptions that surpass their ability to recover using only their resources. These serious disruptions can be natural or environmental, human-made or technological hazards. A growing body of research has shown that disasters can have direct and indirect impacts (De & Thamarapani, 2022; Finucane et al., 2023; Hallegatte et al., 2017). Direct costs include damage to physical infrastructure and assets, loss of human life, injury and illnesses, and damage to the natural environment. In contrast, indirect costs encompass multifaceted impacts such as loss of livelihood, business interruptions, increase in food and housing costs, broken supply chains, cascading health-related costs, loss of learning for children, severed social connections and decline in wellbeing (Hickson & Marshan, 2022; Shi & Jin, 2022; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2022).

To minimise the adverse impact of disasters on people's lives, planning and managing the response and recovery process takes precedence. While the emergency management services lead the way with disaster response and recovery, the community sector also plays an important role. Community organisations are pivotal in protecting people, livelihoods, health and cultural heritage through their timely and flexible response and supporting the recovery process. These organisations typically undertake the majority of relief and recovery work and are critical partners in disaster recovery (Islam & Walker den, 2015). Frequently, community organisations work in collaboration with government and private sector to support recovery efforts. While the scope and scale of disaster recovery support provided by community organisations is substantial, the full extent of this work is difficult to assess due to limited documentation and reliance on institutional knowledge. This raises several concerns for community organisations: difficulties in evaluating program effectiveness or impact and thus knowing what to continue doing and what to change, challenges in identifying best practices, lack of evidence base demonstrating impact to funders and stakeholders, difficulties in training new volunteers and staff and understanding variation in support service quality among others. These challenges highlight the need for investigating the support services and broader contributions provided by community organisations as such investigation could help design effective recovery programs that are designed and managed to meet the needs of the affected communities.

Queensland is vulnerable to a variety of hazards, including cyclones, floods, storms, storm surges, bushfires, and droughts. Of these, floods and droughts are found to have the largest residual aftereffects on communities (Arklay, 2015; World Bank, 2021). In the last few years, the majority of Queensland has experienced multiple disasters ranging from tropical cyclones to severe thunderstorms and from heatwaves to floods and community organisations in Queensland play an important role in recovery planning and management.

This research focuses on a community organisation (CO) in Queensland that has extensive experience in assisting communities in recovering from disasters. The CO's volunteers, in close collaboration with their Disaster Assistance Committee (DAC), support affected people in the aftermath of a disaster. This research focuses on their Disaster Assistance (DA) program and its role in supporting disaster-affected people and communities.

ABOUT THE CO'S DISASTER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Volunteers who are affiliated with grassroots groups within the CO play a significant part in providing recovery support through the DA Program. The program is focused on responding to longer-term recovery needs of affected individuals and households. They also provide a wide range of ancillary services for those affected post-disasters. All disaster-affected people are eligible for the CO's DA program, and the type and level of assistance are determined by CO volunteers based on a range of factors. The maximum assistance a household can request is $50,000 although, if needed, the CO works in collaboration with government agencies and other organisations to support those affected if the assistance claim exceeds $50,000. Two CO volunteers arrange for a home/site visit to assess the damage. This is an integral part of the DA program as it helps volunteers undertake an impact

and needs assessment. Post-assessment, CO volunteers complete a referral form that outlines the assistance required on behalf of the affected households. If approved, funds are generally paid directly to the creditor (i.e. builder, contractor, retailer, school, etc). The arrangements and practices under the DA program continue to evolve through the course of responding to diverse nature-induced disasters in Queensland.

To understand the DA program's design and practice, we present a simplified disaster recovery model. Figure 1 below shows a theoretical model of disaster recovery with enablers, processes and end outcomes. In theory, disaster recovery has three mutually non-exclusive stages – immediate, short-term and long-term. While response is an immediate or short-term activity after an emergency, recovery efforts start with response activities and continue over the long run. Recovery efforts that help communities better cope with future disasters helps build resilience.

The CO's support for disaster recovery is primarily focused on the long-term recovery of disaster-affected individuals and households. As the figure shows, disaster response and recovery usually involve different priorities and authorities but occur simultaneously for weeks or months.

Figure 1: Enablers, processes, and outcomes in disaster recovery
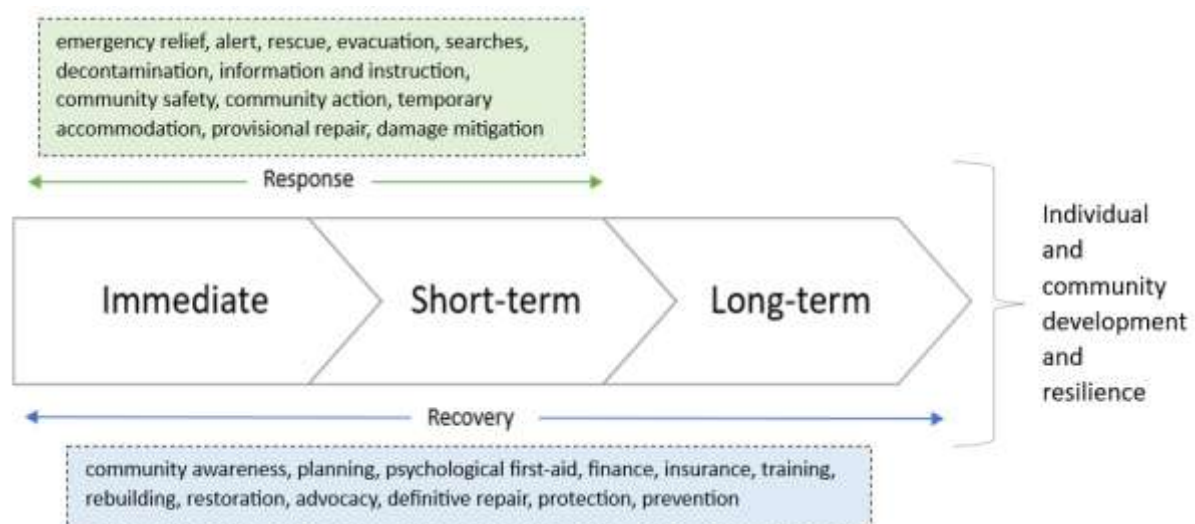
ABOUT THIS STUDY

The main aim of this research is to improve our understanding of how community organisations support disaster recovery and respond to the needs of the disaster-affected people in Queensland. Through the investigation of the CO's disaster recovery support services, we aim to gather a comprehensive overview of the aspects of the DA program that work well for disaster-affected individuals and households and what needs to be done differently. Hence, the research design for this study is exploratory and evaluative. Both aspect of the research focuses on the CO's DA program and at the heart of this research are two questions related to DA Program – What does it do? Does it work?

Given the multifaceted impact of disasters and the complexity of the recovery process, disaster response and recovery are enabled by several actors in this space who focus on relief activities, interventions, and collective action. These actors include government departments and agencies, community organisations, the corporate sector, volunteers, and affected people. We adopt a systems thinking approach to understand the recovery process and resources required for providing disaster recovery support and the outcomes of the recovery process and support. A systems thinking approach recognises the interconnected factors that affect the recovery of disaster-affected people. The factors include different actors and stakeholders in the disaster recovery space, available resources and the recovery process that brings different support providers and affected individuals

together. The approach also helps us achieve a better understanding of the non-linear recovery journey and complex, collective decision-making processes.

