



Symposium: Security, Resilience & Community in an Age of Catastrophe

DATE	15 September 2022
HOST	School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet), Australian National University
CONVENORS	A/Prof Jarrett Blaustein and A/Prof Mark Crowweller
CHAIR	A/Prof Mark Crowweller

NB. This event was held under the Chatham House Rule. Invited participants included a diverse group of researchers and practitioners with expertise spanning emergency management, adaptive governance, humanitarian aid, and defence. With the exception of the Convenors and the Director of RegNet, speakers are not identified in the summary provided below.

Welcome, Acknowledgement, and Introduction

Prof Kate Henne, Director of RegNet began with an Acknowledgement of Country and welcomed participants to RegNet. A/Prof Jarrett Blaustein and A/Prof Mark Crowweller briefed participants on the format and ground-rules for the discussion.

Part 1. Linking ‘Security’ and ‘Resilience’

The Chair poses the first question: *What does Australia need to do to improve its capacity to deal with future catastrophic events, be they environmental, conflict-related, economic, or pathogenic?*

Participants discussed a problematic tendency to focus on short-term and smaller-scale responses when long term and larger scale action is needed. They also acknowledged that issues and harms can overlap and compound each other in cumulative ways, such as housing and pandemic issues, and argued that more robust responses are needed.

One participant observed that there have been similar failures in terms of addressing crises across different policy spheres. They drew on this observation to suggest that larger changes in relation to governance approaches are needed. This prompted discussion of the ‘hollowing out’ of the state, which one participant suggested has displaced responsibility from decision makers at higher levels. Consequently, it was suggested that governments seem less able to deliver on promises made to improve life, which may be generally contributing to declining trust in institutions and democracy. The reason for this, it was suggested, is that even if government capacity has been ‘hollowed out’, people still expect government to be able to act to protect them and look after their interests.

The discussion then shifted to the problem of 'outsourcing' and it was noted that in recent decades, the government has outsourced knowledge and expertise across many areas, and all this expertise has been picked up by the private sector, and this makes government action difficult. A participant stressed that building redundancy is vital for resilience, but 'unthinkable' a neoliberal worldview, so finding a way to balance redundancy against other interests is important for building capacity.

A participant observed that the professionalisation of risk assessments has created a gap between experts and people who are at-risk. Another suggested that Australia may be lacking a comprehensive vision of what resilience looks like, or should look like, with respect to various types of hazards. Consequently, they suggested there may be a gap between what governments are actually doing around resilience, and what people outside government know about these government actions.

It was then suggested that increasing populations, especially in areas that are already in ecologically vulnerable areas, are straining capacity. In these areas, particularly rural areas, it was suggested that there is already a struggle to maintain enough essential workers such as nurses.

Another participant emphasised the need to reflect on state capacity in the context of globalization. They reflected that the impact of pandemic has illustrated changes in global economic systems, shifts away from mobility and towards geographically regionalised supply chains and national self-reliance. They suggested that this creates new questions around what should be done in Australia and what can or cannot be imported in a crisis, including workforce.

The Chair posed a second, follow-up question: *what is the role of government moving forward, in terms of responsibility, capacity, and the social contract?*

It was suggested by one participant that as a first step, all of us need to accept that the world is changing, and governments need to accept responsibility for addressing these issues. Another noted that the responsibility of the state, the public, consumers, and other stakeholders are well defined in some areas or policy spaces, but poorly defined in others, and we need new methods for determining who is responsible for what, particularly when responsibility spans across multiple actors and issue areas (as is the case with complex crises).

In response to this, another participant observed that 'how responsibility is divided' is certainly one important question, but another is how and when to hold actors responsible, and it was noted that actors such as governments may not always respond in 'evidenced-based ways' when they are subject to blame and scrutiny. Because of this, they suggested that experimental approaches to policy making and accountability might be used to incentivise action and mitigate reactive, counterproductive responses to a culture of blame. It was then noted that government actors can get bogged down by responding to inquiries over failures, which takes resources away from responding to new and upcoming challenges.

