Preparedness is my area.

Values:
To dwell in rhetoric and idealism for a moment it is my heartfelt plea for an acceptance that shared responsibility must mean shared power.

I also think it means:

- mutual respect and understanding,
- transparency
- a partnership between citizen/community and government in all their facets.

And here is the really idealistic bit –
It means that community/citizen/organisation or group is seen not as:

- a problem to be solved,
- a risk to be managed or
- an issue to be handled,

And government is not seen as the enemy to be shot at

but where there is a genuine commitment to mutual problem solving and to developing trust between the players.

Like all terminology ‘Shared responsibility’ rolls off the tongue but it requires a seismic shift in the mindset of all of us.

My more expanded answer to the question requires some explanation of how I view why we are where we are. And this is where the ‘no offense bit comes in.

What are the systemic and institutional factors, as I see them, which underpin the current situation?

Disaster and the moment:
For every second of the day, every day of the year, year in year out, the government controls the container of our lives. It is not a malicious, megalomaniac type of control, but more an inevitable consequence of:

- The blaming, adversarial, hierarchical spiritless and consuming systems we have created. Media and litigation conspire with our fears to always look for a scapegoat and so defensiveness thrives and the skin of government gets thicker and thicker protecting itself from the arrows of its citizens
- The sheer size of our society, our impact on the earth and on each other means we need rules upon rules to control how we live with each other and the earth.
- The power of oil has lulled all of us, citizen and government alike, into thinking we are supreme, invincible and that we can control our environment and the earth. Governments are no less susceptible to compulsive purchasing than the rest of us, they are in fact made up of
the rest of us. We spend our money on new trucks and bits of kit, technological fixes and the latest toy the agencies across the borders have. **We forget to invest in the people**, to empower and support them in their own solutions.

- The paradoxical and endemic mistrust, which has developed between community and citizen, and government, which goes both ways.

*The result:* Government have developed such paralysing risk aversion, fuelled by the political cycle, media recriminations and the courts, that everything is reduced to the lowest common denominator.

**One source one message** is the government catchcry in emergency management but it is like having one gene pool – it causes dangerous in breeding of thought.

There **is not one truth in emergency preparedness**, management response and recovery, just as there is not one truth in how to live a life.

Diversity breed ideas, great minds think differently.

**Government, Emergency Management and Research**

There is an extraordinary amount of research that is being conducted all over the country into fires and floods, drought and community engagement:

There are books, projects, research papers, presentations and hundreds of journal articles, PhD thesis, conferences, and communities of practice. The list goes on and on.

All this information is gathered, and we understand an enormous amount **about how disasters happen and how people think about risk and how they are likely to react.** Much of it really useful, particularly to community but it languishes because political paralysis means lowest common denominator.

There are only a handful of new initiatives **actually delivered** in any given year, and usually they have been initiated within the community with maybe some agency support.

**Story of Nasrudin, a bit of a wise joker from the Middle East**

*Nasrudin* out in the street searching frantically for something under lamplight. Neighbour came along and asked what are you looking for? “I’ve lost my key,” replied Nasrudin. Neighbour started to help and some other people. Finally someone asked “Are you sure you lost the key here?” “No I definitely lost it in my house,” replied Nasrudin “Then why are we looking for it here?” was the obvious question. “Because there is more light here.” Replied Nasrudin

Govt and agencies seem to be like Nasrudin – looking for the answers to understanding and working with community in the research because there is more light there, its easier to look. But we the community are over here.

**Community Dependence:**

*And if government has grown in a contorted manner, we as citizens in mirrored response have become dependant on government and disconnected from our own determinism, from our own responsibility*
We are regulated within an inch of our lives.

- It is Australian immunisation schedule provides for our children to receive no less than 31 immunization doses of 14 diseases by the time they are 18 months.
- Food handling regulations insist the sausage turner at the local fete is trained and licensed.
- Planning permits and regulations exist for putting up a chook house or collecting wood from the forest
- Regulations for Family day Care – meant to operate as a home away from home now each child has an individual activity plan, and the carer is called an educator!

**ALL OF THESE ARE UNDERSTANDABLE BUT THERE IS A PRICE...**

**The result is we expect.** We expect that **someone else is always in charge**, in charge of us and what happens to us.

And so it is that at the **baton passing movement** of a disaster either a

- Natural disaster like a bushfire or a flood, or cyclone,
- Or a health disaster like a fatal pandemic, or animal disease outbreak, or a plague or a break down in our transport system so there is no food in our stores,
- Or an invasion or
- A heat wave

Whatever it is, when a disaster hits with full **force the baton of responsibility** is suddenly thrust at us and we must assess, consider and decide sometimes in a matter of moments, what we will do to save our lives

**It is the ultimate irony that at point of impact we are told to take responsibility for ourselves—OK if you say so??**

We sit as ducks paralysed by our fear, not empowered, but spoon fed information at the same time as lectured at to be engaged, responsible and self reliant.

