Collective action for resilience

The Queensland Resilience, Adaptation Pathways and Transformation Approach project (QRAPTA)

Background

The frequency and scale of natural disasters are increasing, and this, combined with chronic and periodic stressors are making communities more vulnerable to natural disasters, or acute stresses/shocks.

The *Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience* (QSDR) provides an overarching framework to empower Queenslanders to factor in resilience measures and activities as they anticipate, respond and adapt to changing circumstances. Resilient Queensland 2018–21 – Delivering the Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience was launched in May 2018 as the statewide, whole-of-government plan to strengthen Queensland's resilience to natural disasters.

QRA engaged CSIRO to expand on the insights garnered from its Resilient Queensland engagement processes with local governments to state agencies.

At present, state agency functions are largely managed through independent, separate processes to define problems, set goals and deliver services relevant to the portfolio. As resources are stretched and complexities increase, objectives must be re-assessed and re-aligned for greater efficiency. Genuine coordination across government is essential to respond to disasters and develop a collective capacity to cope.

CSIRO contends that the way to avoid worsening outcomes is to understand the causes and effects of 'cumulative, cascading and compound' risk, and take collective action across the whole system – communities, infrastructure, goods and services, economies and natural assets.

The CSIRO work commenced with a review of local and international approaches to resilience. In late 2019, CSIRO conducted interviews and workshops with state agency stakeholders to gather views and experiences relating to resilience.

This work recognised that many agencies' activities, irrespective of their particular portfolio responsibilities, already contribute to resilience. The QRAPTA project aimed provide a process to harmonise these resilience activities across agencies and sectors.

Nine key ideas emerged from the interviews, and were refined during workshops in early 2020 to four inter-connected themes. These themes informed the new harmonisation approach for resilience planning in Queensland.

The nine inter-connected ideas that emerged from interviews

I. **The narrowing window for preparedness, recovery and learning** – Queensland's disaster season is starting earlier, finishing later, and its geographic reach is expanding. The new norm is characterised by simultaneous events, multiple events in quick succession, and limited time to recover from one event and prepare for the next.

II. **Shared responsibility** – Agencies have commendable clarity of purpose and function in the immediate response phase of a disaster, and collaborate and cooperate well. However, ambiguity about responsibility tends to increases as the terrain moves from response through to recovery, planning and preparation. Responsibility for resilience is a shared responsibility and agencies' roles and relationships warrant greater clarity.

III. **Resilience 'as usual'** – Resilience is commonly interpreted as returning to business-as-usual, building back better, or maintaining business continuity. Resilience discussions need to mature beyond this comfort zone of existing core business.

IV. **Resilience as 'doing differently'** – Beyond this comfort zone of returning to business-as-usual, resilience should encompass revisiting assumptions about how, why and where things are done. Resilience can be more than building back better. It can be a transformational process, and should encourage consideration of whether re-building could happen differently, or if it should happen at all.

V. **Action under the radar** – Activity that is fundamental to resilience is not always labelled, or identified, as 'resilience building'. These activities can be aligned with resilience work by capitalising on the commonalities with the activities, and language, that already resonate with particular sectors.

VI. **Camouflaged constraints** – The typical resource constraints and bureaucratic barriers that can impact any government reform also pervade resilience activities. However, barriers to progressing resilience can be compounded by uncertainty about the appropriate targets for resilience priorities.

VII. **High stakes** – The visibility of responses to Queensland's disasters, from agencies and political leaders, is a consistent factor in the disaster landscape. The elevated stakes of disaster responses impact what, and how, decisions are made, and how genuinely any inadvertent benefits of disaster responses can be addressed.

VIII. **Resilient Queensland: digging deeper** – Agencies have broad awareness of Resilient Queensland. Some agencies are actively engaged with it, while for others there is potential for Resilient Queensland to gain greater traction and familiarity and connection with the agency's work.

IX. **Engaging with Resilient Queensland** – Agencies have an appetite for deeper engagement with Resilient Queensland. They see value in its use as a mechanism for engagement across a broad suite of stakeholders, and its potential for local applicability and tangible actions.

Outputs

The following documents were developed through the CSIRO work –

- A detailed, final report – '*Disaster-resilient and adaptive to change – narratives to support co-ordinated practice and collective action in Queensland*'

    - This final report includes four 'narratives' to support coordinated practice and collective action. The narratives use a collection of storyboards with visual elements to guide conversations and help shift thinking about resilience and pathways for action

- A report on the interviews with representatives from state government agencies – '*Key insights on resilience: Conversations with Queensland state agencies*'

