

Resilience: preparing for and recovering from crisis and disaster

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Resilience embraces crisis prevention and mitigation, dealing with crises decisively, and then societal rebuilding, repairing, reconstructing and healing. The New South Wales government established Resilience NSW in 2020 in the wake of the state's worst ever bushfire season to guide the preparation for and recovery from future natural disasters, disease epidemics and the like. Herein, the Commissioner for Resilience describes the 2019-20 bushfire crisis and recovery processes, stressing the importance of emotional resilience and social cohesion.

Key words: bushfire; crisis; crisis prevention; disaster; drought; emotional resilience; flood; pandemic; disaster recovery; resilience.

Resilience New South Wales came about in the middle of the worst ever bushfire season New South Wales has experienced. The fire season was unprecedented in terms of its protracted nature, its early start and late finish, the extraordinarily wide scale of destruction and devastation; and the tragedy. It was not, though, Australia's worst bushfire disaster in terms of casualties. In Victoria's Black Saturday in February 2009, 173 people lost their lives in one afternoon. In New South Wales during the 2020 fire season, we lost 26 lives.

I signalled to the New South Wales government in early 2019 that, after having been commissioner of the state's Rural Fire Service (RFS) for more than a decade, I should look at a change. I was originally going to leave before the 2019-20 fire season. When the season began early, however, I decided to stay. We had no idea it was going to be as bad as it was. Then, in the middle of the season, given the unprecedented damage and destruction, the government knew it would require a recovery, rebuilding, reconstruction and healing effort the like of which had never seen before in New South Wales.

So, the government decided to set up a new organisation around recovery and disaster preparedness with the statutory responsibility of leading recovery. They chose the name "Resilience" for it and invited me to lead it.

The Remit of Resilience New South Wales

Initially, we invested a couple of months in evaluating what the remit of the new organisation should be: how we could meet the expectations of government, the emergency management framework and, importantly, society. From this, we arrived at our

vision: "From prevention through to recovery". We would need to give confidence to communities across New South Wales that they can live, work and invest. We will do so through leading and co-ordinating disaster management and recovery, driving strategies and investments to reduce risk, and building the resilience of communities to significant external shocks and stresses of all kinds.

In the first few months, I researched a lot, I read a lot, but, importantly, I listened a lot and I asked a lot of questions of people about what they viewed as resilience. Most people came up with a narrative about our ability to withstand a big shock, or a big disaster and bounce back to normal.

I struggle with that because the whole idea is, if you have been through a difficult period or an enormous event, you want to come back better, stronger and wiser. What is normal after you have had a significant disaster or traumatic experience? You have got to learn from and build on that experience and come out the other side better and stronger. But importantly going forward you need to work out how to prepare yourself, your business, your family, and your community to anticipate and ready yourself for that next big disaster. In effect, to be more proactive at prevention and mitigation arrangements leading into it, to deal with it decisively, and then to come out the other side rebuilding, repairing, reconstructing and healing.

Resilience across New South Wales in 2019-20

Resilience across New South Wales will be my focus in this paper. When I look at the last two years, you cannot go past the extraordinary and compounding effect of disasters on many communities. In early to middle 2019, we had 100 of the geographic areas of the state drought-declared – one of the worst droughts in recorded history. That became the backdrop to what turned out to be our worst ever bushfire season.

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There are two phrases you will not find me using to describe the last two years: “black summer bushfires”; and “social distancing”. “Black summer bushfires” I will not use, because it does an extraordinary disservice to all those that were being so heavily affected by bushfires on top of what they had been living through for years with drought. We were averaging more than a thousand fires a month in New South Wales in winter (June, July and August) 2019 and then it just intensified as we went into spring and summer. People were losing livelihoods, businesses, homes and loved ones well before summer kicked in. We lost 26 lives during the 2019-20 fire season. The first two of those lives were lost in October before we went into the summer period. The season was unprecedented.

When the drought finally broke in February 2020, the rain ended the longest uninterrupted period without any meaningful rainfall leading into a spring and summer period. It was one of the latest onsets of monsoonal activity in northern Australia – a weather event that finally brought moisture down into the centre of Australia to break up the hot air mass that had been dominating the weather. The drought broke with a vengeance. In a number of areas, the storms and rains came across a very denuded landscape. From drought and fires, those extraordinary rain events caused very significant flooding, erosion and landslides. What people had not lost during the drought or the fires, in a number of locations they saw washed away in the rain events.

