

Digital Media
Research Centre

Empowering culturally & linguistically diverse communities in disasters

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our research has taken place. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and to Elders past and present.

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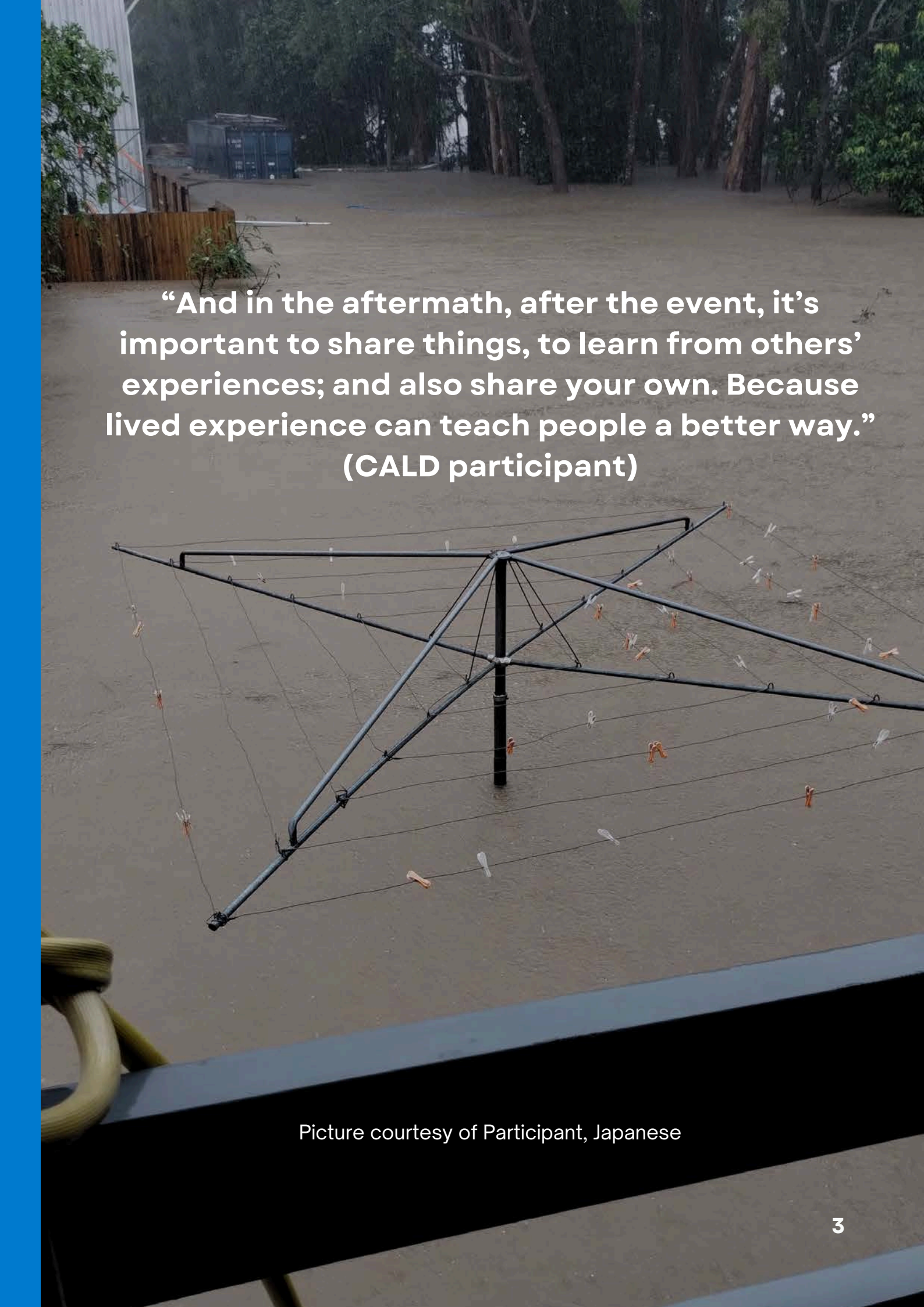
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Australian Government



**Queensland
Government**

A photograph showing a flooded area, likely a residential or community space. In the foreground, a black metal clothesline structure is partially submerged in murky, brown floodwater. Several white and orange clothespins are attached to the lines. In the background, there are trees, a wooden fence, and a blue container. The sky is overcast.

**“And in the aftermath, after the event, it’s important to share things, to learn from others’ experiences; and also share your own. Because lived experience can teach people a better way.”
(CALD participant)**

Picture courtesy of Participant, Japanese

Executive Summary

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world, with nearly a third (30.7%) of its population born overseas and 22.8% speaking a language other than English at home (ABS, 2024). Simultaneously, the country faces escalating natural hazards, resulting in over \$38 billion in annual economic losses and long-term financial, health, and social consequences (Deloitte Access Economics, 2021). Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities—many of whom experience systemic disadvantages—are among the most vulnerable. Despite their wealth of lived experience and cultural heritage, emergency management systems do not always provide the necessary communication resources to support the CALD members or integrate their knowledge into existing frameworks and resilience efforts (Hou et al., 2025a).

Funded by the Australian and Queensland governments under the Queensland Resilience and Risk Reduction Fund, this research **aimed** to:

- Understand the key barriers and challenges faced by CALD communities during disaster emergencies
- Identify new opportunities and alternatives to develop effective communication strategies through co-design with CALD communities
- Inform policy frameworks and action plans to strengthen inclusion in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience-building initiatives

This two-year participatory action research directly engaged with CALD communities in Far North Queensland, primarily in Cairns. Conducted across four phases, the study involved **multiple methods of data collection**, including individual storytelling, resources mapping, co-design/co-production workshops, and validation surveys. In collaboration with local councils, social service agencies, and multicultural organisations, researchers worked closely with seven cultural groups: Bhutanese, Chinese, Colombian, Congolese, Indonesian, Filipino, and Japanese. Community leaders (cultural ambassadors) played a pivotal role in fostering connections, building trust, and driving engagement with their communities.

The study results highlight four cross-cutting themes, offering a deep understanding of how Australian CALD communities navigate disaster emergencies from a communication perspective. These findings provide implications for policy development and resource investment in DRR and resilience-building.

Theme 1: Gaps in CALD-related disaster risk communication

Despite CALD community engagement being recognised as a priority by the Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience since 2007 (AIDR, 2007), communication efforts remain fragmented and often ineffective (Hanson-Easey et al., 2018; Uekusa & Matthewman, 2023). This study identified three major gaps in disaster risk communication for CALD communities:

- **Lack of tailored communication resources** — Many CALD members face complex challenges due to intersectional identities. Key groups requiring targeted support include newly arrived refugees, ethnic migrants with limited English or digital literacy, CALD individuals with disabilities, low-income families, and temporary visa holders.
- **Insufficient actionable guidance** — Disaster updates often focus more on what is happening than what to do next. This leaves CALD individuals uncertain and vulnerable, leading to anxiety-driven information-seeking behaviours rather than proactive preparedness and mitigation strategies.
- **Limited cultural relevance in messaging** — CALD-related disaster communication rarely incorporates culturally resonant themes, emotional appeals, or familiar communication channels. As a result, many CALD members continue to rely on their social networks, cultural practices (e.g., faith-based rituals, traditions), and ethnic media (e.g., Line, Wechat) to manage disaster risks.

Theme 2: CALD communities' priority needs

Despite cultural differences across groups, this research identified the shared concerns and key needs from CALD communities regarding emergency management process and disaster resilience-building:

- **Continuous, cyclical disaster risk communication and education** — CALD communities emphasised the critical need for localised preparedness and risk mitigation before a disaster occurs. Strengthening pre-disaster education is essential to reducing risks and improving response and recovery outcomes.
- **A balanced approach to disaster communication management** — While a central, authoritative source of information is crucial for credibility, a multi-channel, multi-modal communication strategy ensures broader accessibility across cultural groups. This does not replace official channels but bridges gaps for disengaged and vulnerable CALD members.
- **Clear guidance on seeking help and accessing support services** — Beyond general in-language information, CALD communities require specific guidance on where and how to access support for disaster-related needs, including financial aids and well-being resources.