A participant noted that the drivers of risk can also be drivers of reward, and that the drivers of resiliency should be considered alongside these. Consequently, they suggested that there is a need to create tools for finance, especially because the private sector is not properly incentivized by existing, short-term economic structures to finance resilience work.

It was then suggested that governments approach crises with a 'business as usual' mentality, and questioned whether they are even being shocked into action anymore.

Moving forward, a participant suggested there was a need for governments to develop plans with people who have adequate training, with consideration for places, and effective leadership. Beyond planning, it was also suggested that responsive governance is needed to escape bureaucratic inertia which can inhibit meaningful action from taking place, even in the context of effective planning. Responsivity was argued to require learning, experimentation, and learning from experimentation, but this participant noted that a wholistic assessment of risks and challenges would also be critical before action could be taken.

The point was also raised that there is not always time for governments, and agencies, to learn during the aftermath of crises, and that handling multiple overlapping or successive hazards can make it difficult to reflect on what worked (or did not work), and institutionalise lessons.

The discussion then turned to the issue of 'capacity'. It was suggested that capacity should be thought of more robustly as many issues being discussed here are actually whole-of-government and whole-of-economy issues rather than problems that occupy or can be addressed via siloed policy spaces. In other words, risk assessments for climate-related hazards and other complex issues needs to incorporate risk assessments for many other related and overlapping areas including energy, health, and defence, because this will help with planning, prioritisation, cost management, and managing public opinion about costs of response measures. The point was also made that capacity and action are fragmented across multiple different agencies and actors who all have pieces of expertise and capacity, but not the whole picture. Problematically, individual agencies may not see it as their responsibility to contribute to whole-of-government responses either. The question this prompted was, can there be a common framework for managing threats and hazards, and it was observed that interdisciplinary methods for bringing together different kinds of expertise were needed.

A participant observed that when thinking about capacity, it is important to keep in mind that the existing workforce is an important asset, and noted for example that many members of the military reserve are already involved with their communities on a regular basis through their professions including police work, and other public service roles. Knowing how to activate an existing workforce with relevance skills and motivation was therefore argued to be important. Along these lines, it was also noted that veterans may not always have clear pipelines to put their skills to work, and translate these to resilience-building activities, so new structures may need to be created to facilitate this.

It was then argued that capacity is more than the sum of its parts, and that connecting actors with specific capabilities and integrating them into formal and informal systems can create capacity that is not additive. This participant suggested that communities have capacity as well in their everyday activities and relationships needed to keep everyday life moving (i.e., social capital), and this can be a valuable resource. At the same time, it was stressed that informal networks do not have unlimited capacity, and positioning communities as actors the responsible for building capacity can be related to the hollowing out of the state. Further to this point, it was emphasised that communities' capacities to deal with chronic and acute shocks can be different, and that capacity is strained when dealing with multiple chronic and acute shocks simultaneously.

A participant argued that capacity is not something to be fetishized but rather, it needs to be seen as the outcome of political decisions. A lack of government capacity was therefore attributed to political choices.

The point was made that conflicting evidence and knowledge generation also creates challenges, as 'dualling experts' may generate recommendations that are too broad to implement, or do not have actual buy-in by decision makers. It was also suggested that the prioritisation of status quo and of old knowledge over new knowledge can be a challenge for adaptation.

A participant then stressed that the local level needs to be embraced as part of the solution. They observed:

- food is getting more expensive, and there is an opportunity to educate and facilitate people in growing their own food;
- illiteracy and lack of English language proficiency makes it difficult for many people to succeed and become self-sufficient, so programs to train people in English proficiency alongside job training could be effective and reduce dependency on welfare programs;
- that during the pandemic, financing for local, community-based groups had been beneficial for helping individuals and communities become more empowered and self-sufficient, but now that pandemic assistance is easing, this financing is drying up and this prompts concerns about sustainability;

They concluded that decentralising response efforts can lead to an improved overall response because an overly centralised disaster response may be less effective.

