

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION: A CASE STUDY FROM NORTH EAST VICTORIA

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Abstract

Australian communities are uniquely vulnerable to climate change. Our dry continent already experiences high natural climate variability and much of our population lives in coastal regions, potentially threatened by rising sea levels. Effective responses to climate change require at least community support and, ideally, genuine community participation.

This paper reports on a case study of engaging communities in climate change response and draws out general lessons that are relevant for local governments in coastal areas. The North East Greenhouse Alliance, a coalition of six local governments in North East Victoria, engaged the Institute for Sustainable Futures to develop a Community Engagement Plan on climate change adaptation. As part of the development of the Plan, we carried out three pilot activities with the community to test different approaches.

The first pilot used two 'Brains Trust' workshops to engage seniors in the community in identifying ways to respond to climate change. While older people are often seen as vulnerable to climate change, the philosophy behind these workshops was that older people are the 'wise elders' of the community and their knowledge should be respected.

The second pilot worked with existing grassroots community groups to build their capacity for community leadership on climate change adaptation. Workshops in two different communities allowed for exchange of knowledge and ideas between existing groups.

The third pilot developed a set of fun activities that can be used to engage communities through mobile outreach. These activities could be incorporated into a community engagement trailer, or set up at festivals, markets or schools.

The paper reports on these pilots and on the general community engagement principles developed during the project. It also presents a toolbox of ten activities that local governments could implement to engage their communities.

Introduction

Australian communities are uniquely vulnerable to climate change. Our dry continent already experiences high natural climate variability. Droughts, bushfires and flooding rains are part of the Australian experience, but all may increase as the climate changes (Climate Commission, 2011). Coastal communities face the additional threat of rising sea levels. As 85% of our population lives in coastal regions, this is a particular concern (DCC, 2009). Despite international action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, some climate change is

now inevitable (Climate Commission, 2011) and coastal communities need to plan ahead to adapt to these changes.

Responses to climate change can be controversial. A large proportion of the community does not believe that climate change is happening (Leviston, Leitch, Greenhill, et al., 2011), making them likely to resist efforts to adapt to climate change. Others may believe in climate change but question the need to respond urgently, or resist specific forms of adaptation. For example, changes in local planning instruments to respond to rising sea levels may threaten property values and prompt community resistance. The existing controversy and conflict in relation to climate change makes community engagement in climate change adaptation planning and decision-making of critical importance. Genuine community participation in climate change adaptation processes has the potential to reduce conflict and generate community ownership of adaptation actions. However, realising this potential in practice is challenging.

This paper reports on a case study of engaging communities in climate change response and draws out general lessons that are relevant for local governments in coastal areas. The North East Greenhouse Alliance (NEGHA), a coalition of six local governments in North East Victoria (Alpine Shire, Benalla Rural City, Indigo Shire, Towong Shire, Rural City of Wangaratta and Wodonga City), engaged the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) at the University of Technology, Sydney to develop a program to engage communities in North East Victoria in climate change adaptation. NEGHA received funding under the Australian Government's Strengthening Basin Communities program to develop a Regional Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. They were looking for community input to the Strategy, as well as advice on suitable engagement techniques to use with local communities during implementation of the Strategy. The study

The ISF project team undertook the following activities:

- A review of the local community context, including any previous studies
- A review of best practice in community engagement on climate change adaptation
- Identification of communities within the region that were particularly vulnerable to climate change
- Design, implementation and evaluation of three pilot community engagement initiatives with communities in North East Victoria
- Preparation of a Regional Community Engagement Program containing a toolbox of community engagement approaches that Councils and others can adopt.

This paper summarises ten best-practice principles for community engagement drawn from the literature and our experience, discusses the outcomes of the three pilot community engagement activities and concludes with a toolbox of ten community engagement activities for climate change adaptation.

Best-practice principles for community engagement

As noted above, one of the research tasks was a review of the literature on best practice in community engagement for climate change adaptation. We synthesised this literature review into a set of ten general principles for community engagement on climate change adaptation. The ten principles are outlined below along with a brief rationale for their inclusion.