Theme 3: Opportunities to strengthen CALD leadership in collaborative resilience-building

CALD communities should not be viewed solely as vulnerable groups in need of rescue (Bowles, 2017). Recognising and leveraging their strengths, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences can drive community-led resilience and enhance the diversity of Australia's emergency workforce. The study highlights three key opportunities:

- **Fostering an inclusive emergency workforce** — Expanding the presence of CALD and bi-/multi-lingual professionals within the emergency management sector helps build a workforce that reflects Australia's cultural diversity and meets diverse needs.
- **Empowering CALD community leaders as trusted intermediaries** — Formal recognition, incentives, and structured support for CALD leaders can enhance their role in mobilising action, strengthening social capital, and bridging emergency response efforts across diverse communities.
- **Integrating cultural knowledge and influencers into emergency messaging** — Just as Johnathan Thurston has effectively engaged Indigenous communities through the 'Get Ready Queensland' campaign, leveraging similar ethnic celebrities for CALD communities could greatly amplify awareness and inspire positive behaviour change.

Theme 4: Policy implications – Advancing systemic inclusion

Australia has a robust emergency management framework, with policies and strategies implemented at local, state, and federal levels. This research highlights that effective disaster response has been significantly supported by multicultural organisations and NGOs, such as Centacare FNQ Multicultural Services and Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland. To foster greater integration between emergency management agencies and multicultural actors in reducing disaster risks for CALD communities, future policies and strategies can:

- **Elevate the role of culturally embedded knowledge** by integrating it with scientific expertise and formal emergency management systems. Local cultural insights and community-driven initiatives can enhance disaster preparedness and response.
- **Explicitly recognise the importance of social capital** in building long-term resilience. Policies should emphasise the role of networks, NGOs, and trusted community leaders in strengthening CALD communities' capacity to respond to disasters.
- **Support CALD leaders as the fulcrum of resilience-building** by providing targeted resources such as leadership training, financial assistance, and mental health support. Investing in CALD leaders ensures sustainable, community-led disaster preparedness and recovery.
- **Recognise CALD communities as catalysts for new ideas and innovative approaches** to disaster resilience across cultural boundaries. Their unique experiences and solutions can enhance national disaster management efforts.
- **Foster future productive synergies between emergency management and multicultural policies** to create a more inclusive and adaptive disaster response system. Aligning these policy areas will enhance coordination, resource allocation, and engagement with CALD communities.

In summary, this report presents an authentic account of how CALD communities perceive and navigate the current disaster communication systems. Their lived experiences, cultural heritage, and community dynamics provide crucial insights into reshaping emergency management practices and policymaking. By embedding inclusion at a systemic level, Australia can foster a more resilient future where *all* communities are empowered as active partners in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.



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Background

According to the AIDR 2023-2024 Major Incidents Report, Australia experienced approximately 20 significant natural hazard events in a single year, including floods, bushfires, storms, and cyclones (AIDR, 2024). The Empowering Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities in Disasters project investigates the communication challenges CALD communities face and aims to identify and address their needs before, during, and after disasters.

CALD communities in Australia encounter major barriers in accessing critical disaster information and services for preparedness, response, and resilience building. **Key challenges** include:

- A lack of culturally tailored messaging and emotional resonance in official English and translated information (Uekusa, 2019).
- Media portrayals that misrepresent, marginalise, or racialise CALD communities as either disaster 'victims' or 'villains,' fostering alienation and mistrust toward emergency authorities (Atallah et al., 2021).
- A misalignment between top-down risk management approaches and CALD communities' subjective risk perceptions and mitigation strategies (Kelly et al., 2024).
- The absence of a structured approach to empowering CALD communities by leveraging their cultural knowledge, networks, and lived experiences (Hou et al., 2025b).

Given these challenges, this project selected Cairns, an ethnically diverse city and a gateway to Northern Queensland, as its empirical field site. As a United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction Role Model City, Cairns participated in the Making Cities Sustainable and Resilient action plan, which includes disaster risk reduction initiatives. In collaboration with Cairns Regional Council (CRC), this project examines the cultural, communicative, and systemic challenges CALD communities face in all-hazard disasters. The devastating impact of Cyclone Jasper in late 2023, while tragic, also provided a timely opportunity to capture first-hand insights and lived experiences from CALD participants.



Source: cairns.qld.gov.au/community-environment/natural-disasters

A multi-method approach

The **central research question** revolved around how the diverse narratives emerging from CALD communities—reflecting their practical needs, challenges, and desired support—inform best practices, policymaking, and resource development.

With support from CRC, Centacare FNQ Multicultural Services, Cairns and Regional Multicultural Association, Trinity Bay State High School, Study Cairns, and the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland, this project engaged **seven cultural groups** in Cairns: Bhutanese, Chinese, Colombian, Congolese, Indonesian, Filipino, and Japanese. To foster trust and meaningful participation, seven cultural ambassadors were recruited and trained to provide language support, cultural guidance, and community insights. A total of 168 participants contributed valuable perspectives to the project under ethics approval.

Embedded within each CALD community, a **multi-method approach** was adopted, involving individual storytelling (narrative interviews), resources mapping, co-design and co-production workshops, and sense-checking surveys. This approach was instrumental in understanding the diverse needs of CALD communities and developing culturally appropriate communication resources within national, state, and local emergency management frameworks (see Figure 1).

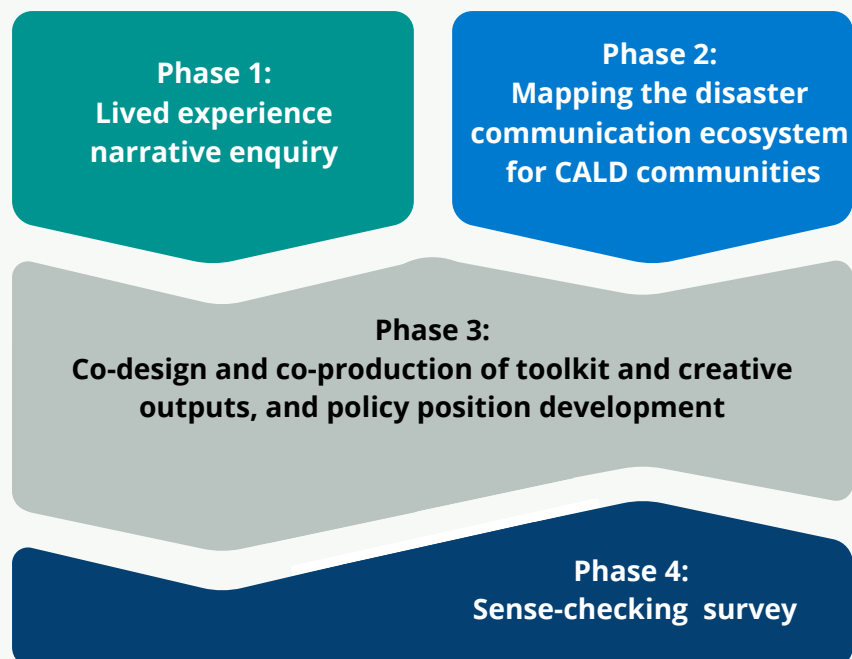


Figure 1. A phased multi-method approach

Building on this multi-method approach, the project produced a series of practical resources and evidence-based research to guide various stakeholders (e.g., emergency management agencies, multicultural service sector, NGOs) in engaging CALD communities more effectively during disasters:

Outputs

Storytelling Toolkit	A set of purpose-built, storytelling-driven, and practical tools designed to establish a dynamic, two-way communication loop between emergency management sectors and CALD communities, fostering relational trust and collaborative disaster resilience.
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Creative Gallery	A digital hub of creative resources in multi-media formats and artistic forms including video clips, photographs, hand-drawings, and networking maps contributed by CALD communities to showcase their cultural diversity and creativity in understanding risks and coping with emergencies.
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Impactful Stories	A collection of resilient stories from CALD community members that could serve as exemplary models for peers and broad communities to develop strengths, navigate adversities, and build self- and collective resilience to disasters.
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Research Publications	A series of evidence-based and peer-reviewed research papers and presentations that improve public understanding of CALD communities in disasters and recommend best practices for cross-sectoral stakeholders.
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Note: All outputs are accessible via the project website:
<https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/empowering-cald-communities-in-disasters/>

Case Study 1:

Communicating with care

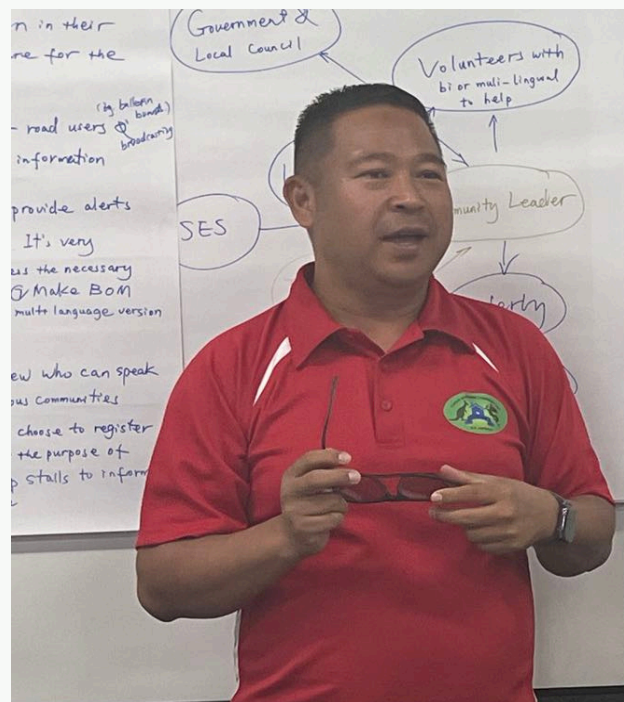
Overview: This case study illustrates how CALD leaders proactively adapt essential information for their community members, ensuring cultural relevance and human care, beyond simply translating official messages.