A participant noted that the complexity of cascading impacts and catastrophic risk makes futures thinking capacities and anticipatory capacities important. They added, also needed are systems for learning and systems for putting anticipatory exercises into real policy practice.

A participant proposed that one policy option is to create models and structures which encourage young Australians to do community-oriented work and gain community-oriented skills, e.g., police, emergency services, but suggested this may create political resistance from volunteer groups. They suggested that civic engagement work need not be full-time and can still provide positive community outcomes and positive identity development. They added, other jurisdictions have tried mandatory community service, and evidence from the history of Germany suggests this might provide a means of building community identity and morale to counter other forms of identity formation which are less desirable in this context.

It was reiterated that taking action that reflects the magnitude of a problem like climate change is crucial, because taking weak action may be both ineffective and depress perceptions of government capacity.

The discussion then shifted to national security and defence.

A participant noted that relying on the military to respond to issues may be understood as a consequence of the hollowing out of state capacity in other realms, which can create service gaps and an overreliance on military or police. It was noted that the defence sector is seen as able to do anything, but Australian defence is more specialised and less capable of taking on anything than may be perceived.

A participant added that a lack of trust in the government's ability to protect people and communities can lead to security issues, and that disillusioned people may become violent.

A more critical view was presented by another participant who raised concerns about the UN Security Council becoming involved in climate governance. They argued that more securitisation may not be valuable for driving inclusive action in this space, or for encouraging other actors to become involved.

It was stressed by another participant that a doctrinal shift from protection towards prevention and resilience is needed in defence, because existing models of defence are not adequate for handling global-scale issues. They added, defence is currently too focused on Australia when it can or should be addressing security issues for neighbours and allies, and on promoting resilience.

The next theme discussed was communication and crafting a productive narrative around crises and resilience.

It was suggested that governments need to be able to communicate, not just dictate, with the public. The pandemic rules were cited as an example of poor crisis communication because the rationale for these was not always clearly articulated.

It was then noted that national security narratives tend to focus on fear and avoidance, and that these do not seem to have a motivating effect on ordinary people who are more receptive and responsive to positive narratives such as asking them "what kind of futures or communities do they want?" The point here was that positive narratives might include frames which seek to maximize Australia's position in the future and how to best prepare for future crises. Furthermore, it was suggested that conversations which centred on fear can be demotivating and stifle action rather than stimulate action and create an impetus to act. A participant argued that it might be more productive for us to ask 'What does it take for a system to survive and thrive?' that to focus our energy on responding to crises.

It was then stated that communities may be open to engage and willing to act, but that they need to have trust in leaders, and leaders need to continuously demonstrate they are trustworthy.

Another participant reflected that in one state, public health officials had developed some ongoing communication channels with some local communities during the pandemic, which were valuable.

Maintaining these channels was argued to be important for connecting with these communities during future crises.

A participant argued that the idea that ‘technology will save us’ is actually a troubling message because innovation is not a cure all, especially as Australia drops in global innovation metrics. It was also observed that ‘innovation’ as a policy frame might not be as compelling as some others.

The final theme of discussion for the first session was power and inequality.

It was noted by a participant that the impacts of hazards are often inequitable, and government responses can also drive inequity – e.g., communities who do not use English as a primary language may not have access to government information or may be more vulnerable to misinformation.

It was also stressed that pushing responsibility ‘down’ towards communities can be a result of, and exacerbate, power inequities. This participant noted that it is critical to recognize power inequities (e.g., around how corporate actors benefit from current power structures), and that we must work to reconfigure who has power, and whose voices are represented.

It was emphasised that relying on wealthy individuals to step in to provide resources is also not a reliable strategy.

The final point raised was that many systems of governance have been built around the idea of economic rewards and incentives, but these are sometimes inattentive to other kinds of reward which may help to prompt collective action.

The Chair concluded the session.