As we were just getting our heads around all that came with the fires and then dealing with the storms and the floods, we came into March. We were then well into the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic. We were learning as a community, as a state, as a nation, and as a global community what the challenges were in responding to and living through a pandemic, including the peculiarities associated with this particular virus.

So, when I think of the last 18 months, I reflect on communities that have been impacted and terribly affected, not just by one disaster but, for some of them, four or five very public disasters, let alone all that was going on in their personal lives. I think COVID has been a remarkable leveller for all of us. No matter who or where we are, what we do, where we work, or where we live, COVID has reached and touched us all. It has reminded us all to pause and contemplate our own level of vulnerability.

In my experience over decades with foreign emergency services, when disasters happen somewhere else, we are remarkably generous, we pour out all sorts of assistance, support and love to those impacted. We, however, very quickly transition back into life as we know it. On the back of some major events, COVID has levelled us all and reminded us that we are all susceptible.

2019-20 Fire Season

Reflecting on the fire season and in particular the toll

it took on New South Wales, just under 12,000 fires burnt during the season, most of which started and spread very quickly. We lost some 5.5 million hectares, the largest area burnt in recorded history, particularly along the forested areas of the Great Dividing Range. The only good thing in a drought from a fire point of view is that there is no fuel west of the Great Dividing Range. There was nothing on the ground to burn, so the fires were all concentrated along the range. They spread from the Queensland border to the Victorian border. We had high intensity operations that went for 160 days and bushfire emergencies that were declared for 200 days (5 to 6 months). Historically in New South Wales, the most high-intensity periods might last 2 to 3 weeks; they do a lot of damage, but there is usually a big rainfall event that disrupts the cycle.

During the 2019-20 fire season, we lost 26 lives including seven firefighters – four volunteers and three aircrew (when a plane crashed near Cooma in January). It was it was an awful period at a personal, organisational and societal level. But what will stick in my mind the most was how deflating it was from time to time. I recall vividly that when we only had 40 or 50 concurrent fires, we thought we were making big progress. In any other season, that would have been a horrible day, but we were actually making progress when down to 40 or 50 fires. Then, suddenly, a frontal system would start coming across the state and, instead of bringing moisture, it brought lightning storms. Within 12 hours of the lightning passing across the Great Dividing Range, we had gone from 40 or 50 fires back to 170 or 180 fires, all of which were taking hold and spreading, some only hundreds of metres from a control line that firefighters had been working on to protect communities for many weeks. The firefighters’ efforts were now thwarted, because an extraordinary fire was spreading just beyond the line they were holding.

We also found fire behaviour going beyond conventional wisdom. We had computer simulation models and fire behaviour experts doing manual predictions of fires. Historically, the best predictive specialists would identify that, under certain conditions, in the best-case scenario a fire will spread to here; whereas in the worst-case scenario the fire would get to there; yet, invariably, due to local factors, it would reach somewhere in between. Usually, these experts are able to estimate quite accurately where a fire would spread. What we were finding during this season, though, was that fires were spreading beyond the worst-case scenario at 2 - 4 am, not at 2 - 4 pm when you would normally expect fires to be at their worst. It was a reminder of the extraordinary effects of the drought and weather-driven elements causing fire behaviour at levels we had never seen.

Recovery and Betterment

When the fire season settled and our focus moved to recovery, we knew there was a rebuilding to be done

and a need to focus on betterment. One of the best things we have learnt when it comes to resilience, helping communities and individuals after disasters, is the need for betterment funding. The classic example is the old timber low-lying bridges. They burn down in fires and, even in low to moderate floods, they become inundated quite quickly. But over the decades when a timber bridge was damaged through a flood or fire, there would be debate about whether or not we should replace it with something bigger, better and higher. Arguments would go around and around among the different levels of government resulting in the bridge being rebuilt in the same way only to see the cycle repeated when it burns down again or is inundated during future floods.

This time around, with good co-operation at all levels of government, we are seeing the timber bridges that were damaged or destroyed, particularly up through the north coast, being replaced with concrete bridges. We are also seeing increases in bridge height to allow those communities to address the issue of isolation during low to moderate floods at any time of the year.

Betterment also involves building resilience at community level. We talk about rebuilding, reconstruction and repair – all those things are really important. But we do not talk enough about healing the emotional and psychological toll that is occasioned to individuals, families, business owners, primary producers, and local communities. This is an enormous issue and is at the core of resilience.

What we conveniently overlook as a society too often is that we live experiences, we learn through those experiences and, hopefully, as individuals, families, and communities, we learn together from those experiences to be better off next time. Too often, we overlook the emotional toll that is occasioned through difficult experiences. More often than not, the big disasters, the big events, the big incidents that impact on the way we live, work and function have an extraordinary emotional toll. It can be quite traumatic for individuals.