Tej is an active community leader who takes great care in communicating information to his Bhutanese/Nepalese community. He involves other members in constructing and delivering messages and engaging with people.

Tej recognises the different literacy levels in his community, both in their own language and in English. He appreciates simple English messaging that is easy to translate and can be understood by most people in his community.

The Bhutanese community has an active Facebook page and Whatsapp group, where they post all disaster information. Along with emailing and texting members of his community, Tej will call around to members of his community, particularly those who are the most at risk in times of disasters to check-in and ensure they have access to the information and resources they need.

Along with making sure that information in simple Nepali and English is freely available via social media, Tej increases people's disaster risk awareness through carefully considering how to communicate preparedness information using different modes at different times. This includes community events and using existing videos and visual resources.



“It's important for people like us to really filter the source of information, where it's coming from; not to share other irrelevant, untrue information... We translated any new updates that came through; put up on Facebook; and then we shared the link...When we translate, it's important that we make the language very simple.” (Tej, Bhutanese community leader)

Case Study 2:

Stories that teach

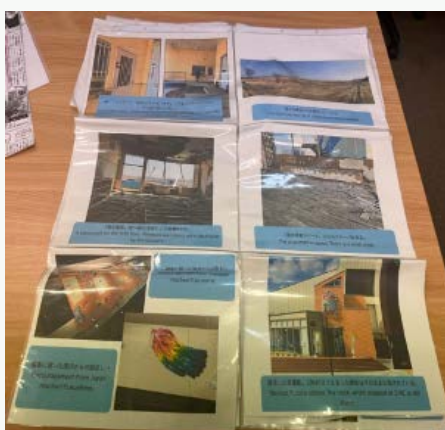
Overview: This case study demonstrates how storytelling through creative media such as comics, animation, and photography can help CALD communities understand disaster risks, learn appropriate actions, and facilitate intergenerational education, allowing younger generations to learn from historical events and better prepare for future disaster risks.

Preparing for Cyclones

Cairns Regional Council and Centacare FNQ Multicultural Services educate the different cultural communities in Cairns about what to do during a cyclone. The image to the right is a simple comic that serves two purposes:

1) Communicating clearly the actions to take to minimise harm and risks (e.g., staying up-to-date with information, preparing your property, having a disaster kit ready, electrical safety, and sheltering); and 2) Providing prompts for further discussion about disaster preparedness and people's past experiences.

Participants in the research highlighted both the importance of visual communication and personal recollections of past disasters as being effective forms of storytelling for learning about disaster risks.



Recovering from earthquakes

Throughout the project, the Japanese community shared resources and stories that emphasised the importance of recovery, and personal and community resilience.

The image to the left is a visual story that a participant shared about recovery from the Fukushima earthquake. They relayed the importance of sharing these stories to teach future generations about the recovery process.

Participants from different cultural backgrounds stressed the importance of using comparative stories from people's home countries to highlight the similarities and differences between disasters there and in Australia. Sharing stories like this can help with community resilience-building in Australia.

Case Study 3:

Sharing community stories

Overview: This case study shows how stories of lived experience and disaster preparation can be shared informally by young people, and how these stories travel throughout their wider networks, improving CALD communities' understanding of risks, resilience, and recovery.

The Congolese community has strong communication networks, and children are central to sharing stories with their peers and families. The community shares information about disasters through church, sports, and family networks.

Community sharing is particularly important for new arrivals and community members who do not speak English, and those who have not had a chance to go to school in Africa. Schools play a pivotal role in educating children who take disaster risk information home to their parents, and young people themselves are building their own networks to share stories and provide support to each other.

“Most of us boys here, from the Congolese community, we are trying to create a soccer team. So every time we meet, we talk about something that’s going on in people’s lives, and see if anyone needs help in anything. So people can help them; especially the new ones...So with soccer, we are speaking up; For example, because I heard from my siblings, obviously; and I asked community members if they also heard what’s happening. And some of them were like, ‘Yes, yes’; and we talked about it. They got frightened before the cyclone happened. We talked about what not to do and stuff like that. So the boys, when they heard about, they went to talk to their families; and that’s how the news went around the community.” (Participant, Congolese)

The community shared stories with each other before and after the disaster. The community used WhatsApp to communicate before and during the disaster, with different groups on the platform sharing information.

“We have parent groups, we have youth groups on WhatsApp. Because most of them are using WhatsApp, it is easier to go, ‘Oh, I get the message from my group’. And then, ‘Mum, oh, mum, did you get this message from your group? You need to get this message’. Yeah, WhatsApp. We are using WhatsApp, all of us.”
(Participant, Congolese)

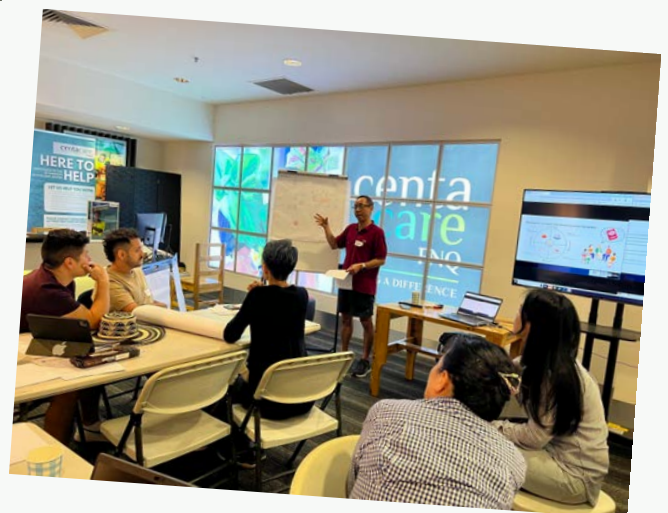
After the disaster the community assisted each other with accessing financial, insurance, housing and mental health support. They also provided a safe space for gathering and sharing stories of their experiences during the disaster.

“So in my case, the Congolese community, they brought people together; they had a barbecue; and they just talked about the struggle they had during the cyclone and what they to recover from it. Everybody had their say and stuff like that.”
(Participant, Congolese)