Part 2. Imagining Secure and Resilient Communities

The Chair introduced the second session by posing two discussion questions: ***‘What does it mean for a community to be ‘secure’ and/or ‘resilient’ in Australia today?’***, and ***‘What role should Australian communities be expected to play when it comes to promoting systemic resilience in the face of complex risks?’***

Participants immediately challenged the notion of ‘resilience’ or ‘security’ as end states and noted that they are never permanent but rather, a quality of people and places. Participants also questioned what is meant by ‘community’ and questioned whether it is simply a politically convenient term which promotes notions of homogeneity and has a flattening effect. It was stressed that this tendency must be understood because otherwise, concepts like ‘resilience’ become meaningless.

Another participant reiterated that the language used to frame these questions was very similar to that which is commonly used by governments, and that a better way of framing this might be to ask, ‘What do we need to do to enact ‘resilience’?’. This then prompted another participant to question whether ‘resilience’ is even the right word, noting that it is very politically charged, often misunderstood, and can mean too much or too little depending on how it is being used. They observed that it has different definitions and connotations in different academic disciplines, such as for example, in some cases being used to refer to the idea of ‘snapping back’ while in others, it is used to describe ‘bouncing forward’.

A participant added that Maslow’s hierarchy of needs might help us to understand and define what security could mean for communities, with ‘resilience’ being substituted for ‘safety’ on the pyramid.

Another participant observed that a community may have a geographic presence, but is home to a diverse range of coping mechanisms and identities.

It was also observed that there was typically a lack of Indigenous representation in these discussions, and that we need to constantly consider ‘Who is at the table?’ when it comes to defining priorities and building capabilities.

The discussion then turned to tensions between 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' when it comes to being able to respond to contingencies and a participant observed that from a defence standpoint, the Army is very small, and effectiveness in terms of disaster response is very limited, due to a lack of resources.

A participant then raised the question, *'In the formation of a community resilience framework - what are we actually trying to achieve?'*

It was suggested that there is a lot of resource and efforts underway across multiple scales of government, but if don't have straightforward, agreed upon goals and objectives, how will we align our efforts and investments? Furthermore, it was stressed that unless we have an operationalised understanding of these goals and objectives, we will end up with scattered investment and a lack of direction.

Another participant suggested we should conceptualise resilience as 'coping' and challenged the way we conceptualise vulnerability as a characteristic of communities. They asked, do we see vulnerable communities as unable to cope, or vulnerable communities as those which actually have experience of coping with challenging circumstances. The point here was that often, it is vulnerably communities which are best placed to cope with crises due to their resourcefulness, and this raises an important question which is, how do we learn from them? More broadly, it prompts us to consider how we might learn from unexpected places.

The discussion then turned to young people in the context of a broader point about mobilisation and national service. A participant challenged the assumption that young people are lazy and suggested instead that they are in many cases, disillusioned and disaffected. This is important, they stressed, because we cannot have societies which cope with crises if young people aren't a part of the process, particularly the construction of new knowledges about how we understand and govern hazards.

A participant suggested that Australian egalitarian rhetoric should be utilised to create more emphasis on unity and creating access to opportunities, particularly in terms of generating a sense of security and a willingness of individuals to rely upon their neighbours.

It was then stressed that bottom-up advocacy is essential, and that the government needs to engage with communities on the ground. A participant stressed that communities can bounce back quickly when they have access to information from leaders that are trusted. Returning to the point about young people, this participant stressed that in order to work with young people and mobilise them, you need to understand where they are coming from, work with them, connect through their interest, and use these interactions to build opportunities for engaging them with relevant support services and job opportunities. They emphasised that funding needs to go to these community-led, mentorship initiatives which teach resilience and adaptation as life skills, and not simply part of a crisis response.

A participant questioned what a resilient community even looks like, and suggests that we need to understand their attributes to learn from them. The emphasis here was that resilience is socially driven, and culturally influenced at the community level, and that communities are not static but rather, they constantly evolve. This implies there is not a universal solution to building community resilience so any models or methods need to be responsive to change.

