

## Introduction

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. We do so in a constructive spirit and pay our respects to those who lost their lives, properties or livelihoods or were injured in the fires. We also acknowledge the incredible response from emergency agencies, civil society organisations, governments as well as the general community. Our submission and the recommendations within in are offered constructively and with great respect to the expertise and dedication which is well evident in the bushfire response.

Australian Red Cross is one of 192 National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement - the world's largest and most experienced humanitarian network. In Australia and the Asia Pacific region, we are strongly connected to our local communities and those experiencing vulnerability and who are affected by disasters.

In the 2019/20 bushfires we supported more than 27,500 people affected by 26 fires across five states and territories, worked at 100 relief and recovery centers and registered 44,800 people through the Register.Find.Reunite service. This response required 1,800 Red Cross volunteers and staff working a total of more than 45,000 hours. We also raised \$200 million thanks to an outpouring of generosity in Australia and internationally.

We are pleased to make this submission to the Royal Commission which highlights in particular:

- The reality of climate change's impacts on the severity and frequency of disasters, and the total (including social and economic) costs that flow from this which are projected to reach \$33 billion per year by 2050. This clearly demonstrates the need for Australia to invest more in disaster mitigation and community resilience now
- The need to ensure our emergency management systems are human-centred and informed by data
- The need to resource and embed community recovery more effectively within all aspects of emergency management – not only as something that is scaled up in response to major events
- The need to recognise, privilege and learn from the voices and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- The rapidly evolving nature of volunteering and humanitarian action that saw 38% of responses during the fires being self-generated by the community. This necessitates that we recognise and foster new mechanisms to support community-led action.
- The critical importance of accountability to communities to build public trust in emergency management systems and agencies, which may best be achieved through the introduction of consistent standards on transparency across all aspects of emergency management
- The significant expansion of technology as enablers at all stages of emergency management and the consequent need to fully leverage the opportunities technology brings to reduce harm and maximize positive humanitarian outcomes from disasters

## Q1 – What aspects of bushfire response worked well?

The 2019/20 bushfires are a stark sign of what a future of non-mitigated climate change will look like for our communities. As such, Australia faces a key moment now to act decisively in order to reduce the speed and impact of climate change, and help communities to adapt and to build resilience to the increasing frequency and severity of disasters that will unfold.

Red Cross acknowledges the strong emergency management sector, including in partnership with civil society that has led heroic, life-saving responses to what has been an unprecedented bushfire crisis. The way in which the emergency management community was able to protect lives and property and respond to the needs of people who were affected was quite amazing. We view the Royal Commission as an important opportunity to ensure our disaster preparedness, response and recovery systems are as robust and strong as they can be, that they are able to respond to the increased frequency and severity of disasters that climate change will bring, and that they continue to change and adapt to meet the needs of the communities they exist to serve.

We would also like to acknowledge the excellent community information provided during the fires, led in particular by the ABC in its role as the emergency broadcaster. The regularity, reliability and trust placed in this service meant that in the main, people were able to access life-saving information as it was required.

### Outpouring of support

One positive aspect of the bushfire response was the incredible public national and international support the events attracted. This included both cash donations and a dramatic increase in both traditional volunteering and community mobilisation through traditional and non-traditional mechanisms. These displays of solidarity, support and compassion, as well as cash and in-kind donations to Red Cross and many other groups, demonstrate yet again the incredible generosity of the Australian and global community during times of crisis.

Governments across the country and across all three levels were also proactive and supportive in the response to the fires and during the darkest of times pulled together to support critical responses.

Red Cross has received \$200 million to our Disaster Relief and Recovery fund between 1 July 2019 and 15 April 2020. Of this, 59% was donated by a companies (over 700 companies), 27% from individuals in Australia and 14% from individuals overseas. Our response is fully detailed in our [report](#).

In terms of other support provided by the community here in Australia and abroad, Swinburne University research analysed 42 initiatives of voluntary humanitarian action. Of these, 38% were community led compared to 62% led by established non-government organisations.

These actions had a range of purposes including:

- Specific appeal for money or help (0/16)
- Immediate response to the crisis when it was occurring (5/16)
- Aiding in recovery (i.e., clean-ups, supporting families and communities in the aftermath) (6/16)
- Offering aid in rebuilding (i.e., of homes, fences and other physical structures) (4/16)
- Supports for health in particular mental-health awareness and recovery (1/16)
- Caring for wildlife (i.e., animal rescue, healing, feeding and habitat restoration) (1/16)

This outpouring of financial and other types of supports demonstrates the strong community and humanitarian value base in Australia and internationally. It also emphasises the importance of ensuring that our disaster and emergency management systems recognise and foster an ecosystem of humanitarian action from both traditional, and emerging non-traditional actors.