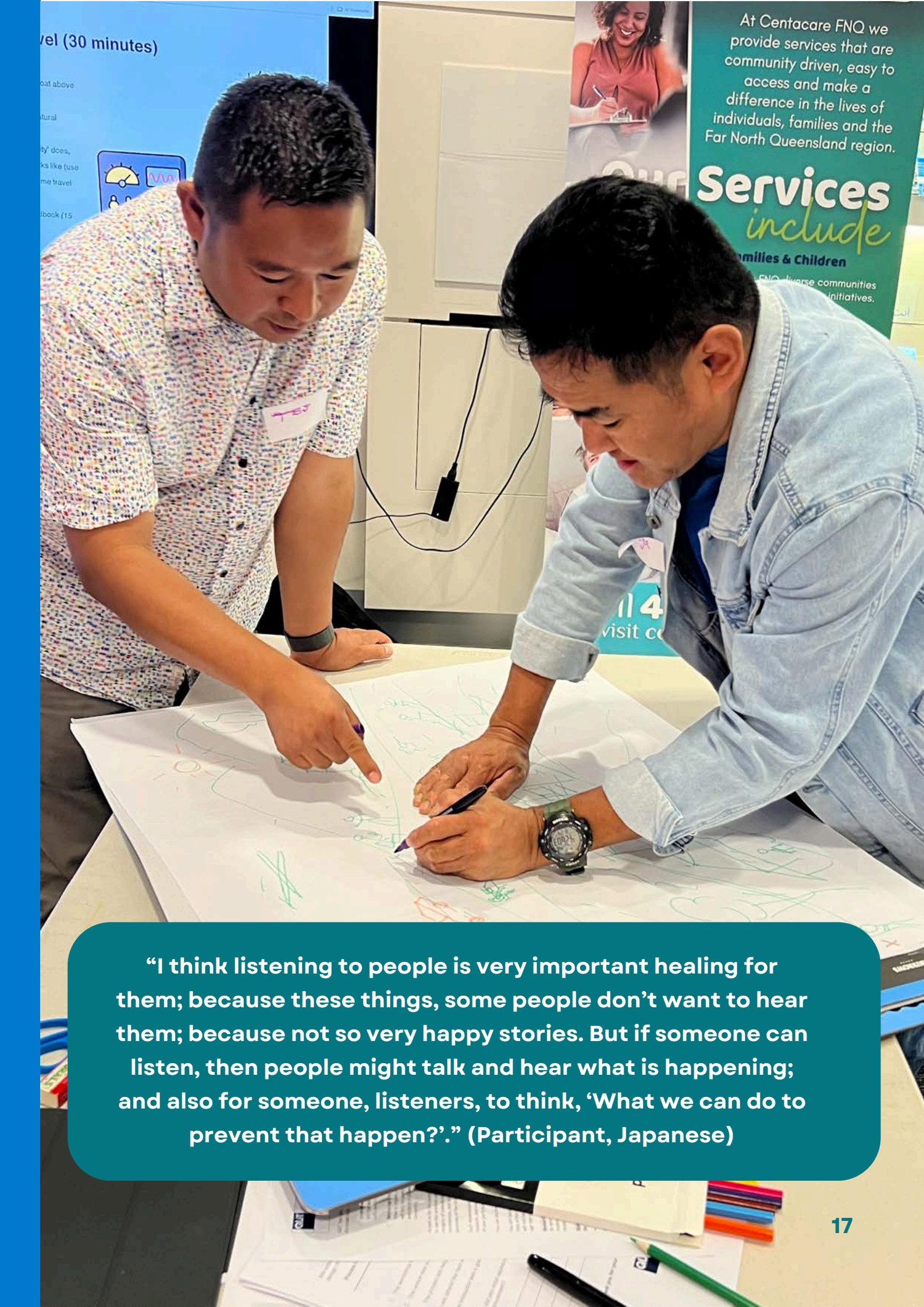
Co-creative workshop snapshot

A key highlight of the project was co-creative storytelling with CALD communities, providing a space for participants to engage and collaborate in sharing lived experiences, cultural insights, and ideas for strengthening disaster resilience in Australia.

The process unfolded across three workshops, culminating in a co-production session where participants, guided by a professional facilitator, co-developed storytelling materials, artworks, and resources. The following examples showcase how CALD members integrate visuals and arts into their sense-making of disaster-related experiences. For more details, please visit the 'Creative Gallery' on the [project website](#).







“I think listening to people is very important healing for them; because these things, some people don’t want to hear them; because not so very happy stories. But if someone can listen, then people might talk and hear what is happening; and also for someone, listeners, to think, ‘What we can do to prevent that happen?’.” (Participant, Japanese)

Thematic findings

Cross-cutting themes emerged across research phases and methods, highlighting key insights into: (1) Gaps in CALD-related disaster risk communication; (2) CALD communities' priority needs; (3) Opportunities to strengthen CALD leadership in collaborative resilience-building; and (4) Policy implications - Advancing systemic inclusion. While cultural differences and distinct experiences exist among the seven groups, the thematic findings reflect shared narratives and perspectives within CALD communities. These insights serve as a valuable foundation for shaping best practices and informing policies, ensuring CALD communities are better prepared, supported, and empowered to navigate future disaster challenges.

Theme 1: Gaps in CALD-related disaster risk communication

Key takeaways:

- **Communication resources should be tailored to CALD communities and their segments (e.g., new arrivals, isolated members), not just service organisations supporting them.**
- **Practical messaging (e.g., warnings, evacuation) should embed localised information with clear, actionable steps.**
- **Integrating cultural awareness into key messages enhances engagement and compliance with safety guidance.**

Lack of tailored communication resources

Despite increased attention to CALD communities and efforts to translate general information into multiple languages, our resource mapping across major government websites, international organisations that support communities through disasters, and relevant national services reveals a significant shortfall: there are few communication and educational resources specifically tailored to CALD community needs. Most existing materials are designed for local emergency management agencies and service organisations (e.g., councils, SES), rather than directly addressing CALD communities (see Figure 2).

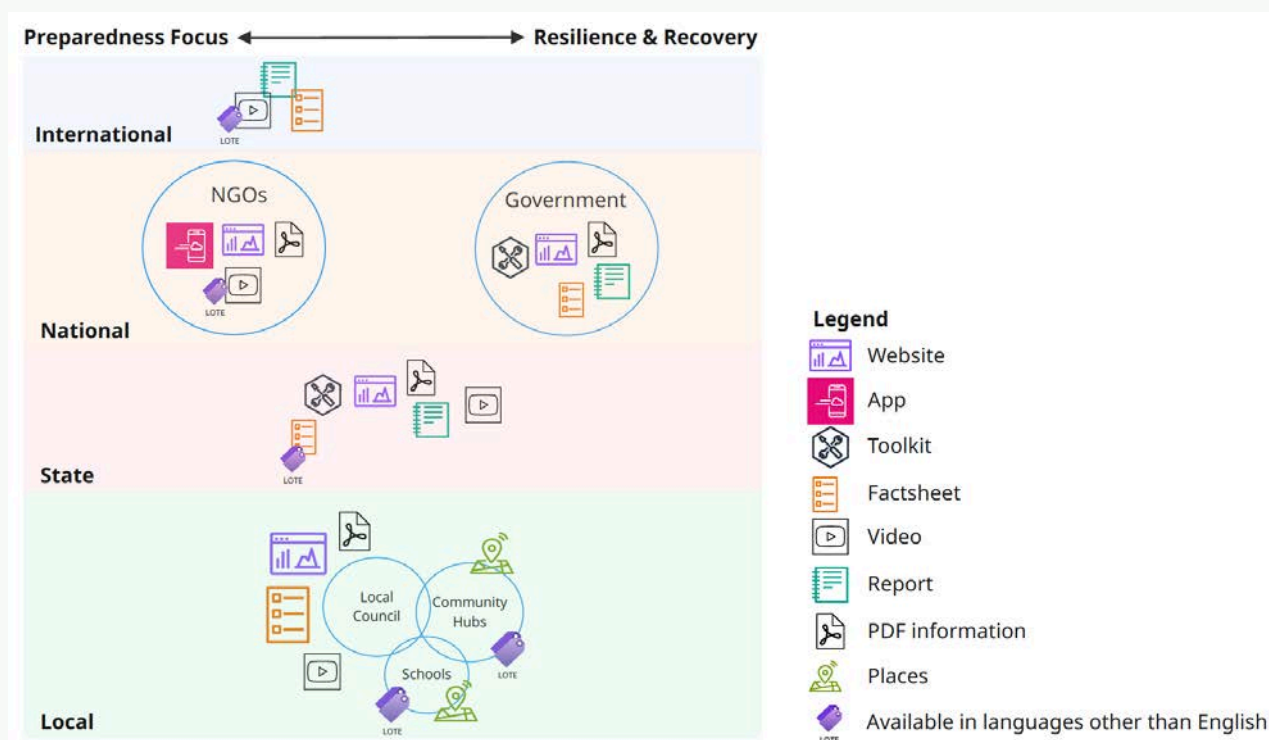


Figure 2. Freely available disaster information resources

In addition to the ‘broad-brush’ approach of translating general information, another evident shortcoming remains—very few resource packages are designed to meet the diverse needs of CALD subgroups, such as newly arrived refugees, ethnic migrants with limited English or digital literacy, CALD individuals with disabilities, low-income families, and temporary visa holders. This gap was widely reported by interview participants. For example:

“As I said before, for new communities, new arrivals, they don’t have any means of transport to evacuate. So if we think about everyone within CALD communities, the government management can provide the ways so they can evacuate, especially those who cannot drive, those who are still new, those who have a problem. Or the management can provide support resources to the community leaders and services, to organise vulnerable members to evacuate and move them to safe areas.”

(Participant, Bhutanese)

Insufficient actionable guidance

Another critical issue identified in the data is the lack of localised information and actionable guidance in practical messaging (e.g., warnings, evacuation). Many CALD members have never encountered disaster warnings in their home or previous countries, making it difficult for them to understand the contexts and urgency of SMS alerts. Participants shared that receiving broad, general messages often led to confusion, as they were unsure whether the information applied to them. While they acknowledged the value of general awareness, they emphasised the need for messaging to include specific, location-based details about areas facing immediate or heightened danger. For example:

“Our phones keep beeping noise, and it says, ‘evacuate now’. I am on Mount Sheridan, and I was thinking, ‘Are you sure? Do I need to evacuate?’ And that area that we had to evacuate wasn’t said clearly in the text message. So, I have to contact my husband; I have to contact my father-in-law.” (Participant, Japanese)

Another participant emphasised that the warning messages should clearly include a call to action:

“If message could have mentioned, ‘If you do not evacuate now, then SES cannot help you’, or something like that. That is pretty much threatening but that’s a real situation...

