

The impact on and changing nature of social capital through multiple disasters



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As disasters become more frequent and severe, they create increasingly complex challenges for communities and place growing pressure on disaster risk management systems. Understanding how these events shape social capital is critical, as it underpins collaboration, coordination, and collective action – central to disaster resilience. Existing social capital provides the foundation for these capacities, making it essential to understand how it is affected in the context of multiple disasters.

Background

Globally, disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, with compounding impacts creating increasingly complex challenges. Yet understanding of how multiple disasters – two or more events with overlapping spatial and temporal impacts – affect communities remains limited. Social capital – social networks, norms, and trust – is often positioned as central to living with, adapting and building resilience to disasters. It provides the relational infrastructure through which society can share information and resources, coordinate support and collectively act. However, limited research examines how social capital is shaped by multiple disasters and the implications for disaster resilience.

Research aims

This research explores in what ways the nature and operation of social capital is changing through multiple disasters, what impacts these changes are having on communities and how any changes are affecting the ability to manage disaster risk and build resilience to future disasters.

Methodology

The research uses a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted in a case study community in northern NSW that experienced multiple disasters between 2019 and 2025. Findings informed questions for the annual University of Canberra Regional Wellbeing Survey to test the generalisability of results.

Findings

Two qualitative papers are in progress examining:

- Strengthening of community networks/ties alongside barriers to increased community agency.
- Erosion of trust in government and associated shifts in community attitudes and behaviours.

Survey data (currently being analysed) will examine:

- How common it is for multiple disaster exposure to erode community-government relations
- Whether multiple disaster exposure is associated with strengthened community networks/ties
- How common it is for multiple disaster exposure to:
 - Increase perceptions of self-reliance
 - Reduce confidence in disaster-related public policy.



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