The question was then posed by a participant, how do you measure resilience or security if we don't know what they look like? They suggested that maybe we are not be able to measure it quantitatively.

Another participant commented that there is a structural problem we need to acknowledge, which is that we are still doing things to people, and it is very much anchored in a 'treatment' mentality. They suggest that we need to build resilience through social and labour policies, and that 'responsibilised' notions of resilience may divert attention away from underlying structural problems. They question therefore whether 'resilience' is simply just a form of control and means of shifting responsibility away from those in power.

Other participants provide a more optimistic assessment of the resilient frame, with one noting that the concept is useful because it gives us something to strive for. They add that the concept also draws our

attention to the fact that we cannot insulate ourselves from systemic hazards, so we much shift our attention from prevention to coping. They conclude that at a policy level, the important question to ask is how governments can work to address structures that undermine resilience.

The Chair poses the next question: ***What role should Australian communities be expected to play when it comes to promoting systemic resilience in the face of complex risks?***

A participant comments that there is a lack of delineation between the roles and responsibilities of different institutions when it comes to promoting resilience in the face of these problems. It is then suggested that the idea of resilience has not been operationalised at the community level in a systematic way, but that communities understand what it means and can relate to the idea through their lived experiences.

A participant notes that our understanding of how divisions in society work is very outdated, and suggests that our tendency to rely on traditional identity categories when making assessments of risk and vulnerability, may be limiting and problematic. They suggest that diversity is much more complex than we often realise, and suggest that we need to focus on understanding what meaningful differences exist within communities in terms of where they are or are not being served by the government. They add that societal change impacts different groups differently, so it should be understood in a granular way rather than through a reductionist lens.

This raised an important point about data, with the same participant noting that the lack of quality data on diversity represents an obstacle to mapping communities to account for diversity and factor this into risk assessments and capabilities planning. They argue that new methods are needed, and the data utilised to inform these decisions should be meta, thereby ensuring that efficient and appropriate decisions can be made in terms of resource allocation. They stressed that the quicker we are able to get support to communities, the quicker they recover, assuming that markets are functional. But the point to emphasise here was that there are particular communities which should be more immediately targeted for assistance than others, based on need.

Another participant responds that we currently have a database that overlays hazard potential with vulnerabilities to inform resource allocation decisions. Many participants in the room who were not part of the emergency management system were seemingly unaware this existed.

The discussion then returned to the topic of young people, and a participant asked, what is our role in supporting young people's advocacy and action, and questioned whether there are meaningful avenues for them to shape the political agenda. They emphasised that young people understand their risk environments through lived experiences, and that communities need to feel a sense of control and choice when it comes to decision making. They do not simply want things being done to or decided for them.

A participant expressed scepticism about the possibility of scaling up and applying lessons derived from our recent experiences to build a one-size-fits-all model for capacity building, and stressed that we need to be asking communities what they want, and what they need. The important questions they suggested, were what things are scalable, and how can they be used to empower communities?

Another participant reiterated that our planning decisions and structures have a tendency to put poor people in riskier geographical areas, and their exposure to hazard may serve to systematically and cyclically recreate disadvantage. The problem, they suggested, is that communities are given responsibilities, but equities don't follow.

A concern was also raised about whether there is too much regulation in place when it comes to disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience related work.

The chair poses the next question: ***What support will communities require in order to drive DRR and resilience initiatives in anticipation of future catastrophic risks?***

A participant responds, 'ask them'.

Another elaborates that consultation is important, but a diversified and adaptable system still requires an effective government, and coordination. They stress that our current institutions in an age defined by complex problems, are not built to act upon the answers that communities provide when asked, 'what do you need?'. The participant also raises the question of what an effective coordinating body or meta-node might look like in this context.

Another participant responds that a regional scale approach to governance and crisis response is critical. They stress that if governance capabilities aren't established at a regional level, the response will be ineffective. They also advocate the importance of bridging community, business, and government interests, and stress the importance of partnership.