### **Improved practice in recognising psychosocial needs**

One of the most important, but traditionally overlooked, components of disaster response and recovery is the need for strong psychosocial supports. Red Cross was pleased to see that in the response to the 2019/2020 bushfires, there was a strong recognition of psychosocial impacts and support needs across all agencies.

Practice in the psychosocial domain of response and recovery has significantly advanced since the Australian Government's (Department of Transport and Regional Services) review of the National Disaster Relief Arrangements 2001. Now, there is a clear recognition in the practice and literature, both in Australia and internationally, that recovery activities should be long term, community development based and that psycho-social support needs to be community based on an outreach model.

Practice over the past decade has improved dramatically and the psychosocial dimension of recovery is better understood and embraced. This practice is largely embodied in longer term community development, community outreach provision of services, and community support activities that enable individuals and communities to draw upon their own social capital. There is also strong recognition within the fields of research and practice that recovery programs need to be in place for a period of five years.

## **Q2 – What aspects of bushfire response did not work well?**

### **The reality of climate change**

The fires of 2019/20 are a stark demonstration of what Australia's future will look like unless we take action to help communities to adapt to climate change, and to increase community resilience. While not specifically an aspect of the response to the bushfires, addressing the issue of climate change and the need for greater resilience is critical to the future wellbeing of Australian communities, including reducing future disaster impacts and response requirements.

As is well documented, including in the International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent [‘The Cost of Doing Nothing’](#) report, and in the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities, [‘The Economic Cost of the Social Impact of Natural Disasters’](#), there will be significant humanitarian and economic impacts as a result of climate change. In Australia alone, we will see:

- An increase in heatwaves
- Increase in warmer days, and a reduction in cooler days
- Increase in drought conditions, and a trebling of fire danger days in southern Australia
- Fire seasons in eastern Australia lengthening, into October and April
- A Black Saturday scale event in Victoria every 3 years rather than 30 years
- An overall reduction in rainfall in south eastern Australia, but increased severe storms and high intensity rain events, leading to flash flooding
- Increased storm surge and coastal flooding due to raised sea levels
- The number of moderate and medium cyclones in northern Australia may reduce, however the number of intense cyclones may increase
- The number of days over 35 degrees per year in Adelaide will increase from 20 to 47 by the end of the century

Without steps to increase resilience, the total cost of disasters will rise to \$33 billion dollars per year by 2050 ([The Economic Cost of the Social Impact of Natural Disasters](#)).

The case for increased resilience stems from our understanding of disaster impacts. The impacts on individuals and communities can be long term, and complicated in terms of loss of

life and injury, changes in health and wellbeing, housing, financial and material losses, shifts in relationships, education and employment prospects, changes in community dynamics and the environment. It is also recognised that the social costs of disaster are equal to, if not greater than the tangible costs of physical losses.

The United Nations Development Program recognises that disasters can erase development gains, and while the effects are more pronounced in less developed countries, they can still erase aspirations in developed countries. To recognise these impacts, the UNDP has begun to measure the impact of disasters in terms of life years lost, that is the time required for economic and social development. In short, disasters can not only cost people their lives, but for those who survive, also cost them productive years of their lives, time that could be spent fulfilling their aspirations.

With a changing climate, and increasing urbanisation, there will be more people at risk to these disasters into the future. More than 9 million Australians have been impacted by a natural disaster or extreme weather event in the past 30 years. In Australia, over one in three people have faced the threat or actual disaster in their lifetime.

Increases in Australia's population see shifting settlement patterns and people moving into areas previously undeveloped, but at higher risk to hazards, including also the push for infill development and increased urbanisation. A recent IAG report on risks indicates that 25% of people live in areas subject to high or extreme flooding, and just under 10% subject to bushfire, over 58% of people live in areas subject to high or extreme earthquake risk, and over 17% at risk of cyclones. A changing demographic profile of the community, through ageing or health or economic status, may also change people's ability to cope with the impacts of disaster.

Disaster costs are increasing, from currently \$5 billion per year, to \$33 billion per year by 2050. The Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities commissioned research by Deloitte Access Economics to determine the cost of disasters to the Australian community, and the benefits of increasing investment in mitigation. Their most recent report (released November 21, 2017) finds that the total economic cost of natural disasters is growing. The current costs are \$5 billion per year and will reach nearly \$33 billion, by 2050, which is greater than the current federal education budget.