The SES people cannot risk their own lives to save others. So, I told community members, ‘When you receive the message, you have to really consider whether you are okay or not and take appropriate action’.” (Participant, Japanese)

Further, it is crucial to provide clear, step-by-step guidance in actionable messaging so that CALD members know exactly what to do. For example, many participants shared that while they expected wind and storm surges, they were unprepared for the days of flooding that followed Cyclone Jasper in late 2023. Although evacuation messages were received, none of the participants used an evacuation centre because they were unclear about the routes or lacked transportation. Instead, they either stayed with friends and family or, in most cases, hosted friends and family in their homes. Observing the confusion, CALD community leaders used their own vehicles to help new arrivals without cars evacuate to other community members’ homes. As one participant shared,

“If they had told us that after the cyclone, heavy rain would come and that the Barron River is connected to different areas, even if we don’t have rain here, it could still affect this area because of its proximity to the sea—that information could have helped me prepare for the floods. Maybe they said it, but I didn’t get it. If they had emphasised that the river connects to the top of the mountain, I could have understood what might happen and taken it more seriously.” (Participant, Japanese)

Limited cultural relevance in messaging

A third gap identified in existing CALD-related disaster risk communication is the limited cultural relevance in official messaging. This could be significantly improved by integrating diverse cultural appeals (e.g., traditional sayings, visual symbols) into scientific information. Doing so would resonate more with CALD communities, fostering positive behaviours in the face of emergencies. Disaster risk communication must go beyond simple linguistic translation, as underlying different languages are ideologies, worldviews, and cultural norms (Uekusa, 2019).

For example, some CALD participants were confused by an emergency message like ‘If it’s flooded, forget it’. They were unclear about what exactly should be ‘forgotten’ during floods. The phrase, in its original context, was intended to mean not attempting to drive through floodwaters as it is dangerous. To remove such ambiguity, CALD participants expressed a desire for the key message (actionable instructions) to be embedded within a culturally relevant narrative. As one community leader explained:

“When we explain things, we need to tell a story, give context—like sharing how someone lost their life trying to drive through floodwaters—so people understand what they should do during emergencies.” (Participant, Bhutanese)

Also, culturally sensitive emergency communication involves avoiding cultural taboos in messaging which may demotivate action. For instance, just as the number 13 is considered unlucky in Western cultures, the number 4, pronounced *si* (death) in Chinese, is similarly viewed as ominous.

“We are told to call the local emergency number for urgent help, but Chinese people may try to avoid it, because the contact number contains too many 4s.” (Participant, Chinese)



Theme 2: CALD communities' priority needs

Key takeaways

- CALD communities value ongoing, cyclical disaster risk communication and education, with the pre-disaster stage being the most crucial.
- There is a strong need to balance a central, trusted source of information with a multi-channel, multi-format approach to effectively reach diverse audiences.
- Many CALD members need clear, accessible guidance on where and how to seek help during emergencies.

Continuous, cyclical disaster risk communication and education

CALD participants highlighted the need for disaster risk communication to be an ongoing cycle, not just a reactive measure. Even when no immediate threats exist, they emphasised the importance of continuous education on disaster preparedness and impact. Like any learning process, repetition and practice are essential for building and applying disaster knowledge.

“If there can be more training in English, Swahili, and other languages—even for those who have been here for a while—it would be really helpful. If every year they could get reminders and refresher training, it would reinforce their knowledge and ensure they don't forget what they've learned.” (Participant, Congolese)

They also agreed that crucial information about natural hazards should be communicated well in advance, not just before a weather event but throughout the year and upon arrival in a new location. CALD communities need accessible, practical guidance, such as checklists for emergency kits, shelter locations, maps, and key support service contacts.

“I feel that emergency management authorities need a longer-term approach, not just focusing on the few days before a cyclone, the day it hits, and the short period afterward.” (Participant, Filipino)

Post-disaster recovery was also recognised as a critical need. Participants stressed the importance of culturally appropriate mental health and wellbeing support for those who have experienced a disaster. In particular, financial assistance and recovery resources need to be tailored to vulnerable groups within CALD communities, including pregnant women, families with young children, elderly individuals, people with disabilities, single parents, and low-income households.

“Even after a disaster, accessing counselling is difficult because of language barriers. Counsellors mostly speak English, and using phone translation services is not always easy or effective.” (Participant, Japanese)

Balancing a central, trusted source of information with multi-channel, multi-modal communication

CALD participants expressed a strong preference for both an authoritative source of information, such as a central hub or one-stop resource centre, and disaster-related information disseminated across multiple platforms and in various formats such as audio, visual, and digital (see Case Studies 1-3). Both interview data and survey results indicate that participants, regardless of age or even within the same cultural group (e.g., Chinese vs. Taiwanese), use a range of platforms to access disaster-related information. Indeed, 94% of survey respondents use more than one social media platform, with WhatsApp and Facebook being the most popular (see Figure 3, also Appendix).

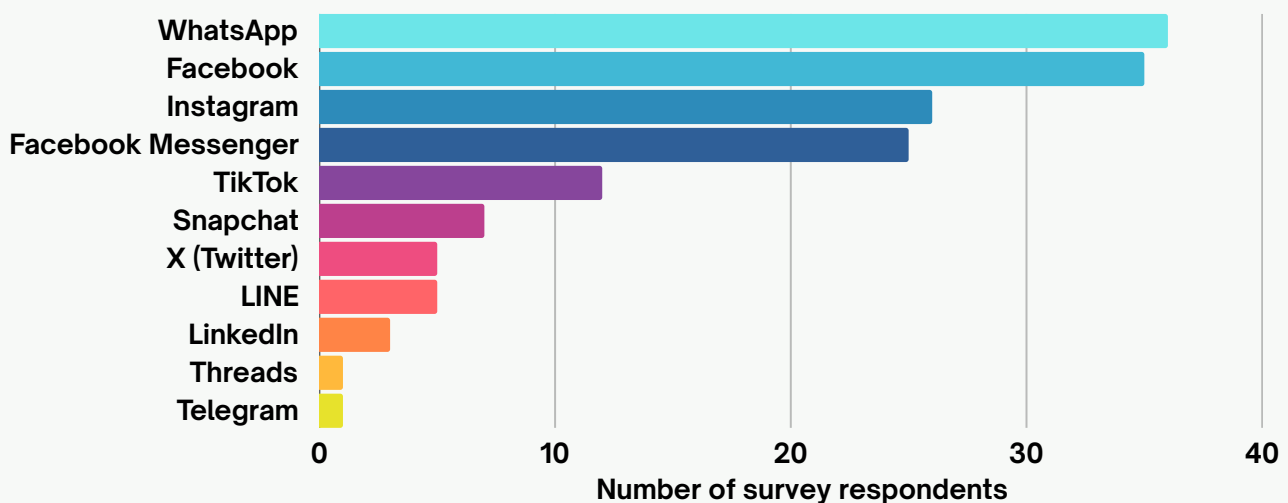


Figure 3. Social media platforms regularly used by respondents

“We also check Facebook. I follow the Cairns Regional Council page. They have a great website and always provide updates on current issues and new threats. It really works for us. Some platforms have maps, while others don’t, so I prefer using the Cairns Regional Council website over general sites.” (Participant, Colombian)

In addition to digital or social platforms, participants emphasised the need for non-digital communication methods, including in-person sessions, radio broadcasts, mailed letters, community events, and physical interventions or visual nudges such as road signs or fridge magnets with disaster preparedness steps. In-person sessions were seen as essential for allowing CALD community members to ask questions and clarify information.

“The best way: maybe we can meet in person; we can have conversations together and talk about disasters like cyclones.” (Participant, Congolese)



A fridge magnet example, sourced from coastadapt.com.au/about-coastadapt

“For instance, use group storytelling to share the experiences of residents in a particular area and how their situations were handled. They could share experience on how to call for insurance or what to do next. You know, they could say you can contact Centrelink, but right now they might be busy, or there could be other ways or channels to get assistance.” (Participant, Chinese)

Radio is an effective tool for preserving phone battery life, receiving updates during power outages, and delivering information in community languages (e.g., via community radio). Particularly in the recovery phase, one participant highlighted the value of letters to support the community.