When I catch up with people at evacuation centres, recovery centres and staging areas, it can be confronting. You meet people who are broken emotionally and, when you ask how they are going, they say they are okay. But they are very emotional. They will say things like: "I can't even prove to you who I am, I don't even have identification, how can I go on from here. Everything I've ever owned is now ash and rubble." They know they have money in the bank, but they cannot get money out of the bank to pay their way, to get the next meal. It is really difficult to put yourself in that person's shoes and work out how will they go forward. The emotional challenges are quite extraordinary.

Resilience for me starts with the individual, extends then to the family and social network, then extends through to our business and our employment areas and it goes right through to the community level.

Emotional Resilience

One of the most confronting phone calls I had towards the end of 2020 marking the anniversary of some really traumatic events was when I caught up with an old RFS colleague one night. It was an emotional conversation reflecting on those events. I asked him how he was travelling. He replied: "Look, I'm getting some support. It's really making a difference." I said, "that's fantastic" and he said "yeah, those professional services have really helped me process a few things". I asked: "What's it doing for you". He replied: "I didn't realise how much I was shutting my wife and the kids out. I'm really making a difference now. We're getting along a lot better. I can see the difference. It's also helping back in the workplace and I'm getting on a lot better with the volunteers." I said: "That's really great. I'm proud of you."

We were about to part ways on the conversation when he said to me: "Shane, before you go, you've got to promise me something". I said: "What's that". He said: "You can't tell anyone that I'm getting help". I said: "You've got to be kidding. After everything that we've been through and after everything that we've just talked about you've somehow got this shame about being helped". He said: "Well Shane, I don't want anyone to judge me. I don't want anyone to think that I'm not coping. I don't want to think that I'm not up to the job that I really want to come back to and continue with. I just need to process those things."

Out of all the things that I had experienced it was that call that confronted and challenged me the most. Then I weighed it up against a lot of the conversations I have had as I travelled around disaster-affected areas in rural and regional New South Wales. I cannot tell you how many times people would approach me. Notable was the number of wives, children, and grandchildren that said to me: "Can someone please talk to my husband, my father, my grandfather. He's wandering around the property, reckons he's going to do everything himself, won't put his hand up for any assistance, reckons there's people worse off that should be accessing the supports and the programmes and he certainly won't have a conversation about how he is, how he's feeling."

Their plea is: "Can someone get to him because we do not want him to give up on life; we do not want him to get so overwhelmed that he thinks he cannot get through and that there is no hope or a way forward." I find that really distressing. If we are going to focus on resilience, we must focus on ourselves and be honest with ourselves. When these lived experiences happen, when we confront difficult circumstances, emergencies and disasters, it is okay to acknowledge that there is an emotional toll attached to the carnage, the damage, the destruction, the despair and the contemplation of what has happened and what has been lost.

Then, more importantly, is the issue of how am I going to go forward and come back after what we have just experienced. It is okay to acknowledge that there is

an emotional toll attached to that because we are human. If I could make one plea when it comes to resilience, it is that men particularly have a look in the mirror and give yourself permission to understand that you have got thoughts and feelings and emotions like everybody else. Talk to each other, talk to your partners, talk to your families, talk to your mates about how they are feeling and how they are processing. The minute you give yourselves permission to open up to one another, the quicker the realisation is that you are not alone, that you are not odd, that we are all experiencing things in different ways and to different degrees. While we regard it as perfectly normal if Mike and I go in for a shoulder reconstruction and Mike is out playing tennis again in 6 - 8 weeks because he is fit and he is following all the rules from the physiotherapist, but I still have a painful shoulder 8 - 12 weeks later because I did not, no one cares. So, why do we have this challenge when it comes to individuals, all of us needing to process things differently, needing to get different supports and different perspectives, because our predisposition coming into any event or any disaster is different.

We all carry our own personal and emotional baggage from whatever is going on in our lives. We are experiencing similar things and we are all quite different coming out the other side, even though we have experienced similar things. So, the more we can share and the more we can support one another the better. Resilience starts with the individual.

I would also challenge you from a leadership perspective: "Do not underestimate the little things". When my daughters were little, I used to read *Who Sank the Boat* by Pam Allen to them. It is a story about a donkey, a pig, a sheep, a cow and a mouse. They get into a little row boat to cross a river to get to pasture. It is designed to teach volume and mass. But there is a good leadership lesson in it. The big animals get in the boat one at a time first. On every page it says: "Do you know who sank the boat?" As each animal gets in, the boat gets a little lower in the water and a bit of water slops over the side. At the end, it is the mouse that leaps off the jetty and lands on the edge of the boat; it is just enough to tip the scales of the boat and they all end up in the river.