Systems thinking underlines the interconnectedness of different social aspects and problems to deepen our understanding of the issues under investigation (Stroh, 2015). Therefore, a systems thinking approach helps us invesitgate how CO works within this broader system to support the recovery of disaster-affected individuals and families. This approach helps us focus on parts of the system that CO can optimise by understanding its impact on the whole process of disaster recovery.

Figure 2 below highlights the complex social system of disaster recovery from the perspective of the community organisation. Under the DA program, CO volunteers work with various stakeholders to contribute to disaster recovery in Queensland and support its communities. Such stakeholders are an important source of knowledge in the disaster recovery space as they often have experience in disaster management and recovery support and the extent to which community organisations help the situation. As a result, they are also direct or indirect collaborators as CO volunteers either work with them to provide disaster recovery support or their engagement and timeliness is influenced by key actors in this space.

In the figure below, the dashed black lines indicate the components of the broader system that are under investigation in this study. It is worth noting that stakeholders and partner organisations also directly engage with affected people and stakeholders, although this is not the core focus of this study.

Figure 2: A systems thinking approach to understand CO's role in disaster recovery

The figure above shows the systems thinking approach employed in this research. Adopting this approach reveals the interconnectedness of processes and challenges, helping us understand how changes or improvements in one area impact the broader system. Through systems thinking, this study examines the underlying structures and connections between CO volunteers and stakeholders, as well as the interactions

between CO volunteers and disaster-affected people. This approach enables us to understand their service delivery, quality, effectiveness, and impact[1].

METHODS

The study focuses on various nature-induced disasters in Queensland between 2022 and 2024 including the 2022 floods in South East Queensland, the 2023 Darling Downs fires and the 2023 Tropical Cyclone Jasper in Far North Queensland. We adopt a qualitative approach as it helps capture the nuanced, informal, relationship-based, and locally embedded practices that characterise much of the CO's work. In this way, qualitative research is a helpful strategy to understand how CO actors operate within the system, in collaboration with people affected, to enable long-term recovery. We conducted semi-structured interviews with two groups of participants: (1) CO volunteers and stakeholders who provided support for disaster recovery in Queensland and (2) Disaster-affected individuals who received support from CO. The former group consists of CO volunteers (some of whom are part of their Disaster Assistance Committee) and key stakeholders that support disaster-affected people.

We interviewed 12 volunteers, 4 stakeholders and 11 disaster-affected people. The interviews were conducted between June 2024 and May 2025. A series of guiding interview questions were used to gather rich information on participants' insights on what worked well, for whom, what did not work as intended and why or in what circumstances. The data was analysed thematically by one or more volunteers of the research team to validate interpretations of the data. Ethical approval for this research was gained through The University of Queensland (UQ Ethics ID: 2024/HE000152).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the next section presents the key findings, followed by insights we draw from these findings, outlined in the discussion section. The concluding section summarises the main research findings.

FINDINGS

The main findings are divided into three broad themes: the role of CO, the broader recovery system, and recovery in practice. The first broad theme focuses on the scope of the CO's DA program, the second investigates how CO volunteers engage with disaster-affected people and stakeholders to provide support, and the third theme examines the efficacy and effectiveness of their support by analysing what its response looks like in practice.

ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Community organisations not only help in immediate disaster response but also provide support for long-term recovery. These organisations are effective at mobilising volunteers and other resources after a disaster and may also provide specialised support services. Therefore, this section examines the role of the CO in disaster recovery in Queensland. The focus is on understanding how the CO approaches disaster recovery as a process, investigates the needs of those affected and outlines the recovery work undertaken by the CO's volunteers.

THE INITIAL ASSESSMENT

The qualitative data reflects that the CO has a need-based approach, where the first step in delivering support services involves the assessment of the disaster impact on people and households that seek support. As noted in the previous section, volunteers are tasked with the assessment of disaster-affected households. While such

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[1] Legislative framework for disaster recovery management and government interventions at the local, state and federal levels fall outside the scope of this research.

assessments often involved home visits, volunteers frequently gave affected individuals the option to meet elsewhere if they were uncomfortable with home visits due to disaster-related damage. As a volunteer explains below, the assessment provides a clearer picture of how the CO can support the affected people.

"The disaster recovery area, how they get the people who go out and do assessments and things like that, it makes such a such a difference. Like, you know, you get a much clearer picture of how you can help people and then speak with them. And I must say, all of the interviews which we've done, we have never had, that I'm aware of anyway, we've never had anybody be critical of them. So, they must have been doing, they must be doing something right?"

This excerpt from a volunteer's interview suggests that while assessment remains a top priority to gauge the support needed, the organisation adopts an understanding and empathetic approach to ensure that those in need of support are forthcoming while receiving the emotional support they need as they discuss the disaster-induced damage with CO volunteers. The assessment is conversational, empathetic, responsive to individual circumstances, and conducted by volunteers who understand the psychological impact of disasters. In this way, rather than viewing assessment solely as a means of determining the extent and nature of disaster-related damage and recovery needs, it becomes an initial step in building a relationship that can be nurtured to support long-term recovery.

The assessment and personalised engagement through visits also help provide socioemotional support. Disaster-affected people experienced considerable uncertainty and anxiety in the aftermath of a disaster, making the importance of hope and optimism paramount in the recovery process. A participant who was supported by the DA program shared how their interaction with the CO sparked a sense of optimism and a renewed belief in their ability to move forward:

"They're people in my life that are key for me to be able to think, yeah, I can do this."

THE LONG VIEW

A consistent theme emerging from the volunteers' interviews was the CO's role as a long-term supporter in the aftermath of natural disasters. The CO's DA program primarily focuses on the long-term recovery of those affected in Queensland. This approach not only aligns with CO's mission of providing a 'hand up' but also emphasises that CO is not a crisis responder. As a volunteer explained:

"But we see our role as not first responders. We are there for the long term, and we've taken on a lot of assistance for people who you know, sort of, once that initial recovery, initial crisis, has happened, and we certainly do take on you know, if people come to us, we do food and vouchers and things like that. But our area, is that long term assistance."

Another volunteer remarked:

"We're not first responders, and we really, we try and make it very clear that we're not first responders, and we stay away from them because they're, yeah, they've got a difficult enough job, as it is without us jumping in there to interfere, so to speak, or get in the way."

Based on volunteers' interview data, their strong focus on long-term recovery and the commitment to explaining their approach to disaster-affected people, helps set clear expectations at the onset of the recovery support process. Moreover, the CO's focus on long-term recovery enables it to prioritise a pace that allows for genuine attention to the specific needs of those affected. This approach focuses on supporting people within their local communities. It helps build enduring relationships that can be scaled up or down to match people's changing needs over time. This results in an empathetic, needs-based framework that systematically attends to the most urgent and essential concerns of disaster-affected people. A volunteer described:

"We're not sort of immediate responders, but I think the sympathetic approach when our people are not there to conduct third degree interrogation of the person, we get enough information, or the necessary information from the person, but sympathetic to the very stressful experience they've been through."