“Even receiving physical letters can make a difference. I’ve found that official letters from the council or government are impactful. We feel more personal. After an event of this scale, something like that is really meaningful. It reassures the community that ‘our council, our government is supporting us’.” (Participant, Japanese)

Clear, specific guidance on where and how to seek help

Many CALD participants come from countries where government support and financial assistance are limited or non-existent. As a result, they may be unaware that they can ask whether they are entitled to financial assistance during crises in Australia. To bridge this gap, emergency management sectors could employ a range of outreach tools and strategies—leveraging social networks within and across CALD communities—to not only raise awareness of available support services but also provide clear, step-by-step guidance on where and how to seek help.

“Of course, all of us need help in some way. The most important thing is to teach people how to ask for help in specific, appropriate ways. Because I might not know exactly what you can help me with, and you might offer one thing but actually I need support with something else.” (Participant, Chinese)

Due to a lack of clear guidance on accessing essential support services, some CALD communities, such as Japanese residents, may prefer seeking assistance from their home country’s government, such as local consulates.

“For the Japanese community, we often contact the consulate. They provide helpful information, and sometimes Japanese people just want information in Japanese—simple, clear answers. Having access to Japanese-language websites or hotlines would be really beneficial.” (Participant, Japanese)

The need for guidance on seeking help becomes even more critical when considering CALD communities that may feel fear or distrust toward emergency management authorities or government agencies. Cultural perceptions of hierarchy or past experiences with authority figures can discourage people from seeking help, even when they need it. For example,

“Yes, I think even a session on how to ask for help would be useful. We had a session with the police that taught us, ‘Don’t be afraid of the police.’ You know, some people have trauma from back home—if you look at the police the wrong way, it could be dangerous. Here, if you’re driving and the police ask you to pull over, don’t be worried. Centrelink should also teach people how to use it and how to access services.”
(Participant, Congolese)



Theme 3: Opportunities to strengthen CALD leadership in collaborative resilience-building

Key takeaways:

- Expanding the presence of CALD and bi-/multi-lingual professionals in the emergency management sector can help build a more inclusive workforce.
- CALD community leaders can be empowered as trusted intermediaries, strengthening social networks, mobilising action, and connecting diverse communities to resilience efforts.
- Integrating cultural knowledge and influencers into emergency messaging can enhance inclusivity in disaster risk communication.

While CALD communities are often portrayed as vulnerable ‘victims’ in need of rescue (Bowles, 2017), their strengths, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences are valuable assets that can contribute significantly to collaborative resilience-building. Many individuals within CALD communities have lived in refugee camps, experienced conflicts and wars, or navigated life in multiple countries before settling in a culturally and linguistically diverse environment like Australia. Although adapting to a new climate and socio-cultural context presents challenges, their cultural heritage and resilience in overcoming hardship are critical strengths for effective emergency management. Their diverse perspectives can offer innovative solutions for building a disaster-resilient future. As one survey participant noted:

“A lot of us are highly educated with multiple degrees, so please don't underestimate us.”
(Survey participant)



Fostering an inclusive emergency workforce

CALD participants emphasised the need for bi- and multi-lingual speakers to be employed in ongoing roles within emergency management organisations such as QFD, SES, and local councils. These professionals, who bring linguistic and cultural diversity, should be integrated into various operational areas, not just multicultural services. By doing so, they can gain broad emergency management experience and be deployed in specialist roles, such as mental health and cultural support, during emergencies.

“They [emergency management] might nominate some key professionals, including Japanese speakers, to be contacted. I am a social worker, too. Some people have expertise that can be useful for the community during emergencies. But these skills and resources are not always utilised, which feels like a waste.” (Participant, Japanese)

In addition to employing more diverse professionals, CALD participants highlighted the importance of strong cross-sectoral and cross-organisational collaboration. They used Cairns as an example, where close partnerships between service providers have proven effective in supporting CALD communities during emergencies. Specifically, participants praised the direct and personal communication they received from social support agencies, especially Centacare FNQ staff, who consistently shared updates via messages and phone calls. CALD leaders recognised that strengthening such collaboration would help establish trusted, authoritative sources of disaster information for their communities. Moreover, they emphasised the importance of fostering unity across public sectors to build collective resilience:

“Council could invite all services to report what help they can provide, then consolidate it into a map that can be shared. If this information is distributed widely, especially to frontline workers, hospitals, and cultural leaders, it would be more effective. That way, no single place (when services are needed) becomes overcrowded.” (Participant, Japanese)

Empowering (and remunerating) CALD leaders as trusted intermediaries

The study results highlighted the critical role CALD community leaders—whether holding formal positions (e.g., paid employees in social support or multicultural organisations) or informal roles (e.g., spiritual or natural leaders)—play in supporting their communities during disasters. As trusted intermediaries, these leaders are key to relaying essential information in multiple languages and connecting their communities with external organisations. In addition to providing direct support, they serve as vital links between information providers and those in need. For instance, during Cyclone Jasper in late 2023, CALD leaders were seen as ‘boots on the ground’, reaching out to community members, driving to evacuation areas, and checking in with families:

“Just community members asking, ‘What’s happened? Any problem?’ After that, we call the families: ‘Are you okay?’” (Community leader, Bhutanese)

Beyond the role of community leaders, the findings suggest that young people within CALD communities also play an important role in intergenerational education and communication. Fluent in English and often active on digital devices or social platforms, young people are well-positioned to seek and share information. Some participants noted that children and young people can serve as key informants and intermediaries in disaster risk communication:

“Yeah, the youth, we have a lot of youth who finish high school, and their ambition is higher. So if you tell them, ‘Do this, do this’, it’s easier to communicate with young people. For example, if you’re talking about a topic in my language, it’s very easy for me. But for older people, kids and young adults can work with them, too. ‘Okay, if you want to make a video in your language, I’ll show you how to do this, do that.’ So the youth can bridge the gaps too.” (Participant, Congolese)

However, the contributions of CALD leaders to emergency management and resilience efforts have not been formally recognised, incentivised, or rewarded. Without proper recognition, these leaders may experience burnout from the high demands of community members. Moreover, the emergency management sector may be missing an important opportunity to collaborate with these leaders and leverage their expertise to achieve better resilience outcomes. As one participant pointed out:

“So I think if the management team could collaborate very closely with leaders from the communities, as liaison people from the community, that is much more beneficial.”
(Participant, Filipino)

Another participant stressed the importance of collaboration between government and multicultural associations to foster better communication:

“Yes, I feel the government could collaborate with multicultural associations to provide educational programs. For example, if an event is coming up, they could tell the communities, ‘We’re planning an event. Here’s what’s happening.’ Then, ask the

leaders to share that message within their communities so that everyone is informed. If the president of the community tells us this is happening, then we all know what’s going on. Everyone will understand what’s happening where they live.” (Participant, Indonesian)



Integrating cultural knowledge and influencers into emergency communications

CALD communities in Australia still maintain strong connections to their cultural heritage, which significantly shapes their perceptions of disaster risks, response behaviours, and recovery efforts. These connections manifest through faith-based practices, cultural festivals, and the use of culturally significant objects and rituals. Understanding cultural knowledge and practices is crucial for developing inclusive emergency communication strategies that resonate with diverse communities.

Facing disaster events, CALD communities demonstrate different risk perceptions, often shaped by their religious or philosophical beliefs. For example, individuals with strong religious faith may interpret natural hazards as divine punishment, thus making prayer and worship integral to their preparedness efforts. Japanese communities often adopt an acceptance-based approach, viewing disasters as natural occurrences beyond human control. This philosophy aligns with Chinese Taoist thinking, as expressed by a Chinese participant, “Humans follow the Earth, the Earth follows the Heavens, the Heavens follow the Dao (rules), and the Dao follows Nature.” This worldview emphasises harmony with natural forces rather than resistance. However, cultural wisdom also promotes preparedness, as reflected in the Chinese proverb “unexpected storms can arise in the sunny sky”, akin to the Get Ready Queensland campaign’s message ‘Weather cannot plan’. This belief translates into proactive disaster preparedness, such as ‘repairing the roof before it rains’. By recognising these cultural insights, emergency agencies can tailor their messaging to encourage preparedness in ways that embrace diverse perspectives.

Further, many CALD participants emphasised the need for communication formats that transcend language barriers and better engage their communities. For example, Japanese communities favour animation, comics, and gaming apps to explain disaster science, while African (Congolese) communities find that embedding preparedness messages into dance resonates more deeply. Football (soccer) presents another opportunity with Latin American communities, including Colombians, responding well to emergency education initiatives linked to the sport.