The message for me is that, as leaders, as individuals, as carers and all those that are concerned for others in life, our family, our businesses, our loved ones, our local community, is do not underestimate the importance of the little things. How paying attention to them and sharing your understanding about those little things can make the difference to individual and collective healing. If we can heal and come out stronger, set priorities and set focus areas, we will find that the recovery process succeeds.

The rebuilding, the reconstruction, the priorities, the focus areas, the investments will come through collective thought. Open communication sharing goes to the core of building resilience.

Physical, not Social, Distancing

I mentioned earlier, that I will not use the phrase "social distancing". I understand what the intent is and I support it. But what we are really talking about is "physical distancing"; geographic separation that seeks to stop the virus from spreading. The more we can maintain distance physically, the better chance we have of limiting the spread of that hideous virus. However, the last thing we need in New South Wales and in Australia right now is to socially isolate, to exacerbate loneliness, isolation and depression. It is the last thing we need particularly in a state like New South Wales where we have had the compounding effect of so many disasters and the recovery efforts in communities have been interrupted and compromised by COVID. How deflating it was for villages, towns and communities to be gearing up for the 2020 Easter holiday traffic to compensate for what they lost in the summer period only to have it thwarted by travel restrictions, shutdowns and fear of the virus.

I have found that people in 2020 consciously connected more with family and loved ones, with workmates and with their social circles than they ever would have in 2019 or planned to do in 2021 had it not been for the virus and the ability to connect. I had never heard of Zoom until 2020 and I never knew how powerful tools like Microsoft Teams were in enabling people to connect and provide face-to-face messaging, group conversations and interactions; where people were sharing their thoughts, their feelings and their experiences. It helped them to realise that what they were experiencing and were worried about was a shared experience.

Many employees, in particular, said: "You know what, if I was normally going to the workplace, I'd go into the workshop or I'd go upstairs to my desk. I'd go to the tea room, where I might see four or five people. Now, I'm part of this organisation. I am not only seeing those four or five people, I'm seeing a whole team and department. I've seen the general manager, the CEO, a supervisor from whom I only ever got emails. They have a face; they do exist. They are online, telling us what's going on, why it's going on, what the challenges are."

People felt included. Social inclusion, whatever your organisational responsibilities are, is essential. Whether it is a family unit, your business, your social circles, your clubs, your organisations, your employment, it did not matter. Community organisations were coming together more than ever before during 2020 and I think that has been one of the staples of building resilience and strength during very difficult and uncertain times.

Conclusion

There are many wonderful lessons that adults can learn from children. When I was the RFS commissioner during the 2019-20 fire season, I received thousands of cards, drawings and notes from kids from schools and families everywhere paying tribute to the firefighting

effort and saying thank you to all involved in that work. I have visited quite a number of schools, been to some community organisations and some galleries and similar places around the state as people are starting to process the recovery. They are lifting out some of these wonderful notes that have been sent to me and shared with others. In many of those notes, three phrases tended to come up repeatedly. The kids worked them out when they spent time with each other trying to process the enormity of what had happened and unfolded in their lives. Each kid discovered: "I am not alone in my thoughts, feelings and predicament". Then they worked out that they could say: "You are not alone, because I can relate to what you are talking about and I can share my thoughts and feelings and views with you". The final wrap-up was the group of kids were not alone.

In building resilience, the more we realise that we are not alone, the more we can come together, support each other, anticipate and plan for the next big event and do better than we did before. We can seek to minimise the damage, respond as best we can and

then, importantly, leverage that collective thought as to how we rebuild, recover and heal. We will come out the other side better than we were prior to the event.

The Author: Shane Fitzsimmons was appointed inaugural Commissioner of Resilience NSW and Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management, in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, New South Wales (NSW), in May 2020. Resilience NSW is a new agency focused on disaster preparedness and recovery. He chairs the State Emergency Management Committee, the State Recovery Committee, and National Emergency Medal Committee. Previously, he had a distinguished career of over 35 years in the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) culminating in becoming its Commissioner from 2007 - 2020 and leading the RFS during the 2019-20 national bushfire emergency. He was awarded the Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM) in 2001 and the National Medal in 1999. He is also a Royal Humane Society of NSW Councillor and was named NSW Australian of the Year in 2021. [Photo of Mr Fitzsimmons: Resilience NSW]