Raising awareness

Embed activities to raise awareness of climate change in all community engagement activities.

Gardner et al. (2009) note that misinformation, uncertainty and skepticism are key barriers to successful climate change adaptation. They argue that greater awareness of climate change, and more accurate knowledge about its impacts, is an essential step on the pathway to climate change adaptation. While the primary goal of community engagement programs is often to motivate practical action, programs should also incorporate activities to raise awareness about climate change. To avoid getting caught up in polarising debates about climate science, it is important to keep a focus on positive actions (see below), including actions that will have benefits regardless of how the climate changes.

A focus on positive action

Adopt a positive, inspiring and fun approach to reduce fearful reactions to climate change, as these work against taking action.

Climate change is a topic that often carries a message of doom and gloom. This can be counter-productive. Scary, depressing messages that highlight personal vulnerability tend to bring about negative emotions in an audience and this can lead to fear, despair, feelings of helplessness and apathy (Futerra, 2009; CRED, 2009). This is particularly true when people are uncertain about what they can do to respond.

In response, community engagement programs need to be positive, inspiring and fun. They may use innovative approaches such as visioning to draw out positive visions of the future. They may use enjoyable creative practices such as drawing, photography, storytelling and community art projects to engage participants in a different way.

One of the best ways to overcome negative emotional responses to climate change is to ground programs in positive actions that participants can take to make a difference. The specific actions will depend on the communities involved but they should be tangible, practical and fun.

A positive focus also means avoiding the language of vulnerability and highlighting instead the potential to build the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities, as discussed below.

Building resilience and adaptive capacity

Build the resilience and capacity of the community to adapt to long-term climate trends and unpredictable climate shocks, such as fires, floods and heatwaves.

Ultimately, community engagement programs need to build the resilience and capacity of the community to adapt to long-term climate trends and unpredictable climate shocks,

such as fires, floods and heatwaves. These trends and shocks can have an impact on individual and community assets and on livelihoods.

Framing climate change adaptation as being about building resilience rather than reducing vulnerability is consistent with the positive focus discussed above. It also provides space for discussion of actions that can increase the general resilience and strength of communities that may not seem specifically linked to climate change. This can be important for engaging members of the community that have doubts about the reality and seriousness of climate change.

Practical

Ensure that what we ask of participants is practical in the context of the everyday practices in which they engage.

A common failing of community engagement and behaviour change programs is to ask participants to take on behaviours that are not practical due to other constraints they face. Social practice theory provides a theoretical perspective and analytical tools that can help practitioners to avoid this failing. Social practice theory takes the attention off individuals as agents and focuses on how both individuals and structures participate in everyday practices (Hargreaves, 2011). Instead of being the central unit of analysis, individuals become 'carriers or hosts of a practice' (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012: 7). According to Reckwitz (2002: 249):

A 'practice'...is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

A social practice framework, therefore, makes everyday practices the central unit of analysis. It draws attention to the mutability of practices and highlights the importance of inconspicuous, everyday practice (Shove, 2004). When using social practice theory as an analytical tool, the concept of 'elements' of a social practice is valuable. Shove et al (2012: 14) identify three types of elements of a practice:

- Materials – 'including things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made'
- Competences – 'which encompasses skill, know-how and technique'
- Meanings – 'in which we include symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations'.

For a practice to take place, all of these elements need to be present. Individuals need to have access to materials, competences and meanings to support their engagement in a practice. Community engagement programs are more likely to succeed if they consciously seek to make materials, competences and meanings available to support new practices.

Community-led

Help communities to understand the issues affecting them and support communities to design and lead their own solutions.

The most successful community change initiatives are often community-led. People don't like having change forced upon them against their will. They want to decide what changes they need to make and how to go about them. The role of community engagement programs is to facilitate this process, helping communities to understand the issues affecting them and to design and implement their own solutions. When solutions come from the community, they are much more likely to have a lasting impact.