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS AND AWARENESS

While the DA program is managed by the CO's Disaster Assistance Committee, recovery support is often delivered by volunteers embedded within local CO offices/hubs. This structure enables the CO to leverage neighbourhood-level connections and maintain a strong focus on community impact and needs. Such local ties become especially important when large parts of the state are affected by a disaster. As explained by a volunteer, the Committee relies on the local offices, volunteers and other stakeholders to understand the disaster impact, gauge community needs and provide effective assistance to those affected:

"That's the beauty of the CO, too, that we're a local organisation, so when we do that disaster recoveries, it's not the Committee, just in isolation making these calls. We're relying on people at the ground level, at the local level, to do the initial contacts so they will know, and then all it is, is feeding information back up to us, to Committee to coordinate and approve."

Yet community awareness regarding the CO's DA program remains low. Many disaster-affected people did not know that the CO provides recovery support through its DA program. In most cases, the CO reached out to those affected. While many individuals and families are referred to CO by partner organisations and government agencies, volunteers expressed that community awareness regarding CO's DA program is lacking. Prompted to think about the reason behind the limited awareness, a volunteer reflected that the CO maintains a quiet approach when it comes to its programs. In their view:

"Of course, it was part of the DNA of the CO not to talk about what it did. It was humility."

The CO's approach leads to an information asymmetry regarding support available among disaster-affected people. This could create barriers to much-needed support and leave potential unmet demand for support due to a lack of awareness. Disaster-affected people also discussed their lack of awareness about the CO's DA program. The lack of awareness people experienced was intensified when they became disconnected from others. An affected individual recalled:

"Yeah, so afterwards, you don't like, you lose your communication with the rest of the world, so you don't know what's going on, so you're just hanging out at your house trying to fix the problems, especially if you don't have anyone else doing it, and you don't have a car and you can't get out because we were probably flooded in, like the road would have been closed, yeah."

The individual explained how they learned that the CO provides disaster assistance at the recovery hub:

"Because I went down to this, to the (recovery) hub, which I didn't know about either… that's where I met up with, the CO there."

Recovery hubs are an essential part of the disaster response and recovery in Queensland. The benefits of the recovery hub include having many service providers present under one roof and the opportunity for face-to-face outreach. Being at the hub allows people to access multiple forms of support efficiently, facilitates better communication among providers, and fosters a sense of community during the response and recovery process.

HOUSING RECOVERY

The CO's DA program is tailored to community needs and takes into account the complexity of the post-disaster recovery. The volunteers provided a detailed account of the workings of the DA program, including the different

forms of support. The recovery efforts are often focused on specific aspects of socioeconomic recovery such as emergency relief, financial aid, material necessities such as food and clothing, white goods, housing repairs and maintenance. Since CO is not a crisis responder, its DA program is more focused on housing recovery. The housing recovery efforts prioritise reconstruction, definitive repairs and restoration of safe and liveable conditions.

The volunteers shared how the CO's support is geared towards the social and built environment with a strong focus on home needs and repairs and general wellbeing. This role manifests through socioemotional and financial support provided to disaster-affected people. As expressed by a volunteer:

"Like some people, you know, needed some structural repairs, but mainly they needed replacing good, you know, furniture and goods that they'd lost. Other people, their houses needed to be gutted because they had that, they don't make, they don't make houses with proper walls anymore. They use that stuff that melts away. A lot of walls needed to come out and they needed to be redone."

Volunteers' accounts also provide a better understanding of the nature and duration of support provided through the CO's DA program. Given its focus on housing recovery, the CO's support typically extends over several months or even years. A volunteer shared:

"Just going on memory, some people take up or 12 months or possibly more to get to the point where they're looking at doing those repairs, so they're not in the state of mind. It's the problem in front of them is just so onerous. It takes that long. They've been through counselling. Now they're at a point, okay, I'm ready to face the world again. Oh, but I've got no money, and that's where we can step in as well. That's where a lot of times we do step in."

Another volunteer highlighted the importance of their active involvement and management in the reconstruction efforts, primarily on housing recovery. This underlines how the CO's DA program ensures effective support throughout the recovery process.

"We can address this reconstruction effort, but what's becoming clear is that it's not just the financial input, it's the managerial input from the CO that's powerful."

Disaster-affected people also explained how the CO's DA program was instrumental in rebuilding their damaged homes after disasters, especially for those without insurance or when insurance was inadequate. According to one of the stakeholders:

"They (CO) were very good in, you know, being able to help people with things that were termed as pre-existing damage."

RESPONSIVE APPROACH

Disaster-affected people spoke about how the CO's support stands out for being personalised, impactful and tailored to individual needs. Some volunteers also discussed how the DA program had the flexibility to deliver support much faster than similar support typically offered by other avenues. A volunteer explained how this combination of speed and personalisation makes the support feel more immediate and meaningful:

"But having worked in the public sector, the approval process to spend $20,000 on a person is quite onerous. We're talking several levels, and it takes ages, but we've got the freedom to go and make that call, go and inspect the house saying yes, this quote equates to what I'm seeing. Yep, fair enough. And we can, as a Committee, we can authorise that, and we can get the money out the door quicker than a lot of other organisations."

Volunteers further explained how the CO's DA program is experienced as innovative and agile. During the critical Christmas period, support was provided through online channels to ensure continued assistance despite a

limited on-the-ground presence[2]. This digital approach helped maintain connection and responsiveness at a time when needs were high and in-person services were scarce in an underserviced part of Queensland.

"You know, with cyclone Jasper, and that happened when some of the local offices in North Queensland were on holidays. A lot of those people did swing in to go and do things, but we had a State-based virtual team, who also assisted them from that aspect there as well."

Another volunteer explained:

"Through the virtual support team and also through the Christmas Day storms, we had a lot of input into assisting people with that."

The data illustrated how the virtual support approach, paradoxically, enabled responsive assistance and support that set up the conditions for long-term recovery. For example, the virtual support team made it possible for the CO to engage with people in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. This helped demonstrate the CO's capacity to overcome barriers to accessing communities during holiday periods or in the absence of physical infrastructure or presence. The CO's innovation was further demonstrated through its use of other creative pathways to support people. Beyond traditional methods, it adapted to challenges by finding creative solutions. For example, the CO supported a household's disaster recovery efforts by providing guidance and referrals to appropriate services:

"And he said, 'That'll take away most of my superannuation'. I said, 'how long has the retaining wall been there?' Such and such. Well, you realise that someone would have approved it. So, there would have been a design done on it. It would have been installed, that design, and so there'd be a liability clause that needs assessing. I said to him, 'I prefer to give you $5,000 to hire a solicitor and go down that path...'"

This also highlights the crucial role of volunteers, who bring their own expertise, local knowledge, and personal commitment to the DA program. Their diverse skills and backgrounds enrich the support provided, allowing for more tailored and effective responses to the diverse needs of each community.