These costs include significant, and often long-term social impacts noted above. Where governments do not make budget provision for disaster recovery, funding for recovery activities has to come from either surplus funds (if available), reduced expenditure in other areas, borrowing, or increased taxes. Hence these costs have an additional, hidden impact. This will have an impact on the current and future government's ability to effect budget repair.

Without mitigating action, the total cost of natural disasters in each state and territory is expected to increase by more than 2.5 times between now and 2050, after adjusting for inflation. As previous reports from the Roundtable have shown, targeted investments in physical (such as infrastructure) and community (such as preparedness programs) resilience measures are predicted to significantly lessen the increase in costs.

### **The need for even greater investment in disaster resilience**

The value of investment in resilience has long been recognised, internationally, nationally, and locally through disaster management and mitigation frameworks, from the first United Nations Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, agreed by nations in Yokohama, Japan in 1992 through to the most recent signed in Sendai, Japan, in 2015.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Resilience 2015-30, which the Australian Government has signed, calls for increased investment in disaster risk reduction to achieve resilience.

Importantly, the Sendai framework uses the language of investment rather than funding, noting that there is a potential return on actions that are undertaken pre-disaster to reduce their

consequences. This framework provides guidance for Australian policy instruments, including the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, and the National Partnership Agreement on Disaster Resilience.

### **Investing in disaster resilience; for every dollar spent.**

As identified above, the costs of disasters are increasing. The first report from the Australian Business Roundtable found that an expenditure of \$250 million annually in disaster mitigation (currently only \$52 million) would generate budget savings of \$11 billion and federal government costs on disasters could reduce by 50%.

These saving are likely to be much higher, as a subsequent report found that the economic costs of the social impacts (health and wellbeing, employment, education and safety issues) are equal to, if not greater than the physical costs of restoration of assets.

Using three distinct case studies; raising the Warragamba Dam wall, strengthening housing stock in Queensland, and putting power lines underground in Victoria, cost benefit analyses suggested that for every dollar spent, savings between \$3 and \$8 dollars could be made.

Hence, making relatively small investments can reduce pressure on the budget into the future, and contribute to Treasury's goal of fiscal sustainability, and increasing productivity, and the Australian Government's goal to support the economic prosperity and welfare of Australians. They also will reduce years to decades of stress and heartbreak for those affected by disaster.

### **Investing for a double dividend**

Disaster resilience has a double dividend. The first dividend is a direct benefit (and future benefit). The savings generated are tangible, which means less pressure on tight budgets and other priorities such as schools, community centres and roads can be funded, or budget repair effected.

The second, or double benefit, comes from the economic or social activity that the activity creates. Building levees, clearing firebreaks, retrofitting homes or raising dam walls clearly has a positive economic benefit, putting money into local communities and creating jobs. These are all benefits that are realised in the present.

It may also increase community confidence, which has a further positive benefit. If people feel safe, they are more social and cooperate more.

Mitigation programs, such as education and awareness programs, which are far less expensive to run than the cost of infrastructure projects and have a broad positive community benefit. The benefit is also realised in the present. People feel more confident, and in control. Programs that focus on network building create community connections. A range of research shows that people who are connected into their community, and participate in their community, live happier, healthier and longer lives, and their neighbourhoods are better places to live.

### **Australia significantly underinvests in disaster resilience**

One of the findings of the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding in Australia was that Australian Governments underinvest in disaster resilience (\$52million, shared 50:50 by the federal government and the states and territories). It recommended a gradual increase by the Australian Government in funding to \$200million, to be matched by states and territories. The report also recommended that this increase be tied to a shift in cost sharing under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements, with states taking more responsibility for the recovery costs of natural disasters, as more of their assets are exposed to the impacts of disaster.

On 23rd December 2016 the Government responded to the Productivity Commission inquiry report: "The Government acknowledges the Commission's view that the current natural disaster funding arrangements do not provide incentives for state, territory and local governments to

adequately reduce disaster risks to their essential public assets. The proposed upfront recovery funding model will support jurisdictions to better manage the risks associated with essential public assets by reducing the barriers to 'building back better' when appropriate.

The Government also acknowledges the Commission's recommendations that the Australian Government increase mitigation funding to \$200 million per year over time while significantly reducing its contribution to recovery spending by:

- Increasing the threshold at which the Australian Government will begin sharing recovery costs with a state
- Reducing the cost-sharing rate above that threshold to 50%, and
- Increasing the small disaster criterion from \$240,000 to \$2 million per event.

The Australian Government has consulted states and territories about these recommendations. States and territories raised significant concerns with any proposal to reduce the Australian Government's contribution to recovery funding. For this reason, the Australian Government does not propose to pursue these recommendations at this stage. However, as part of the upfront recovery funding model the Government is actively exploring the option of states using any efficiencies realised following the actual reconstruction of essential public assets on future disaster mitigation activities<sup>10</sup>.