In practice, this means that community engagement programs should provide facilitated processes that will help participants to build their awareness about climate change adaptation, understand possible responses and then design and implement their own responses. As noted by Gardner et al. (2009), the ultimate goal is for vulnerable communities to take sustained action themselves.

This principle extends to preparing communities to respond themselves in the wake of natural disasters, when it may take time for the official emergency response to become effective. Community leaders need to be ready to act in the crucial period before outside help arrives.

Flexible and adaptable

Ensure that a range of activities are available that can be adapted to different contexts.

All communities are different and there is no single community change program that will work everywhere, in all situations. Contexts and issues can change rapidly, meaning that community engagement programs also need to respond and adapt. This is one of the reasons why we developed a 'toolbox' of ten possible community engagement activities that could be applied in different situations. This allows Councils to pick and choose activities that are likely to suit their particular context and application.

Place-based

Be responsive to local context and draw out actions from the community that are appropriate and sensitive to the local landscape.

One of the things that makes communities different is their place. Place-based community engagement approaches recognise that local context is critical. Actions that make sense in one place may have less value in another. Engagement programs should be responsive to local context and should draw out actions from the community that are appropriate and sensitive to the local landscape.

Diverse engagement techniques

Use diverse engagement techniques to cater for differing learning styles and preferences.

People learn in different ways, which means that a single engagement technique will not motivate everyone to adapt to climate change. Some people are visual learners, others learn through movement and doing and others learn through talking and discussion. To reach as many people as possible, community engagement programs need to use diverse engagement techniques that suit different learning styles and motivations.

When designing a community engagement program, this means providing a suite of engagement techniques to suit different audiences, as well as using diverse facilitation techniques within any particular engagement.

Testing and evaluation

Ensure that all activities are piloted and evaluated.

Given the importance of local context in climate change adaptation (see above), it is not possible to be certain in advance that a particular engagement activity will work in a particular community. Testing and evaluation is a critical element in the design of community engagement programs. This is one of the reasons why we piloted three community engagement programs as part of our work in North East Victoria.

Lasting engagement

Aim for lasting engagement with communities rather than one-off activities.

Finally, community engagement programs should aim to last beyond the scope of the particular project that initiates them. Community engagement works best as an ongoing conversation with the community, rather than a one-off project.