Others, such as Chinese and Indonesian participants, suggested incorporating cultural and historical figures into emergency narratives to strengthen community engagement. For example, a Chinese participant pointed to the well-known story of Emperor Yu (*Dayu*) as an example of how traditional narratives could be repurposed for modern emergency education:

“Almost every Chinese person knows the story of Dayu taming the floods (*Dayu Zhishui*). Many parents still use it to teach children about disaster management. Australian emergency management agencies could integrate these familiar stories into their educational programmes to show more cultural inclusion.” (Participant, Chinese)

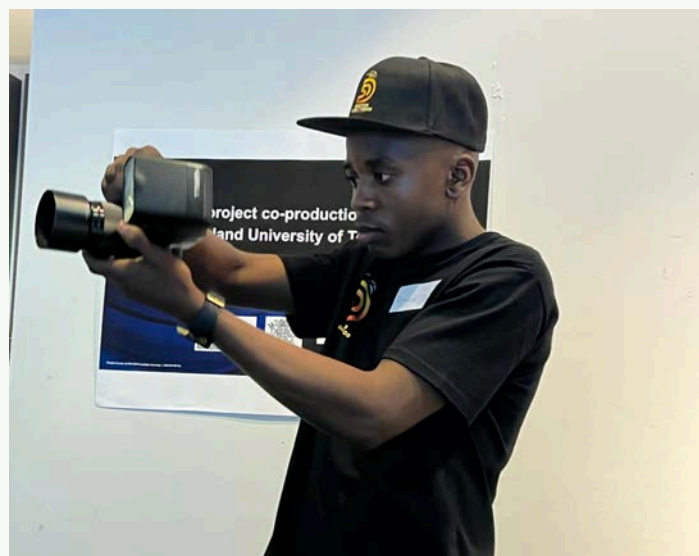
Similarly, an Indonesian participant described how their community linked emergency education to Kartini Day, a celebration honouring a national heroine who championed women's rights:

“Each year on April 21, our community organises an emergency education event to honour Kartini's legacy. We also raise donations for disaster victims, such as those affected by the Cianjur earthquake. These culturally significant events provide meaningful opportunities to integrate emergency preparedness messaging.” (Participant, Indonesian)

Beyond diverse narratives, culturally relevant influencers play a crucial role in mobilising CALD communities during emergencies. The success of Johnathan Thurston as an ambassador for Indigenous communities in the Get Ready Queensland campaign demonstrated the power of trusted role models in fostering engagement and action. A similar approach could be extended to CALD communities by enlisting ethnic celebrities, such as popular singers and actors/actresses, to amplify emergency messaging. As one Chinese participant reflected on the role of celebrities in disaster relief efforts:

“In China, when disasters like earthquakes occur, celebrities often organise fundraising concerts, and their fans respond immediately. Australian emergency agencies could adopt a similar approach by selecting ethnic-based ambassadors to strengthen community engagement.” (Participant, Chinese)

By integrating cultural knowledge and leveraging trusted figures, emergency communication efforts can become more inclusive, fostering greater preparedness, response, and recovery within CALD communities. Acknowledging cultural values, traditions, and communication preferences not only enhances the effectiveness of disaster messaging but also builds deeper trust and collaboration between emergency agencies and the communities they serve.



Theme 4: Policy implications – Advancing systemic inclusion

The preceding thematic findings underscore the need for policy frameworks that guide coordinated action across diverse geographical contexts to achieve effective DRR and resilience outcomes. To foster a more inclusive and adaptive approach, policies should promote both stable, strong institutions and encourage innovation. This is particularly relevant in the context of emergency services, where policies should evolve to better integrate diverse communities.

Our project conducted a stakeholder workshop and interviews with key respondents from local agencies to assess how policy frameworks could mitigate the disaster risks faced by CALD communities. The findings suggest that enhanced policy frameworks, coupled with effective operational systems, can significantly improve outcomes for CALD communities. Recommendations for policy frameworks include:

1. Elevate the importance of culturally embedded local knowledge and action in policies and strategies by

- Resourcing that enables and empowers communities to produce the resources they need, realigning resources from national to local levels
- Formalising structures to employ CALD community leaders to run culturally appropriate preparedness or recovery activities
- Incentivising communication packages which are co-designed by and with CALD communities

2. Make more explicit the role of local social capital building in policies and strategies to support CALD communities by

- Embedding CALD activators in state-level policy with funding to Local Government Areas (LGAs)
- Incentivising emergency services to recruit people from migrant and refugee backgrounds into the frontline roles
- Focusing on place-based responses and established networks that integrate CALD communities in emergency planning and response efforts

3. Support CALD communities as the fulcrum of long-term disaster resilience by

- Supporting stable long-term CALD communities to win the long game of disaster preparedness
- Leveraging multicultural communication strategies using platforms and subchannels preferred by communities, such as WeChat (for Chinese communities) and LINE (for Taiwanese communities)
- Advocating for region-specific language plans to ensure that language barriers do not hinder access to critical information during disasters

4. Promote innovative approaches to disaster resilience across cultural boundaries by

- Incentivising programs and training for young CALD community members across Queensland to raise risk awareness and build communication and preparedness capabilities
- Identifying synergies between emergency management and multicultural policies to enhance collaboration and resource integration
- Researching and developing AI-powered resources for capacity building and disaster communication, particularly for CALD youth, to foster their engagement in preparedness activities.

Implementing these recommendations will position policy as a critical driver of systemic inclusion, transforming CALD communities from passive recipients of aid into active, empowered participants in disaster risk reduction and resilience-building. This proactive approach will foster a more inclusive and adaptive emergency management system, ensuring that Australia is better equipped to address the needs of *all* communities, particularly in times of crisis.



Participant feedback

The following testimonies are from participants in this project:

- **“I felt honoured and respected to share my experiences and cultural knowledge.”**
- **“It's very useful to me and my community as well as to all who are living through disaster season.”**
- **“It was good to share information with other cultures about disasters and experiences as foreign people. I enjoy the workshop and I think that it will be very useful for us. Thank you.”**
- **“I appreciate I was able to know each different community’s perspectives for disaster.”**
- **“Easy to speak and share your ideas with the group.”**
- **“Talking through community perspective was great. Cheers.”**
- **“Good to see different perspectives of disaster management.”**
- **“It was not only discussing. We wrote, drew pictures, shared stories during this workshop such as very enjoyable. And of course I learnt a lot. Thanx :)”**
- **“I've also learned a lot from participating in this project.”**
- **“Very fascinating experience. Will be valuable to the CALD communities.”**
- **“I enjoyed listening to people share their stories. I’ve learned a lot from their experiences.”**





**“It’s very important to learn from people’s experiences and use that knowledge to build strength for the future.”
(Participant feedback)**

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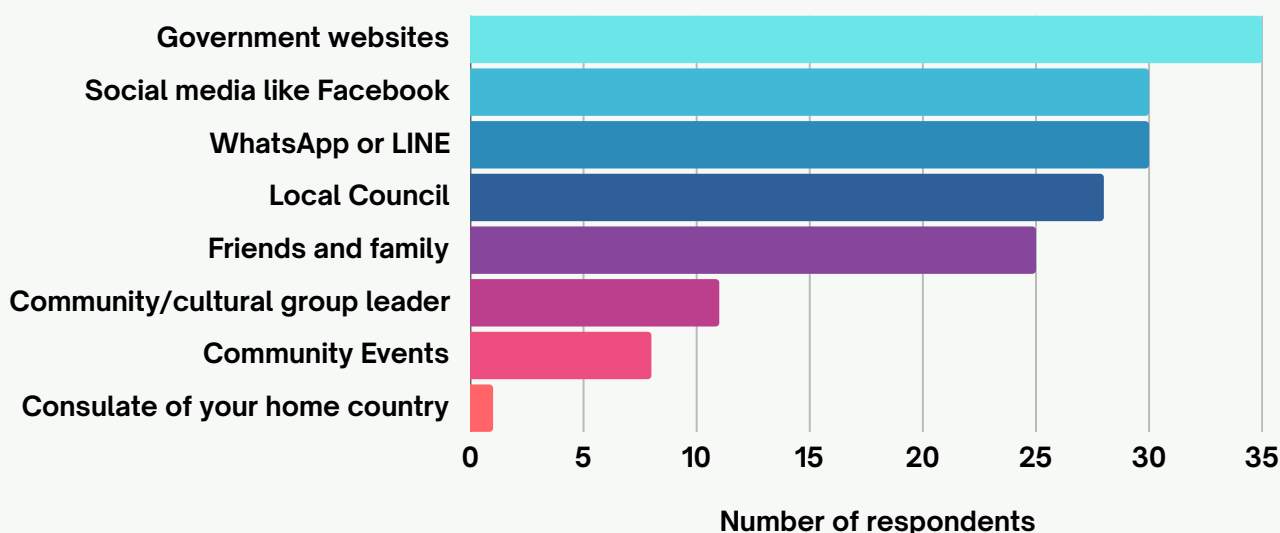
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Appendix: Survey snapshot