WORK WITH AND WITHIN BROADER SYSTEMS

The scope of damage and human impact means that many actors are involved in disaster response and recovery. Community organisations are part of the broader system that responds and provides recovery support to individuals and households. As discussed earlier, CO's DA program also works closely with many stakeholders and government agencies to provide recovery support to Queenslanders.

While government agencies often assume the coordinating role, the responsibility for collaboration is shouldered by various organisations, including the CO. It is important to note that this exchange is not restricted to collaborative efforts between government and non-government organisations but also alludes to working relationships among community organisations. While the CO's work within broader systems may vary between small- and large-scale recovery contexts, the core findings below hold important lessons across different recovery contexts.

COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

Given the complexity of the recovery process and the involvement of various stakeholders, coordination and collaboration are important aspects of managing disaster recovery. As such, coordination and collaboration

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[2] Since CO volunteers tend to halt visitations during the Christmas period, a virtual support team that operates out of CO headquarters takes its place and offers assistance to those who need it.

between various organisations is vital for operational efficiency, avoiding duplication of efforts and providing comprehensive support to aid recovery. The research found that the importance of CO's collaboration and coordination cannot be overemphasised. Indeed, research participants from the CO's partner organisations also discussed the value of collaborative efforts in the immediate, short- and long-term. Interview data from stakeholders highlighted the importance of coordination and collaboration to support people affected by disasters:

"We have to be collaborative. We can't, not one agency can do this on their own."

"More groups, you know, rocking up and wanting to help, but they can't do a great deal on their own, but they can do a really huge deal collectively."

As explained by the stakeholders, when disasters occur, it is beneficial to establish a coordination model where agencies work together. Unfortunately, any inconsistency in implementation of this coordinated approach across all emergency contexts could present significant challenges for everyone involved. A stakeholder remarked:

"You know the limitations are usually from the government department, so you know, like [name withheld] or [name withheld]. They're the places where the limitations normally are and then organisations like St Vincent de Paul and Salvation Army and GIVIT are usually then trying to work around those limitations and build the gaps."

Despite inconsistencies, many organisations involved in recovery maintain close partnerships with state government agencies and other key stakeholders to improve disaster response capabilities. This underscores the importance of a coordinating role in disaster recovery. In their interviews, volunteers and stakeholders reflected how effective coordination ensures optimal resource allocation as it avoids duplication. In discussing how seamless coordination could deter duplication of efforts, a stakeholder reiterated the importance of working collaboratively which in turn minimises gaps in support coverage:

"And I guess we always try to work collaboratively with others who are providing support, so we don't duplicate, so the support can go as far as it possibly can to help that person."

The stakeholder further explained how the lack of coordination could lead to inequitable access to resources and support for disaster recovery.

"And so, what we saw during cyclone Jasper was that several agencies were placing these requests for the same communities, and they were being over-serviced, but then somewhere else was missing out because it was already going and the coordination mechanism of once those items arrive on the ground, who is responsible for distribution, and all that sort of thing."

CO volunteers also noted the importance of coordination among support and service providers. For example, effective coordination also leads to cross referrals with other community organisations or government agencies to minimise gaps in support service delivery. A volunteer outlined:

"We recommend where people, you know other organisations people can go to."

On a similar note, a stakeholder highlighted the CO's commitment to collaborative partnerships:

"So, the good thing I found is that the CO is very collaborative with other organisations. It's not a matter of saying, no, we want ours to be the only service in town. It's a matter of saying, well, we're trying our best to help out the clients, regardless of where they are within the state, and regardless of who else might be able to help them as well."

Volunteers also outlined how the CO is keen to collaborate with local community actors from schools and neighbourhood centres. Local partnerships can play a critical role in disaster recovery by leveraging the knowledge of various community actors. By working together, the CO's DA program ensures that recovery efforts are tailored to meet specific needs and bridging gaps in support services as local knowledge provides greater situational awareness (Grant, Hart, & Langer, 2019). The data below from volunteers highlights how these community connections and networks are helpful in driving locally led recovery.

"We've done a little bit of that locally, and we sort of set about a small committee which comprised of people from our school, school communities, as well as from our parish and our civil units and offices. So, we've set up a little group. If we have another disaster, then contact this person from here. But that's within our own church community, really. But we've also got another church across the road, and we've got contacts with them, so we're doing it in a very small way, but that's just locally."

"We tried not to be, try to be all things to all people. We had with the recovery team. We had meetings with the local Neighbourhood Centre who, who seemed to be the one that was coordinating everything. It worked with, we worked on a very close relationship with them, so that we were on the ground as far as knowing what was necessary and what was needed."

The previous section revealed how the CO's DA program is responsive. The adaptability and responsiveness are enabled by collaborative efforts within and outside the organisation. A hallmark of the disaster recovery support delivery system is agility. We learned that rapid coordination and flexible service delivery are facilitated by strong local partnerships. While discussing the prompt support provided to affected people after the Christmas 2023-January 2024 storms that left parts of the City of Gold Coast without power and communications, a stakeholder explained:

"That's a perfect example. You've got a situation unfolding on the night of Christmas, and then at 8o'clock the next morning, there's LDMG[3] meetings being held all across South East Queensland, and people are on those meetings. And the only way they got, they knew about those meetings is by getting a phone call from somebody."

BUREAUCRACY VS AGILITY

Following from the previous point, the volunteers and stakeholders' experiences highlighted how organisations like CO successfully help disaster-affected people avoid bureaucratic bottlenecks. On the other hand, government procedures can result in bureaucratic barriers that hinder disaster-affected people's access to support. Disaster-affected people who received recovery support shared a similar viewpoint. In their experiences, repeatedly subjecting disaster-affected individuals to multiple trauma assessments by different agencies not only further traumatises vulnerable people but also creates inefficiencies and delays in service delivery. In contrast, disaster-affected people prefer the direct support service delivery approach and straightforward processes. Therefore, formal, cumbersome communication channels and bureaucracy often prove inadequate, with instances of important documentation such as damage assessment photos being submitted to government departments but never fully reviewed or acted upon.

A participant recounted the bureaucracy they encountered when dealing with other organisations and government departments:

"Our whole cul-de-sac was without electricity for 10 days. I told my neighbours that [name withheld] had documented proof of us being cut off and how they could get access to it, but they were just too demoralised to reapply. Other neighbours were refused paltry sums and told they must have brought contents down from inside

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[3] Local Disaster Management Group

their unflooded parts of their properties and put them in flood waters. Things like these were unnecessarily cruel ways to treat people."

These bureaucratic breakdowns leave people in limbo, unsure of their status or eligibility for assistance, while their needs compound over time. Such systemic gaps highlight the importance of the CO's role in providing continuity of support but also underscore the need for better coordination and communication protocols across all levels of disaster response to prevent avoidable long-term consequences for affected individuals and households. It also underlines the effectiveness of CO's initial assessment carried out in-person through home/site visits which provides a more comprehensive and dignified approach that builds trust while gathering accurate information about people's actual circumstances and needs.

The participant shared positive experience of engaging with CO:

"They (CO) didn't put you through unnecessary hoops, when your spirit and energy was already lagging."