The pilot community engagement activities

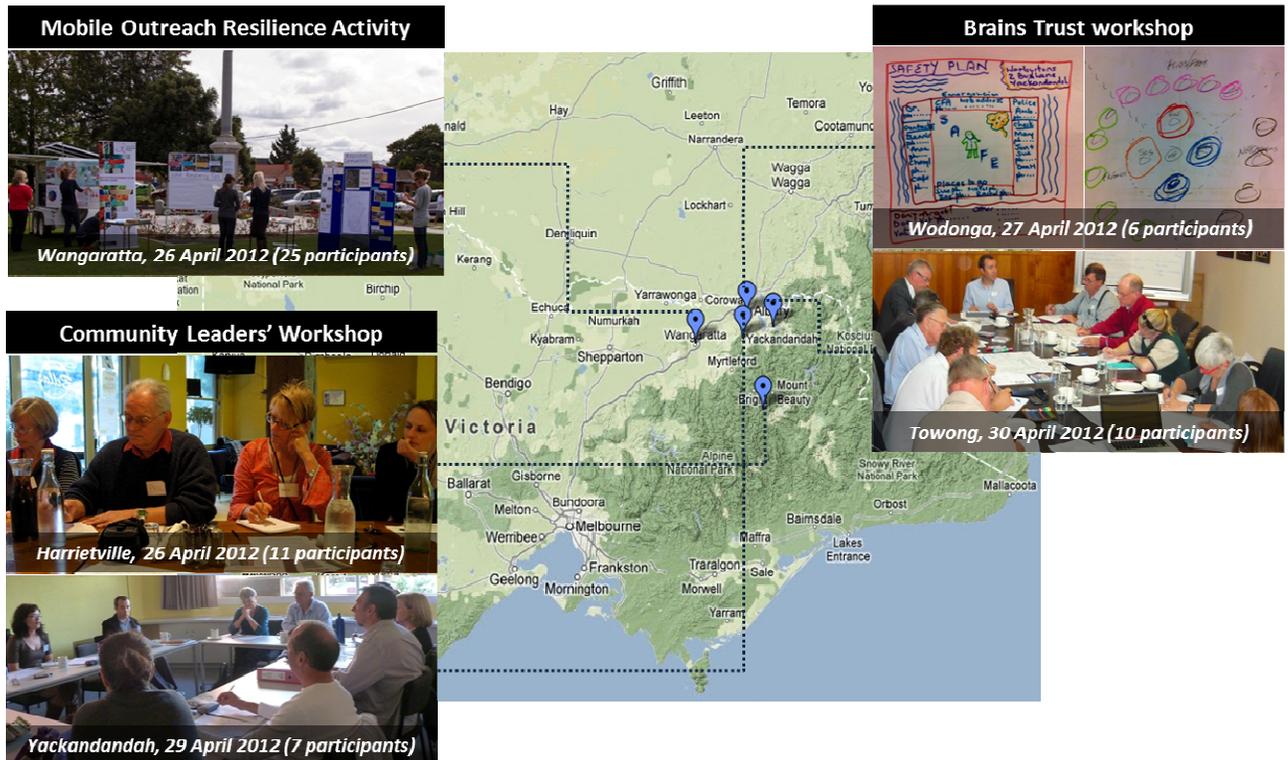
Guided by the above principles, we worked with NEGHA to develop three pilot community engagement activities with vulnerable communities in North East Victoria. The design of the activities drew on existing research into community vulnerability in the region, our literature review on best practice in community engagement and interviews with key stakeholders and knowledge holders at Councils, other agencies and community groups. The three pilot community engagement programs were:

- The North East Brains Trust – workshops on climate change resilience with older people in Wodonga and Tallangatta
- A grassroots community leadership pilot program, involving members of the Harrieville Community Building Initiative and community leaders in Yackandandah

- A trial of several mobile outreach activities on climate change resilience in Wangaratta, alongside a trial of Wangaratta Council’s new eco-living trailer.

The three pilots and their locations are shown in Figure 1. We evaluated the pilot activities using participant feedback surveys, facilitator observations and reflections, and analysis of the outputs from the activities. Further details on each pilot activity are provided below.

Figure 1: Locations of the three pilot community engagement activities.



The ‘Brains Trust’: Engaging seniors in climate change adaptation

The first pilot used two ‘Brains Trust’ workshops to engage seniors in the community in testing activities to help seniors prepare for climate-related emergencies. While older people are often seen as vulnerable to climate change, the philosophy behind these workshops was that older people are the ‘wise elders’ of the community and their knowledge should be respected. Many know their community very well and have experienced and survived climate-related emergencies. Seniors can be empowered to act as a ‘brains trust’, offering a source of wisdom and local knowledge to help plan for climate resilience.

We held two Brains Trust workshops – one in Wodonga and one in Tallangatta (see Figure 2). The intent was to see if the approach worked in an urban community that was relatively well-connected (Wodonga) and in a more isolated township (Tallangatta). Participants were recruited with assistance from the respective Councils. They participated in a 3-hour workshop. Each workshop included the following activities:

- A presentation on climate change in the region

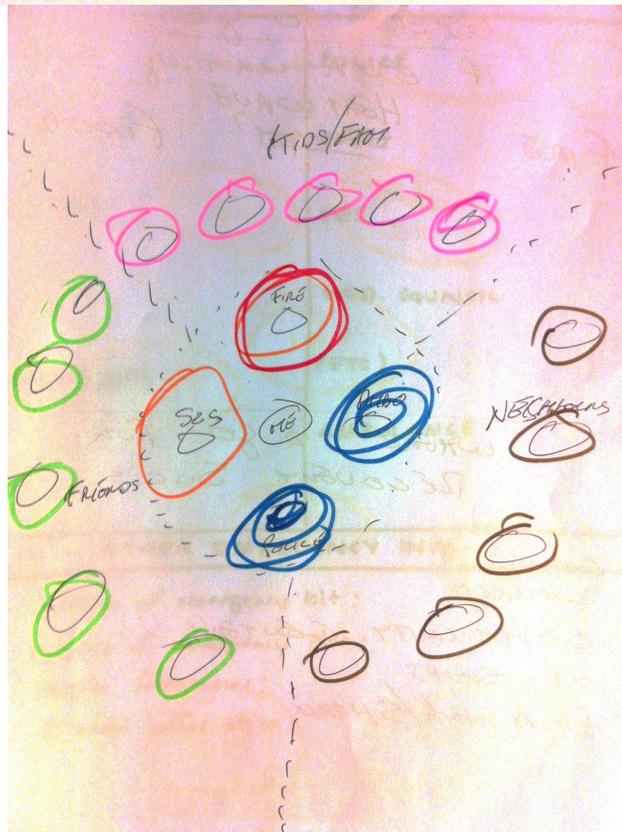
- A story telling activity, in which participants shared what they love about their community and their experiences with extreme climate events
- Development of a vision of a climate-resilient community
- Testing of an emergency planning resource developed for seniors by the Red Cross (Australian Red Cross, 2009)
- Creating 'resilience posters' as a visual resource for use during emergencies.

Figure 2: The Tallangatta Brains Trust.



This last activity was an attempt to engage participants in a creative activity to develop a useful personal or community resource. In an emergency, older people may struggle to locate information about what to do and who to contact. A resilience poster is a one-page poster with essential information for climate emergencies in a highly visual form that could be stuck on a fridge or wall. While a useful resource in itself, we also found that the process of creating such a poster encourages participants to think about who they would contact in an emergency and to mentally prepare for such an event. Examples of two resilience posters developed by participants are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Resilience posters developed by Brains Trust participants. The top poster shows one participant's 'Safety Plan', listing phone numbers for key contacts down the left side, people to check on down the right side, possible places to go and important things not to forget. The bottom poster groups contacts to check on during an emergency in an expanding circle of care, starting with key emergency service contacts and then moving out to family, friends and neighbours.



Based on feedback from participants, they found the workshops useful and engaging and we are confident that the concept of a Brains Trust workshop could be used elsewhere to test other community engagement activities. Several of the workshop activities were further developed as part of the final toolbox of community engagement activities, discussed in the conclusion to this paper.

Grassroots capacity building workshops

The second pilot worked with two existing grassroots community groups to build their capacity for community leadership on climate change adaptation and resilience. Workshops in two different communities allowed for exchange of knowledge and ideas between existing groups. The philosophy behind these workshops was that there are many existing community groups that could do more to lead climate change adaptation and it is a better use of resources to work with these existing groups than to create new ones that do not already have momentum.

The Harrietville Community Building Initiative (CBI) is an existing group of community leaders working successfully to improve sustainability and amenity in Harrietville, supported by Alpine Shire Council (see Figure 4). We held a workshop with this group to understand and document the approach that they have taken as a case study for other communities. In the workshop, we also explored key lessons and critical success factors with the group, provided them with other resources that might support their activities and facilitated a future-focused discussion for them to think about next steps for their group.

Figure 4: The Harrietville Community Building Initiative.



In the second stage of this pilot, we convened a workshop for community leaders in Yackandandah to explore what kind of support and resources they need to help them build community resilience and tackle climate change adaptation (see Figure 5). Two representatives from the Harrietville CBI attended the Yackandandah workshop to share their stories and experiences and there were also speakers from Indigo Shire Council, Solar North East and Yack Sustainability. The workshop gave an overview of 'tools', programs or approaches that have a climate change adaptation or resiliency focus. There

was discussion of what would help to strengthen community leadership in the area and how a broader range of groups could see climate change adaptation as part of their work.