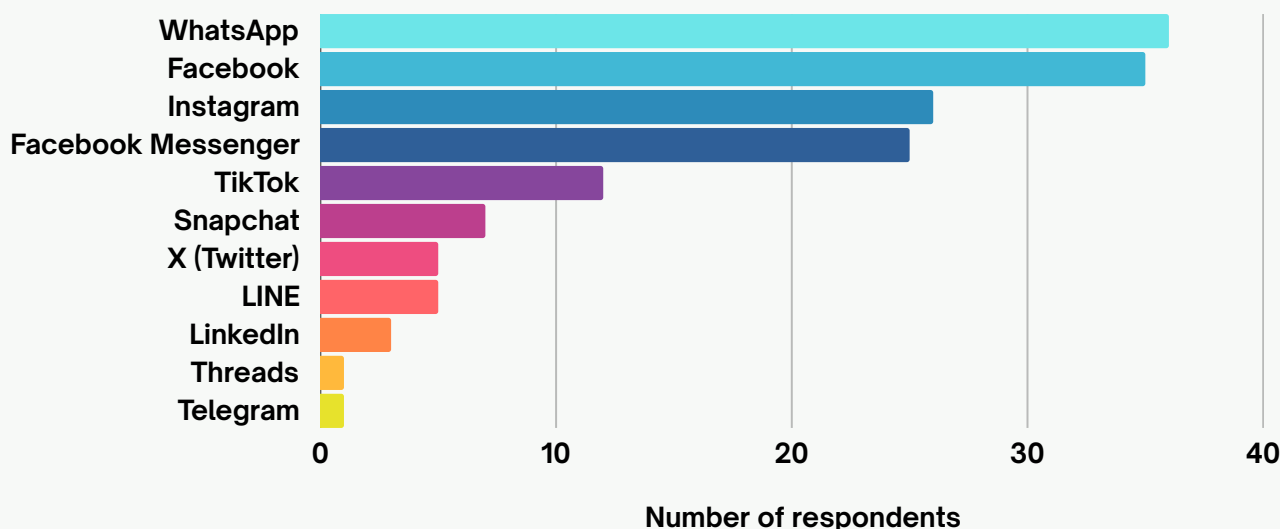
A short survey based on the findings from the interviews and workshops was designed to inform the toolkit development. It was advertised online to CALD communities around Queensland with assistance from Centacare FNQ Multicultural Services, Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland, and QUT Digital Media Research Centre. Most of the respondents live in Cairns or the South-East Queensland regions. 90 people from a variety of cultural backgrounds responded to the online survey, and shared the ways that they access and use information to prepare for, and recover from disasters, and how communication can be improved to meet their needs.

Information Sources

Respondents get information from a variety of sources but rely on government information and social media (which is reflected in our other data).

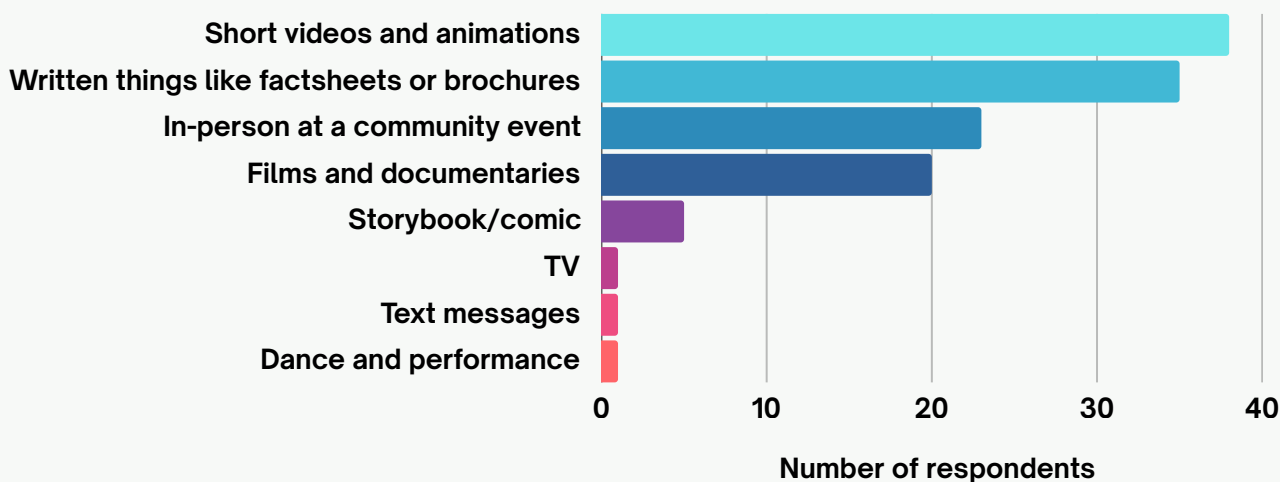


Indeed, 94% of respondents use more than one social media platform, with WhatsApp and Facebook being the most popular.



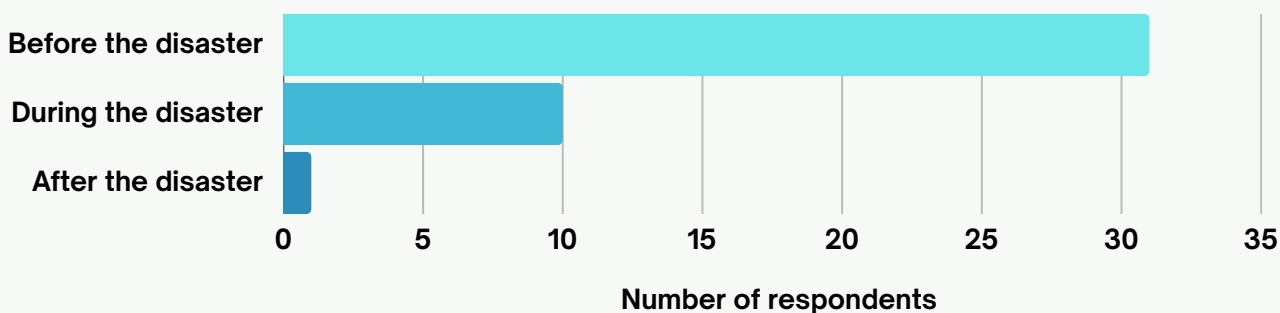
Communication & Storytelling Preferences

There is a clear preference for visual, video communication among respondents, followed by factsheets and in-person events, with people wanting to know about practical information like weather conditions, risks, and hazards.



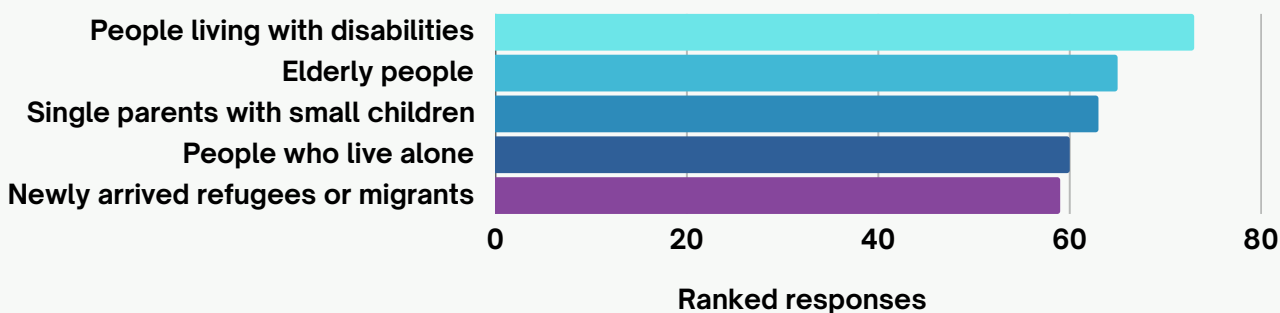
Information Timing

There is also an overwhelming clear preference for information BEFORE a disaster. The following are response to the question: *I think information is most important*



Who needs the most support?

Respondents think people with disabilities need the MOST help followed by elderly people, single parents with small children, newly arrived migrants and people who live alone.



What is important about disaster communication with CALD communities?

Respondents had a variety of thoughts about how to improve, and what to consider when creating communication resources:

- Simplicity—avoid overwhelming people
- Use a variety of formats to educate and get feedback from the community
- Use social media
- Don't underestimate the resilience of CALD communities

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