Therefore, the CO's DA program offers a flexible alternative to the usual bureaucratic approach. The grassroot-based, volunteer-led program helps bypass bottlenecks affected people generally encounter within the broader disaster recovery system.

COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK

The interview data highlights the importance of communication between different actors involved in the recovery process. As the extensive impact of different disaster events and their aftermath continues, a clearer account of the disaster impact and the varied severity of its effects begins to emerge. Our interview data reveals that post-disaster, within CO, key communication encompasses sending, receiving, gathering, managing, and evaluating important information related to impact and needs both internally within the Disaster Assistance Committee and externally with partner organisations. A volunteer explained:

"That coordination role and communicating with other agencies and charities has been a huge job."

The volunteer further discussed communication challenges in support delivery:

"The way that we communicate, you know, is a challenge... A lot of our work is paper based."

A stakeholder further explained the importance of receiving key communication and detailed feedback from CO to offer seamless recovery support in the future:

"Some of that (relaying information on remaining funds) type of feedback that gives us a better idea of whether we should still keep sending referrals, or if we have to adjust the type of referrals that we send through."

While there are formalised processes for organisations to share and discuss feedback organised by the Queensland Government, organisations would like more opportunities to debrief, and share learned lessons with office of Emergency Management and the Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services and other key organisations. Stakeholders also questioned the timing of the formal debrief noting that:

"It often happens at the wrong time."

On a similar note, a stakeholder emphasised the importance of communicating during 'peace time':

"And I think they're… the most important meetings are the ones that are happening outside, like what we call 'peace time'. So, in our 'peace time', those meetings are actually some of the most important meetings, because that's us determining what we need to do as a group."

Another stakeholder highlighted the importance of scheduled touchpoints outside the disaster recovery phase:

"The only improvement I could say was what I probably suggested before, perhaps that we have a quarterly catch up so that volunteers could actually get to see the faces of the other people on the other end of the line. Sort of thing helps to establish a better communication if you, if you met with the person or if at least you know what they look like."

The findings highlight the need for a post-recovery communication framework that creates horizontal learning opportunities—the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and best practices between organisations. Through systematic information sharing with other community organisations, government agencies, and recovery partners, CO can adapt and refine its approaches based on collective insights. These horizontal learning opportunities enable the CO (and others) to understand what works effectively in different contexts. The value of such cross-organisational learning was highlighted by a stakeholder:

"I think there are challenges with the model of debriefing when people are being funded by the same people. So, you're not going to come and say this didn't work, we should have done that better if your funder is sitting at the table. It's not necessarily conducive to accurate feedback, and there's very little of it that (opportunity to provide feedback) that could be sort of horizontal, in terms of like, I don't sit down with the CO or others and debrief with them. However, we probably should, and that there would actually be lots of learnings from that."

Within the CO, there is also an attempt to provide feedback from the volunteers and grassroot branches of the organisation engaged in disaster recovery to the Disaster Assistance Committee to streamline operational aspects and deliver timely support. The data shows us that CO's Disaster Assistance Committee has been adaptive and quick to respond to frontline volunteers that are working closely with disaster-affected people.

"There wasn't a lot of feedback from us. Early on, I think there was, payments were a bit slow, so we fed that back, and the Committee took that on board, and we got a much better response fairly quickly, so they were responsive to the feedback that wasn't much, but what it was, they responded to quite well."

Disaster-affected people are also keen to share their experience with those who assisted them.

"I tried to do things... I didn't try to, I wanted to do things that showed that, 'Hey, look what (good) you've done. Look what this means to us. We're back home now, and we have another chance'."

EXIT STRATEGY: BUSINESS AS USUAL

According to the World Bank and Queensland Reconstruction Authority (2011), for all organisations engaged in disaster recovery, establishing an exit strategy that helps organisations return to business as usual is imperative. Indeed, designing an exit strategy is crucial for community-centred interventions, and when it comes to disaster recovery, requires foresight in determining enduring recovery activities. While an exit strategy for the CO might look very different to that of government agencies and others focused on emergency management, there are important considerations around timing and community readiness. In principle, an exit strategy not only helps organisations transition back to business as usual but also ensures that those affected are not left without adequate (ongoing) support.

The enduring process of disaster recovery and the long-term support make it challenging to gauge when to scale back support. While discussing how organisations transition back to business-as-usual activities or prepare for future disasters, a stakeholder shared:

"I don't know that the recovery period ever ends. But you know, we're still recovering from the 2022 event. We've since had another event, and it takes years for that recovery to finish, and so it just becomes business as usual, that long-term recovery is business as usual."

Another stakeholder summed up the challenges of planning transitions and assessing whether recovery services are no longer needed without leaving communities vulnerable:

"I guess we don't have a defined exit strategy, because it's like, it's a tricky one, in the fact that the disaster is never over. There's this point in time and there's before the disaster, and then there's after the disaster. So, people will naturally transition back to whatever level of recovery they end up achieving."

From the perspective of those affected by disasters, long-term recovery takes time, often years. Between the immediate impact and waiting for recovery to be completed, those affected often return to a new normalcy where they grow accustomed to the loss and the new ways of doing things. A participant who faced acute loss in the 2022 floods in South East Queensland explained how they have gotten used to owning less:

"All our furniture was damaged, so we have less furniture now but that's okay. We don't need a lot anyways".

As discussed in the previous section, volunteers' and stakeholders' experiences reveal that, over time, they may need to alter or discontinue their disaster recovery assistance. However, this does not imply that the available support diminishes as it often continues through other direct and indirect channels.

RECOVERY IN PRACTICE

The response and recovery of disaster-affected people were significantly assisted by CO's DA program. This section explores their experiences in greater depth, bringing together their diverse insights to understand what response and recovery look like and mean in practice. To do this, this section focuses on how CO's recovery effort focused on disaster-affected people and its impact on them.

SUPPORT QUALITY

Overall, disaster-affected people expressed deep appreciation for the support they receive from the CO. Many disaster-affected people we interviewed had limited or no access to electricity, and all of them had to be evacuated following the disaster event. They also faced challenges in accessing safe water and functioning sewerage systems. In some cases, neighbourhoods were isolated as a result of inaccessible roads following flooding events.

The first phase of relief and response is where CO takes a strategic or tactical approach as it helps people with emergency relief. This is not surprising given the CO's focus on long-term disaster recovery. This decision to provide immediate support through assistance that resembles emergency relief is driven by the presence of many other disaster recovery actors and organisations in the immediate aftermath. As explained by a volunteer, immediately after a disaster, *"the place is love bombed"*. So, offering emergency relief in the immediate aftermath is also a strategic program decision because the disaster damage and broader impact are still under assessment at this stage. Therefore, the CO's DA program is not rolled out immediately after a disaster but rather builds on the initial wave of support and establishes relationships with those affected to provide long-term assistance.

While sharing their experiences of receiving a variety of support in the days following the disaster event from diverse actors involved in support delivery, an affected individual explained that the support was helpful but short-lived.

"Lots of police, in the house, helping me, just trying to clear the lounge out, clear everything out. Put it on the side of the road, and SES were marvellous, too. But then that happens all within about two days and then nothing. You don't see anyone again. They move on to the next one."