Figure 5: The Yackandandah community leaders workshop.



The workshops were again well received by the participants. Participants stressed that there are many existing community groups and the challenge is not to create new groups but to connect, coordinate and support those that already exist. The kind of support that they were particular seeking included support for fundraising, facilitation skills and use of social media. Groups were keen to find ways to attract and involve younger people, perhaps through the use of social media. Groups also saw a role for Councils to offer support but there is a need for continuity so that trusting relationships can be established.

Several of the ideas presented by participants were further developed as part of the toolbox of engagement activities presented at the conclusion of this paper.

Mobile outreach

The third pilot developed a set of five activities that can be used to engage communities through mobile outreach. These activities could be incorporated into a community engagement trailer, or set up at festivals, markets, schools or shopping centres. The intent was to provide a set of fun activities that would get people thinking about climate resilience without requiring an onerous level of participation. This was a response to the difficulties that Councils can have in reaching isolated rural communities.

We set up the five activities in a grassy area next to the War Memorial at Wangaratta (see Figure 6) and tested them with Wangaratta Council staff as part of a trial of Council's new eco-living trailer. Some members of the public that were passing by the activity also chose to participate. The five activities we tested were:

- A passive reading activity, where participants could learn more about climate change by reading information posted on a board
- 'Make your mark' – participants could use pins to mark places on a map where they had experienced extreme weather events
- Participants sharing their local resilience tips by writing them up on a board after discussions with the facilitator
- A resiliency pledge activity, where participants were given sheets showing possible actions they could take and were asked to tick off those they had done. They were then asked to commit to an action, to write it up on a 'speech bubble' and to have a photograph taken with their commitment. Photographs were provided to participants and a copy was posted on a noticeboard (see Figure 7)
- A game with buckets and juggling balls where participants were asked to come up with benefits or outcomes for particular resiliency actions.

Figure 6: The five mobile outreach activities.



Figure 7: Participants with their climate resilience pledges.



The level of engagement in the activities varied – for example, the resilience pledge was popular and participants seemed to find it engaging. There is good support in the behaviour change literature for the use of public pledges as a way of motivating and sustaining new behaviours (Dawnay & Shah, 2005) and the speech bubbles (see Figure 7) were a fun way to implement this.

On the other hand, there was very little participation in the bucket game, which required relatively complex explanations and higher skills levels. There were also logistical problems on the day – the exhibit was not as ‘mobile’ as we would have liked and was not designed to cope with wind. Nevertheless, there was good participation in the activities overall and we think that the idea of using fun activities like this for mobile outreach is sound. The mobile outreach activities are further developed in the toolbox of community engagement activities in the conclusion of this paper.

Conclusion: A toolbox for community engagement on climate change adaptation

Drawing on our desktop research on best practice in community engagement on climate change adaptation and our experiences with the three pilot activities, we developed a toolbox of ten activities for NEGHA, the member Councils and other organisations to use to engage the community in climate change adaptation. Although developed in a specific, non-coastal context, we believe the toolbox is a useful resource for coastal Councils that could be readily adapted and tested for the local community context.

The toolbox contains diverse activities suited to different audiences, locations and purposes. The intent is that Councils can pick and choose from the listed activities as appropriate to suit the particular context and purpose of engagement. Table 1 summarises the toolbox with key information to help Councils choose which activities to implement.

Table 1: A toolbox for community engagement on climate change adaptation.