- A technical report that covers the components of a comprehensive, multi-level checklist, and guide for using it, that helps agencies self-assess, align and coordinate their practices and measure their progress – '*A Resilience Checklist – a guide for doing things differently and acting collectively*'
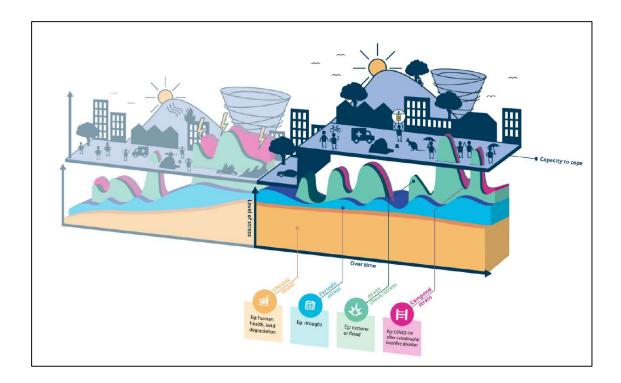

Narratives to support coordinated practice and collective action

Establishing a shared language, shared goals and shared understanding is critical to coordinating agencies' efforts to build resilience. CSIRO has designed four 'narratives' to help talk about the complex systems that need to be understood by decision-makers in a common way. The narratives are supported by storyboards with a range of visual elements that can be used flexibly to help shape discussions.

These are explored and explained in CSIRO's paper *Disaster-resilient and adaptive to change – narratives to support co-ordinated practice and collective action in Queensland.* This document dissects the diagrams, explaining individual components of the narratives.

Narrative 1 – Becoming more resilient

Chronic, periodic and acute stresses combine and amplify to create systemic risk, leading to the potential for catastrophic disaster. Changing roles, responsibilities and approaches to managing chronic, periodic and systemic risk will lower risk, and increase capacity to cope.

Narrative 2 – Thinking in systems, not silos

A systems approach is needed – understanding cause and effect, points of leverage, and three pathways ('Doing the same', 'Doing better' and 'Doing differently') to create futures that are disaster-resilient and adaptive to change.

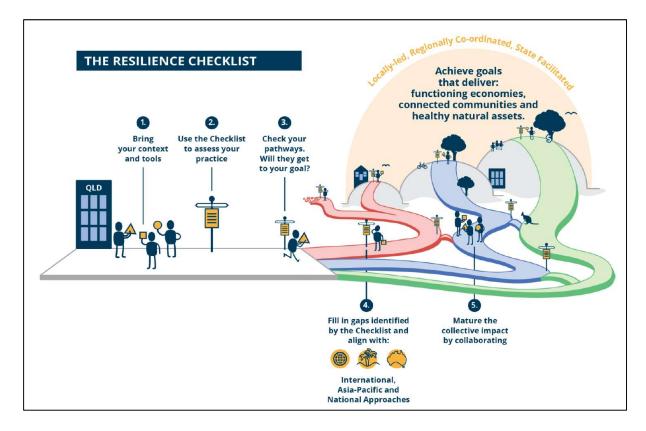## Narrative 3 – Pathways to effect change

Participants in interviews were clear in their collective view that another 'how to do resilience' instruction process was unnecessary. Instead, a resilience checklist has been developed. This enables agencies to assess whether their existing processes are effective and whether existing initiatives can be better aligned for collective impact.

The checklist can be used independently or jointly. It can be used by agencies at any level of risk reduction maturity. It also has the potential to be used systemically to underpin a collaborative approach to governance across all agencies and sectors, including those not traditionally in the 'disaster risk' or 'disaster response' business.

Narrative 4 – Changing our practices

The Resilience Checklist can complement the creation of new ways of interacting and governance mechanisms for co-ordinating State government service delivery.

The resilience checklist

The resilience checklist can be used to:

- enhance individual agency responses to challenges and assess whether their existing approaches are sufficient to meet the challenges of climate change and other disruptions

- help agencies compare practices and share learnings across organisations, identify gaps and duplications, and create opportunities for collaboration, co-ordinated action and collective impact

- create an environment conducive to considering future risk early in decision making processes, and

- potentially underpin more mature, shared governance arrangements that incorporate where and how agencies' day-to-day business activities can contribute to government's overall resilience and capacity for risk reduction.

What's next?

As acute events such as natural disasters, underscored by cumulative impacts of chronic stresses and changes, complicate how governments pursue common goals for our society – functioning economies, connected communities and healthy natural assets – the importance of collective action increases.

The QRAPTA project has generated a series of 'resilience narratives' and storyboards to frame discussions in ways that resonate with decision-makers and service delivery agents. It also provides a 'checklist' to support government agencies to self-assess, compare and align their practices and pathways for resilience.

These narratives help create a common understanding of the systems, risks, pathways and changes needed to improve Queensland's collective capacity to cope.

CSIRO envisages that this work can be used to support a broad range of government and non-government processes and initiatives. Examples include the state-wide rollout of regional resilience strategies under RQ, planning and investment initiatives for land use and infrastructure, and planning for social services.

Agencies have been empowered to use their existing processes to align their actions, and do things differently, to deliver better outcomes on the ground.