And then of course when the damage has been wreaked, and the ashes cool or the floodwater subsides, the baton cannot be neatly taken back. Hands have held it and know the need to keep holding.

**Specific Answers:**

To answer the question, **Is shared responsibility a useful policy:**

The short answer to that is: **yes I think so,**

the longer answer is that it depends on how shared responsibility is defined and implemented.

And: what could undermine shared responsibility as a policy concept? : 
the system, political will, deeply entrenched cultures which could all result in lip service, and create a greater divide between citizen and government, where people become either more dependant and vulnerable or they become more fiercely independent and mistrustful of anything government says

Currently there are very few community developed and owned disaster programs, events or festivals and even less, perhaps none, funded that don’t echo or support the current government and agency thinking – that don’t tow the party line.

Shared responsibility means making information available, but then allowing indeed encouraging us to think for ourselves.

We as a community are locked out of the process of developing and owning projects around disaster preparation.

We are powerless to develop strength and capacity, the very thing we are constantly told we must develop, the very thing that is repeatedly identified in research papers as the highest priority in community safety.

There is no healthy competition and debate between big government and small NGO’s - there are no small NGO’s.

There is no avenue for activism and agitation, hallmarks of democracy. It is all within the confines of enormous bureaucracies.

There is a cartel, a closed shop, of those given authority to save us from the red bull or any other bull.

As a result there are no community agencies lobbying for change, there is no capacity or empowerment for community to come together.

There is no grass roots disaster movement.

There is, in commercial terms, restraint of trade.

One factor contributing to the lack of support for community led disaster participation is the belief that we, the community will get it wrong.

Myth and misinformation dog disasters and in particular bushfires.

The thinking is that if we were allowed or encouraged to develop our own projects, programs, or systems, We would spread myths and dangerous misinformation like the plague. Fear and lies would become the unstoppable pandemic and emergencies agencies and truth would become powerless to ensure people are correctly educated.

In answer to this fear, I would argue that myth and misinformation are rampant anyway and there is no way to control it. And the greater the gap between citizen and government, the more fertile the soil for breeding misinformation.

But the more people are empowered to work in, explore, be creative and participate in and for their communities about disasters,

the more we will encourage

• preparedness,
• awareness,
• social connection and resilience,
• learning and education,

around disasters of all kinds. And most importantly ownership of the problem.

So the first step in implementing shared responsibility must be to empower community to work it out for themselves, to work out their part in being responsible.

It means repeatedly saying we can’t protect you, there may not be anyone telling you what to do. It means not catering to the lowest common denominator but believing that community is an average intelligent adult. For example they can be trusted to know where relief centres are. It is a risk – some people will get it wrong but some will get it wrong anyway and community will be stronger and less likely to allow others to get it wrong if trusted and empowered with the response.

It can’t be done by anyone in authority, it can’t be told, it can’t be bought, although money does help. It can be encouraged and supported, it can be funded but it can’t be controlled. It is in fact a leap of faith by people in people.

It means accepting there are other ways to live with a particular risk and allowing that to sit alongside the official government line.

It needs funding and encouragement for diversity in programs, events, activities. It needs a creative hand on grants programs and accountability and boundaries and it needs an active enthusiasm for non-traditional avenues and means – not just local government, large bureaucratic NGO’s and brigades.

It does happen in other areas but not in crisis. There are four thousand Land care groups Australia wide and millions of dollars available for them from a wide range of sources. There are community or non-government organisations in almost any field you can think of. There are sustainability groups, community health centres, and legal centres; there are unions, welfare services and mental health not for profits. There are even peak bodies supporting all the small organisations and representing sectors. However, none focus on disasters.

There is millions available in other grants - all in the name of community development - that the community knows best what it needs to develop resilience, community capacity and self-reliance.

**Process:**

And equally important aspect in any implementation and one that is very often overlooked or undervalued, is good, well designed and executed processes.

We need really good, well thought through and designed processes to engage in broad ranging, open and thorough discussion around these issues. We need to bring process experts into the discussion to draw upon and work with them in thinking about and designing processes for interaction.
We need to look at really **creative and participatory practices** of engaging and discussing with community and between community and government these fundamental issues about how we live with the risks inherent on our part of the planet.

We need to encourage and know that a thriving active noisy troublesome bunch of disasters activists and organisations is a sign, indeed a KPI of community resilience and shared responsibility.