Activity	Description	Audience	Location	Purpose
1. Brains Trust workshop	Engage community 'elders' as a 'brains trust' to gather local knowledge and identify or test appropriate community engagement practices for the local context. The guiding philosophy is one of respect for the existing wisdom of seniors in the community. The precise activities will depend on the application but could include many of the other activities listed in this toolbox.	Particularly older people and landholders with experience of climate variability but can include other community leaders	Anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultation • Piloting activities
2. Facilitated emergency planning	Take individuals or groups through a facilitated process of developing an emergency response plan, using existing resources. There are many such resources that could be used, including guides developed by the Red Cross (e.g. Australian Red Cross, 2009), the NSW State Emergency Service's Flood Safe site (http://www.floodsafe.com.au) or the NSW Rural Fire Service's Bush Fire Survival Plan (RFS, 2010).	All, but particularly older people and other vulnerable groups	Anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal emergency planning
3. Climate resilience stories	Share personal stories of experiences with climate variability and responses. Can work at multiple scales, from a small workshop activity to a community-wide project. In a workshop, this kind of storytelling activity is particularly useful for building trust between participants by showing them that they have common experiences with climate risks. At a community scale, one way this activity can work is by having school students interview seniors to collect their stories. In this form, the activity is not only valuable for raising awareness of climate change and the need to adapt but can also help to improve community resilience by connecting older and younger people.	All, but particularly focused on older people sharing their stories with younger people	Anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness of impacts and responses • Strengthening community networks

Activity	Description	Audience	Location	Purpose
4. Resilience posters	Develop a one-page poster with essential information for climate emergencies in a highly visual form. This is useful both as a workshop activity for individuals or small groups and at a community scale. As a workshop activity, this gets participants thinking creatively and encourages them to mentally rehearse what they would actually do in an emergency. At a community scale, competitions could be held for the best resilience posters, which could then be made available as a community resource.	All	Anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal emergency planning • Raising awareness of community networks and resources
5. Community resilience audits	This involves identifying existing community groups and networks in a particular location to audit what is already being done to build community resilience, which groups are well placed to do more and where connections could be made or strengthened. During our research it became evident that Councils and community groups did not have a good sense of which existing groups existed that could take on a role in climate change adaptation. Mapping existing groups is a first step towards providing support for these groups.	Councils, community leaders	Anywhere but may be more useful for strong place-based communities in townships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying community groups and networks
6. Support and coordination for existing groups	Instead of establishing new groups, provide resources, support and specific training for existing groups to take a stronger role in building community resilience and adapting to climate change. This activity builds on Activity 5 above.	Community leaders	Anywhere but may be more effective in townships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening community networks • Getting resilience and climate change adaptation on the agenda of existing groups • Building personal capacity to lead climate change adaptation actions

Activity	Description	Audience	Location	Purpose
7. Local and regional exchange events	Community groups are often unaware of other groups that are doing similar work, both locally and regionally. Regular community exchange events at different scales, from towns, to LGAs to regions can bring groups together and strengthen community networks. These events can play a dual role of information-sharing and social occasion.	Community leaders	Anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness of community networks and resources • Strengthening community networks
8. Regional climate resilience web portal	Establish a local or regional web portal to act as a clearinghouse for information on climate change resilience. The portal could provide real-time information during emergencies. It could also include a participatory Google mapping function to allow the community to share local experiences of climate impacts, identify examples of local actions to improve resilience and share emergency response plans.	General public, comfortable with Internet use	All with good Internet access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness of impacts and responses • Raising awareness of community networks and resources
9. Community participation in resilience planning and recovery	Communities should be directly involved in resilience planning and recovery planning through deliberative and inclusive processes. It is easier to ensure community participation in long-term resilience planning and more difficult when rapid decisions need to be made in the aftermath of severe climate events. Nevertheless, if there is genuine community participation in planning and decision-making, there is more likely to be ownership of outcomes.	Community leaders or randomly selected general public	Anywhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting and involving communities in decisions about climate change adaptation
10. Mobile outreach activities	Use fun activities to engage and motivate people to take climate change adaptation actions in diverse locations such as markets, festivals, fetes and schools.	General public	At events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising awareness of impacts and responses • Motivating individual action to adapt to climate change

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