This highlights a gap in the support service provision during the transition between the immediate and short-term period post-disaster. While this period is marked by damage assessment and recovery planning, a gap in support could be a barrier to disaster recovery in the long run. In light of this, another participant who received recovery support highlighted a potential area for program improvement:

"If they (the CO) had come on board, a bit sooner, like if you get on board a bit quicker, because it was like a few months before they made contact."

Given the CO's focus on the long-term recovery, their work with the broader system happens at a later stage, after the immediate and short-term response. However, there are significant social, economic and wellbeing costs that spillover into the long-term when critical issues are not addressed early in the disaster response process. This further highlights the need for timely disaster recovery support. Nonetheless, the gradational approach adopted by the CO where the form of disaster recovery support is scaled up over time yields many benefits. A volunteer explained:

"Anyway, we got the first phase, it really was just immediate help sort of thing that might have been food vouchers, that might have been cards using the CO shops and that sort of thing. In the second time around, we actually had up to about $10,000 that we could not exactly offer them, but they could request help up for up to about $10,000…and the third one was when we got into the buildings or repairs; people either didn't have insurance, didn't have adequate insurance, or couldn't fund it themselves."

EVOLVING NEEDS

The gradational approach also helps support disaster-affected people with evolving needs. Those affected by disasters expressed that their estimated material needs and support after an initial assessment often fell short of what was needed for disaster recovery. In many cases, initial assessments underestimated actual needs due to factors such as revised contractor estimates, fewer salvageable materials than anticipated, and hasty post-trauma decision-making as suggested by the data below:

"So, they initially helped me with a sum of money, which, you know, was, for me, it was considerable, but in the long term, it was actually quite short of what I needed. And then the second time around that I called them, look, I didn't have high expectations, because I didn't know whether, you know, it (the assistance) was a one off, sort of a request. But no, they called in their office, and they just made sure in front of me that it was okay to put through a second application."

This shows that support needs evolve over time as people's understanding of their circumstances improve. It further highlights the need for prolonged engagement through multiple touchpoints as people reassess their situation and gain clarity during the recovery process. Prolonged engagement is important to address evolving needs as recovery timeframes may go up to a couple of years for some. The intensity of personal experiences as well as the duration and frequency of support services, varied among those who participated in this study. This variation is not surprising as personal experiences are likely influenced by the magnitude and severity of the disaster event. More than three years after the 2022 floods in South East Queensland, one affected individual has yet to fully recover. They explained that:

"No, the work never finished. 2022 flood project is still not finished yet. After flood we've not gone to the house."

In this case, the financial assistance needed for housing recovery fell short for a disaster-affected family as the builder revised their quote. Although their housing recovery was aided by the CO's DA program, they refrained from communicating the increase in quotes to the CO. They explained that:

"When someone has helped me (already), then I don't want to go for them [CO] as they are already helping, but I don't want to ask for more and more. Really, I don't know if I can ask or not."

PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY

Importantly, we learn that the CO's DA program is led/delivered by willing volunteers who were described by one participant as akin to (if not better than) professionals in the disaster recovery space. The following excerpt from our data suggests that the CO's volunteers maintain professional standards and deliver quality services in time of high-need in a high-stress environment.

"The only people I've had really good help and professional help, and are very, very good is the CO."

Another individual outlined:

"Anyhow dealing with CO was a humanising experience in a sea of insensitivity and hoop jumping."

Disaster-affected people described how the CO's DA program had positive impact on their recovery process while alleviating workloads of recovery support service professionals. The volunteers demonstrated exceptional professionalism and provided affected individuals with options to choose from:

"And they came, and they made me feel humble, and they made me feel that they cared. And so, they were able to start helping me. And they had a... there were a few different options."

A stakeholder summed up the benefits of the CO's DA programs for both those affected as well as other actors involved in the disaster recovery space.

"Their willingness to jump in and support is obviously very well received. There are limited roadblocks when you're trying to engage those agencies. So, they're more agile than larger organisations with really structured governance processes, that's probably what works well, the ability to mobilise people who have got the right attitude, the right approach, and who are very passionate about what they do. You know, that goes a really long way."

SUPPORT MODALITY

Much of the disaster recovery support provided to people has involved cash or voucher transfers or direct transfers to tradespeople and building professionals. According to disaster-affected people, cash transfers or transfers with 'near cash' benefits work best as it financially empowers them to focus on urgent needs and minimises ongoing disruptions and damage. Our interview data highlights how cash transfers are effective:

"It is because I didn't have the money to pay the tradies to get the right advice. Yeah. So, the paying of the labour and like the whole job was the best, because you just can't do it otherwise."

While CO offers multidimensional support/multiple forms of assistance at the local level, we found that cash transfers or transfers with 'near cash' benefits were preferred over other cash-equivalent assistance, such as sourcing second-hand furniture, etc. This preference reflects the importance of preserving recipients' dignity and agency by allowing them the autonomy to decide how best to meet their own needs. An individual reflected:

"And I said, if you don't mind, I'd rather be able to choose myself, and also I'd rather have it new, because I've lost everything, and I really don't want to have an old, rusty fridge with scratches all over it. It won't make me feel any better."

Such direct transfers to those affected, contractors or tradespeople are not only responsive to a variety of recovery needs but also ensures that people's safety, health and dignity are not compromised. Thus, from an organisational perspective, it also enables operational flexibility. It is also important that such transfers or transfers with 'near cash' benefits are timely, adequate and equitable.

AT-RISK POPULATIONS AND COMPOUNDED NEEDS

Disaster-affected people who participated in this research elucidated their recovery experiences, thereby highlighting their diverse needs. People's vulnerability to disasters can be understood using the lens of intersectionality. Indeed, vulnerability and disaster recovery are related concepts (Hallegate et al., 2017). While stakeholders and organisations involved in disaster recovery focus on community recovery, people with compounded needs may present with additional or pressing challenges. A participant explained:

"And you know, our expenses, being on carer's pension and an age pension and having children, and I'm a single woman, basically they came to me and asked if I'd like assistance, because I'd gone through the government program and that had failed, but they knew that we were in a situation where we couldn't even afford, there was no insurance on the house…"

Depending on the intensity, type and scale of disasters, people experience varying degrees of loss and damage. But for many, disasters present far more complex challenges than loss and house damage. Recovery supports that merely recreate or perpetuate existing vulnerabilities can lead to increased or even compounding susceptibility to disaster events in the future. To address this, communities need disaster recovery support services and practices that take into account local and group vulnerabilities as preexisting vulnerabilities may exacerbate the impact of disasters. A stakeholder explained that:

"I suppose, pretty much anybody who's on a pension is in a tough situation whenever it comes on. You know, it doesn't matter what type of government pension, but if they're on a government pension, that anything like an event, whether it's a bushfire or flood or ...it has a big impact on them."

In a similar vein, a research participant shared how difficult it is to restart and rebuild lives post-disaster as a pensioner:

"So, your pension doesn't go very far, let me tell you that… when you got to buy everything again."

For households on low income and those struggling with housing and/or financial stability, a disaster can be the tipping point. While sharing their recovery experience, a participant described how their precarious working conditions impacted their recovery process, which in turn delayed their return to work, causing livelihood concerns.