It is noted that local governments are often regional in scale and are somewhat responsive to community interests and needs, but under-resourced. It is also suggested that there are important developments underway in relation to self-governance and devolution of governance in Indigenous communities in Australia, but that there is a need for further capacity building support these initiatives. Ultimately, it is suggested that responsibility is increasingly being devolved to local government, but they are not receiving the resources required to fulfill their functions effectively.

One participant suggests that cities should be a focal point for these discussions and we need to work to address inequalities in these environments. This prompted a debate about urbanisation and it was noted that urbanisation trends in other parts of the world are seemingly different than in Australia.

A participant suggests we need to be mindful of where material resources are coming from in at-risk communities. They acknowledge there is a heavy reliance on voluntary labour, and funding needs to be deployed strategically, and in a manner that will support self-sufficiency and sustainability. A concern is raised regarding the ability of marginalised communities to access competitive funding through existing schemes.

Other participants note that we need to be cautious about giving money directly to communities as they may not be democratically organised, so there is a risk that resources may not be allocated in an appropriate and effective manner.

A participant notes that there is an overwhelming sense from communities which have experienced disasters that they are not being heard by responding agencies, and that they feel disenfranchised. The point is that communication must be two-way, whereas existing structures are typically unidirectional and formal mechanisms and processes do not necessarily capture diversity.

The chair asks: ***How should community-led initiatives which seek to promote resilience and/or enhance national security be governed or regulated, particularly for the purpose of protecting the rights and interests of marginalised populations?***

A participant suggests we must reject a blanket approach and endorses an adaptive governance model. Another suggests that money isn't always the solution. This prompts another question, does adaptive governance align with a national security strategy?

A participant suggests that alignment is necessary, but difficult due to the enduring mentality which frames resilience as an end-goal. They advocate for the importance of evidence-based research that helps to amplify and validate the voice of marginalised communities. They add that we also need to create pathways for members of marginalised communities to join emergency services and other sectors which contribute to crisis governance and management.

Another participant reiterates that consultation must precede decision making, and we should not assume that communities necessarily want interventions or programmes. They stress that this knowledge investment is an important pre-condition for developing research-based interventions.

Another participant adds that traditional governance arrangements are largely incompatible with these ideas and approaches.

A participant adds that our approach to measuring success is also short-sighted, because we have a tendency to focus on achieving effective outcomes rather than building inclusive processes. Part of the problem here is that it is difficult to define and measure the value of processes or systems and this creates challenges in relation to evaluating 'what works', particularly as it can take years for the impacts of an intervention to be understood. They conclude that the way we do measurement needs to change, and we need to focus more on indicators of inclusivity and perceptions of security, safety, and social capital.

The point is also made that evaluations can highlight successes at the local level, but these should be led by community organisations.

Another participant observed that compliance and performance indicators are sometimes unfair for marginalised communities because evaluations work if governments work with the right people.

A participant then suggested that community-led initiatives should be understood as part of a suite of options, but that coherence is critical and must be achieved at multiple levels, across sectors. They added that in the international humanitarian context, aid can actually cause harm.

A final question is posed by the Chair: *What is national security?* The Chair suggests this is really the crux of the discussion.

A participant suggests that national security is dependent on the security of communities, so excluding them from governance processes and resources or systems means distancing them from our understanding of what national security is and how we work to achieve it.

Another participant notes that the question of 'who we are' is important for defining what national security is. They stress that this begins with improving data collection mechanisms to harness this identity and to understand vulnerabilities systematically. They stress however that there is also a space for common-sense in the discussion.

The Chair concludes the second session.

Concluding Remarks

Convenor A/Prof Jarrett Blaustein concluded the event with some reflections. He noted that based on the discussion, it is clear that there is no magic bullet to address any of the challenges that Australia faces and that an effective model of crisis management will necessitate systems-level thinking and the utilisation of coordinated and resourced, networked governance-based responses. He argued that the issue of coordination is particularly important, and that shifting the way we thinking about risk and responsibility from 'ownership' to 'stewardship' might provide a fruitful avenue for overcoming some of the issues raised.