This was a significant opportunity to undertake landmark reform in emergency management, focusing upon meeting tomorrow's risks and challenges, today.

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *That disaster resilience funding is increased from \$26 million to \$200 million over three years, as recommended by the Productivity Commission*
- *That the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework is fully implemented and periodically updated to reflect the changing nature of disasters.*

### **The need for human centred preparedness, response and recovery systems supported by accessible data**

In addition to a significant increase in disaster resilience investment, we must ensure that our disaster and emergency preparedness, response and recovery systems are human centred, trauma informed and put the needs of the community at the forefront. We must also ensure that the systems meet the needs of individuals and communities and people are able to access supports when and where they need them – a 'no wrong door' approach. Key to achieving this, is access to safe, reliable and ethically managed data.

The experience of a natural disaster or emergency can be one of the most traumatic of a person's life. The aftermath of the event can also be traumatic as people grapple with loss of life, property, livelihood, injury and more. Individual people and communities will respond in different ways and at different speeds.

In a country the size of Australia, there are also a number of logistical challenges including the ability for individuals to access evacuation and recovery centres. In the 2019/20 fires, Red Cross was aware that many people were geographically unable to access physical recovery and/or evacuation centres.

The range of agencies and levels of government can also pose challenges. Many individuals report having to access multiple agencies and navigate multiple systems in order to access the supports they are entitled to. These systems and agencies are often not integrated – a person must themselves advocate for the supports they need and are entitled to, rather than a system where a person would engage with one agency and have that engagement open the door to the other supports they need.

As we confront a future of more disaster events, it is timely to consider how we can ensure that the systems and agencies which exist to respond to disasters can be more human-centred and can collaborate more effectively.

One way of achieving this is by investing in timely, accurate, verifiable and ethically managed data systems that cut across geographical and system boundaries. Despite consistent recognition that effective disaster response requires real time access to data and information on disaster impacts, Australia still lacks a capacity to manage data across geographic and system boundaries. Nor do we have a mechanism to verify data once but use multiple times. This is a particular issue in distributing grants to people who have been affected; people are required to have their impacts verified multiple times and by multiple agencies rather than once with multiple applications.

The absence of strong cross-border data sharing arrangements also means that it is difficult to understand where recovery and evacuation centres are needed, and how many people will require outreach and other ongoing support because they are unable to access a physical centre.

Where there are some mechanisms in place to share information and data, often these are restricted by state or territory borders which have little practical relevance for many communities that are spread across the border line. For example it is not possible for an evacuation centre in Queensland to notify colleagues in New South Wales (assuming that consent has been given for such a notification) that a person might require additional follow up or support. Similarly, there is no consistent, verified national system that gives data on property damage in real (or close to real) time. Whilst ad hoc arrangements have emerged in some locations, these are inconsistent and not embedded to the extent required to ensure that people or information isn't lost between systems.

This has particular impacts for response and recovery planning as it is not appropriately informed by data on needs such as property losses, number of people impacted, and business losses. The lack of consistent information causes a range of logistical challenges in response planning and slows down the overall response and recovery planning. It also has impacts on people who are not able to access an integrated system of supports and have to 'repeat their story' numerous times in order to access the various supports needed. This experience can be traumatic as well as frustrating and inefficient.

While pre-arranged data sharing arrangements could meet this need, an alternative is a single database for response and recovery. There are a number of systems that could be useful starting points from which a national system could be developed. This includes the nationally supported and consistent system for reconnecting people displaced by disasters, Register.Find.Reunite.

Of paramount importance in the development of any data-sharing arrangements or systems is that data sovereignty and privacy is respected so that people are empowered to control their own data and that data is shared in the least intrusive way possible. For example, verification of circumstances (e.g. loss of property) may suffice, without necessarily requiring sharing of personalised data and information. Such a set of arrangements or system and the data within it would need to be held to the highest ethical standards and managed with great transparency so that people would have confidence in the arrangements/ system, and to avoid infringing on civil liberties including a person's right to privacy.

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *Cross-border/ national data sharing arrangements or system providing accurate data and information on human, infrastructural, environmental and other impacts be developed but that any such arrangements/ system ensures that the privacy and data sovereignty of individuals is respected and protected*
- *That such data systems inform disaster response and recovery planning including where additional outreach capacity is required*

## **Cross border arrangements as they apply to Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements**

Another example of how existing disaster management arrangements aren't currently working well to respond to the needs of communities and individuals who use them is in Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) are implemented in different ways across state and territory borders. With different lead or commissioning agencies in each state or territory administering the DRFA, there is significant variance between states and territories. This is problematic from an equity perspective generally, but is most pressingly an issue in communities that straddle state or territory border lines.