"It's alright, all of it is alright if you're making lots of money. And so that would be alright for someone who has income, but I was casual. So, yeah. So that's what makes it really hard, if you're already over expended before the event occurs, right, if you are someone who has put a nest egg, but I just invested into my house, like you've truly just finished it and then, and then, you get that (the disaster), that's the hard part. Yeah."

The diverse, compounded needs of disaster-affected individuals and households accentuate the need for engagement that promotes connections, empathy and fosters people's capacities to cope with and overcome disaster impact while building resilience.

As discussed earlier, CO's approach to need assessment is understanding, empathetic and conversational. We found that disaster-affected people appreciate this method of assessing needs and impact, as one highlighted how asking for support can be uncomfortable for many. Research in social psychology confirms that concerns about embarrassment, social judgment and fear of exposing vulnerabilities deter people from asking for help (Bohns & Flynn, 2010). A participant shared:

"But what I'm trying to say is I just found that it's hard for people don't just usually ask for help. It's a big step when somebody goes and asks for help, and they don't need to be put through the wringer when that happens. That's how I feel."

The DA program, focused on establishing relationships and highlighting people's strength and capacities to support disaster recovery, helps deliver targeted and personalised assistance in a way that people feel positively about engaging with. The capacity to provide targeted support to disaster-affected people is predicated on an approach from volunteers that enables the recipients of support to actively participate in the recovery process. To sum, the findings highlight how the DA program focuses on rebuilding homes that support people's ability, needs and family structures.

STIGMA AND SHAME

Seeking help for disaster recovery support is a complex issue. People can be reluctant to ask for help even in challenging situations. However, it is worth noting that this reluctance does not reflect the prosocial motivations of those who are willing to help and support others. A volunteer shared their experience of how disaster-affected people may shy away from asking for help from the CO:

"*We've got the government people saying, 'we'll give you $180.' You know, we were giving out $10,000 per family, and those people out there, they don't even want to take it because they don't want to take it off CO. We struggled to get them to do applications because they felt it was charity money, charity.*"

This experience aligns with research that shows how people receiving charity feel shame (Parsell & Clarke, 2022). However, the charity element is not the only source of shame and stigma for disaster-affected people. People also shared how they experienced stigma, beyond the acts of receiving charity. On their visit to one of the local grocery stores in the aftermath of the disasters, one of the participants experienced an embarrassing and emotional ordeal when the retail store staff repeatedly commented on the smell of their bag, which had been affected by the muddy flood waters. They recounted:

"*And my bag was in the mud, and I washed it five times, but it was still smelling, but nobody else could smell it but she kept saying, 'Oh, what's that smell? Oh, it stinks. That's awful. I can't stand that smell'.*"

Following this interaction, the disaster-affected individual explained how such experiences could compound the trauma of the disaster. Indeed, people may avoid service providers or public spaces or much needed essential items, thereby creating barriers to accessing disaster recovery support and resources.

Therefore, help-seeking behaviour is considerably influenced by negative experiences or interactions with others. For instance, the interaction with others in the community can also be a source of stress and judgement. Disaster-affected individuals may feel judged or embarrassed when accessing essential items or services not only when they are approaching charities but also when they are interacting with others.

DISCUSSION

This research was structured around two key questions related to CO's DA Program – What does it do? Does it work? While the research findings are organised across three different themes, this section focuses on synthesising the key findings to address the two overarching questions. The key learnings are discussed below.

Disaster recovery is a highly complex and heterogeneous process. Different types of disasters require different forms and duration of recovery support. The CO's DA program reveals how it is important to engage affected people to understand their recovery experiences, their needs and their capacity for resilience. We found that CO's disaster recovery support comes in many tangible and intangible forms. Empathy and socioemotional support provided from the initial assessment are found to boost hope and optimism. This form of support has many tangible benefits. For one, it is central to equitable relationship building that promotes support service delivery that preserves dignity and agency. Additionally, it boosts the resilience of those affected by disasters as it sets the stage for long-term engagement and lays the groundwork for the recovery of those affected by

disasters. Importantly, the DA program supports definitive repairs and housing recovery of those acutely affected by disasters.

The experiences of those affected by disasters revealed that following needs assessment, the CO provides swift support. Despite the speed with which the CO operates, we have learned that recovery is often slow and frequently non-linear.

Volunteers also spoke about areas for improvement in the DA program. Internal processes within the CO play an important role in delivering timely disaster recovery support. The turnaround time for finance approval from the Committee to the volunteers is a determining factor in how quickly support reaches those who need it. The research also brings forth the growing role of digital technology and skills in disaster recovery. Disaster-affected people and volunteers emphasised the value of digital skills for finding and accessing support post-disaster. Therefore, another crucial factor is streamlining the referral process by shifting from paper-based systems to digital communications would enhance operational efficiency. When talking about areas for improvement, a volunteer explained:

"I guess how procedures could be streamlined a bit, but I wouldn't see that as a major priority. I think that the Disaster Assistance Committee has sort of learned from its experiences in different situations, different disasters, how best to operate."

Regarding the second question, participants' accounts of experiencing the program highlights the people-centred and housing-focused elements of the program. When describing the nature and effectiveness of the support they received from the CO, people frequently used superlatives such as "*very good*", "*very, very good*" and "*best*".

We also learned that people have inherent capacities to manage and overcome disasters. Such capacities are enhanced by the CO's volunteers shouldering the responsibility of disaster response and recovery, the wide range of adjustments that people make in their lives to cope with disaster impact and various forms of support available through local and neighbourhood connections, including but not limited to community organisations.

The findings reflect how recovery informs resilience building and preparedness for future disaster events. As acknowledged by the study participants, complete recovery enables disaster preparedness in communities. In some cases, vulnerable individuals receive targeted support and in other, vulnerabilities are indirectly reduced. For example, in many cases, hazard exposure may be mitigated by quality of reconstruction.

Nonetheless, disaster recovery also raises significant equity concerns, particularly around how support is allocated and accessed. Moreover, the resources needed to cover or repair damages are not equally accessible to all disaster-affected individuals, while the urgency of repairs varies considerably among different households. Community profiles further compound these inequities, with rural and remote communities experiencing disproportionate impacts due to limited access to timely, quality support services. Geographical isolation following disasters can exacerbate these adverse effects, creating additional barriers to recovery for already vulnerable populations.

Volunteers and affected people also shared how feelings of shame and stigma influence help-seeking behaviour and, in turn, act as barriers to effective disaster recovery. Research shows that 'reciprocity' frames a pathway to overcome the shame that people feel when they are positioned as passive recipients of charity or assistance (Parsell & Clarke, 2022). Direct reciprocation that enables people to have opportunities to directly give back to the CO, as contributors to the collective good could remove the shame and stigma. Exemplifying this view, a participant outlined:

"And because they did that, in the future if I go on volunteer, they (CO) would be the people I'd go and volunteer for…. It's not a reward basis, but I like to put ...because you don't forget that sort of stuff."

While beyond the scope of this research, in the larger framework, disaster funding remains a challenge for disaster planning and management. The CO's DA program (and many other community organisations) is often funded through disaster appeals, direct-to-project funds and grants posing significant challenges to timeliness, scaling up support and then phasing out support. As acknowledged by a volunteer:

"I think the uncertainty of funding is probably the biggest issue."

The interview data further reveals that procurement of services presents challenges not only for organisations involved in disaster recovery but also for those affected. This is particularly challenging for community organisations, especially smaller ones. A stakeholder explained that government procurement policies can sometimes be cumbersome, leading community organisations to start delivering services before officially signing a contract.

This research also elucidates the practical needs of disaster-affected people. A practical dimension of response and recovery involves accounting for post-disaster displacement. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, displacement is an immediate and widely prevalent impact of disasters. Displacement, even in the short-term, disrupts family and community life, as well as livelihoods. It also adds to the challenges of accessing services (due to loss of identification documents, multiple moves/lack of stable residence/constant relocation). Displacement further exacerbates the difficulties of supporting vulnerable or marginalised communities. Going forward, the CO may play an increasingly important role in supporting those living in temporary housing [4] while they await a transition into a permanent home, whether that be their restored/repaired original home or a new one.

WHAT PROVES EFFECTIVE?

The findings reveal how different disasters need different recovery approaches. CO has developed a genuinely flexible, adaptive capacity to support people through different disaster events that vary enormously in their impacts, timelines and required interventions. While different types of disasters require different resources and operational approaches, the CO's core focus on socioemotional support and housing recovery has helped it build a transferable approach that can be easily adapted to different contexts. A volunteer described:

"We've had the fires; we've had the floods and cyclones. They all present a different perspective on life and who we should be going to. So, it's, it's not always the same people, emergency services, it could be different people that we need to go to."

The CO's DA program has many elements of an effective recovery program – it is empathetic, innovative, need-based, dynamic and non-judgmental. These elements of the program align with CO's vision and purpose of providing a 'hand up' to those who need it, and the elements are themselves built on CO volunteers' relational approach to assistance and support. A volunteer's experience illustrates the relational approach adopted by the CO:

"She just had nowhere to fall back on. She had a valuable property. She could have sold it and moved into retirement place or something else like that. We're not there to make judgments about that. She was very clear that she didn't want to leave there, etc, etc. And you know, again, there's no judgment here and some were there to go and help her out, and she really, really appreciated that. Good for her and she just rang up out of the blue one day to thank us."

As a volunteer explained, the beneficial outcomes for people supported by their assistance are a major source of fulfilment for CO volunteers involved in disaster recovery. This highlights the altruistic motivation of CO's

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[4] Not emergency or temporary shelter

volunteers. For many, a simple expression of thanks is deeply fulfilling and reinforces their sense of purpose and connection to the community. In their view:

"If they say thank you, that's like winning the lottery."

The CO's relational approach helps it deliver support that fosters a sense of calm and hope through tailored communication, coupled with compassionate delivery of other forms of support that are essential for a recovery framework that not only preserves dignity and agency of the disaster-affected population but also strengthens community resilience for future disasters.

Delivery approaches that help people cope, recover and thrive after a disaster could incorporate elements of Hobfoll's Principles of Trauma Intervention that promote: 1) a sense of safety, 2) calm, 3) a sense of self- and community efficacy, 4) connectedness, and 5) hope. The principles are useful for informing and guiding interventions after a disaster or other forms of trauma (Hobfoll et al., 2007). While the five principles of interventions are fairly established and widely acknowledged, Dückers (2013) also identified that the challenge is often for people to have equal access to these principled services after a disaster event. As highlighted in the findings section, there is a need for more trauma-informed approaches in the disaster recovery context. In practice, a simple manifestation of this process is ensuring that those affected are not repeating their trauma in difficult situations to different support service providers. While the CO is cognisant of this, a lack of coordination within the broader system could act as a significant barrier to adopting effective approaches in the post-disaster setting.

Recent years have also seen an increase in cascading or consecutive disasters. Cascading and consecutive disasters not only impact people but also those who provide support services to others. As the CO's volunteers and stakeholders provided recovery support to those affected by different disaster events between 2022-2024, burnout could be a cause of concern. It is important to support those who dedicate themselves to supporting others.

At the same time, people who had been affected by disasters before shared their experiences of how they had coped previously. For those affected by the disaster event for the first time, there was a low perception of risk that likely resulted in poor adjustment to the natural hazard (for example, rising flood water). In instances where research participants had been exposed to or experienced a similar natural hazard before, there was a high-risk perception. Research has shown that such high-risk perception leads to well-adjusted response and recovery (Argyrous, 2018). This also helps build resilience in the long run.

In all, the CO's DA program and its strong focus on housing recovery help improve sustainability by repairing damaged homes and ensuring liveable conditions. Through empathetic, need-focused, long-term engagement, the program may also boost resilience. A participant's explanation of how the CO's support helped them encapsulates this resilience:

"They gave me faith, faith in people, faith in community."

CONCLUSION

While many believe that community organisations often fill the support gaps for disaster-affected people, this research shows that the CO's support for disaster recovery is anything but residual or secondary. To conclude, the DA program is highly responsive, dynamic and need-based with a strong focus on definitive repairs to ensure long-term recovery as the CO is engaged in recovery efforts that entail restoration, rebuilding, and building back better.

Overall, we found that the recovery support provided by CO encompasses food and financial assistance, socioemotional and advocacy support. Given the CO's focus on long-term recovery support, it focuses on

housing repairs and reconstruction for disaster-affected people. This form of support is a well-received and valuable initiative as research shows that housing reconstruction and material recovery are preconditions for social recovery post-disasters (Tierney & Oliver-Smith, 2012). Therefore, the CO's DA program helps with a vital component of disaster recovery.

Within the broader system, collaboration and coordination are the hallmarks of disaster recovery planning and management. Communication and feedback could further improve planning and processes in real-time and help avoid creating gaps in support. From an organisational perspective, feedback loops, during and after the recovery, are an important mechanism for learning and improving service provision over time. The stakeholders shared important information about the workings of the disaster recovery support paradigm in Queensland and communication challenges. Although government agencies in coordinating roles organise debriefs and provide platforms for sharing feedback through forums and workshops, communicating feedback to funders can be challenging. The CO's local connections (through volunteers and local offices) and organisational links are salient in our data, confirming the need to look at the broader context within which the CO, especially the DA program operates. For organisations involved in long-term recovery, there are also important considerations in ensuring that those affected are not left without adequate support and essential services.

This research also presents evidence on the quality, approach and operational standards of the program. With a strong emphasis on the experiences of those who receive disaster recovery support, the findings also reveal their evolving and compounded needs, underlining the need for personalised, long-term disaster recovery support. The research highlights how shame and stigma can create barriers to help-seeking behaviour, emphasising the importance of maintaining high professional standards among volunteers to build trust and create safe, non-judgmental environments where people feel comfortable accessing support. The key findings in this paper hold important lessons across different recovery contexts as we learn that continued good practice and new learnings will lead to improved and more comprehensive disaster assistance strategies and plans within the CO and more widely.

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