During the recent bushfires there were numerous cross border communities impacted and many struggled to access recovery supports, as their normal geographic service centre is across the border from where they reside. This meant that people were turned away from recovery hubs where financial assistance was being provided as they were not classed as residents of that state. This caused a lot of undue stress for residents, conflict within communities and many were forced to travel longer distances to access support.

Similarly, government assistance measures available vary significantly from state to state, creating inequities when disasters occur either side of or across borders.

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *That Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements are amended to be more consumer centric, with particular consideration and arrangements for people who live in 'cross-border' communities*

## **Need to further enhance ongoing disaster recovery capability**

The nature of recovery from a disaster or emergency is complex and dynamic and is affected by the unique experiences and circumstances of individuals and communities. Successful recovery relies upon understanding the context, recognising the complexity, using community led approaches, ensuring coordination of all activities, employing effective communication, and acknowledging and building capacity. It must also be trauma informed and culturally aware.

Whilst disaster response agencies receive steady and secure funding from state and territory governments and in some instances have dedicated Emergency Management Commissioner type roles, the agencies required to support disaster recovery (which include but are not limited to humanitarian or civil society organisations) do not necessarily have the same degree of funding certainty and so are required to rapidly scale up following events. This means that institutional knowledge is not retained consistently and nor is the recovery sector able to permanently establish itself in the disaster landscape.

As we look to a future with more frequent and severe extreme weather events, as well as other emergency events such as collective trauma events or pandemics such as COVID-19, the need for effective recovery responses has never been more important. This can only be achieved by ensuring and supporting recovery capacity and capability that can be scaled up and down in response to demand, embedded into the system to develop the appropriate capabilities and working relationships and roles within the sector. We need disaster recovery to be embedded in emergency management arrangements as an ongoing and pivotal piece, not activated only when there is an emergency through the formation of new, time-limited agencies.

As is the case in some jurisdictions the recovery function could be performed within the remit of an Emergency Management Commissioner or equivalent role so that it has an end to end perspective on emergencies and their impacts on communities. Similarly, the recent announcement by the New South Wales government to establish 'Resilience New South Wales' in order to lead preparedness and recovery work in that state is a good example of recognising the need for ongoing recovery capability. Such a capability will work best if well integrated with response functions. Within such

any such approach, it is important that the value and experience civil society organisations is respected, supported and included.

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *That recovery capacity is established and resourced on an ongoing basis within each jurisdictional emergency management arrangements*
- *That the role of civil society organisations that contribute to and have expertise in recovery work is recognised and leveraged in any new recovery arrangements*

### **Impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

Red Cross acknowledges the intrinsic connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to their Country and by extension, the unique contributions to preparedness as well as pain and impacts felt as a result of natural disasters and emergencies.

There is a need for our emergency management arrangements to be adapted for two purposes. The first is to ensure that any emergency service response is inclusive of and culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The second is to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in order to leverage 60,000+ years of knowledge and resilience into our emergency management responses and preventative approaches.

In order to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people, emergency management services must also be culturally safe and take into account the unique needs for particular communities. There are a range of ways this can be achieved, one of which is by ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in emergency management agencies.

On a practical level there is a critical need for emergency management agencies to understand the location of sacred cultural sites in order to be able to avoid damaging them in the course of their duties.

As we move further into recovery and reflect on the aspects of the emergency response that worked well or could be improved, there is an opportunity to ensure that the distinct needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are met in preparedness, response and recovery, and that where appropriate, the broader community is able to benefit from the rich cultural knowledge of First Nations people which includes cultural healing practices and ceremonies.

The first of these is to ensure that the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is captured in recovery research and literature – a field which traditionally does not adequately capture such experiences.

The second is to recognise and, where necessary, support the resilience traits in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities such as close social links and shared histories in the recovery process.

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *That the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities are involved in emergency management preparedness, response and recovery planning and implementation. This could be achieved through inclusion of relevant Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander leaders in the relevant emergency planning committees and response management structures*
- *That disaster and emergency management agencies build or foster meaningful and respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities with a particular focus on leveraging the deep and long-standing knowledge of First Nations people in managing Country and disaster preparedness, response and recovery*

- *That the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and volunteers in emergency response organisations is increased.*

### **Foster an eco-system that promotes volunteering, community mobilisation and humanitarian action**

As referenced in Question 1, the 2019/20 fires prompted an outpouring of humanitarian actions in the form of a range of activities as well as cash support. Some of these efforts are supported by traditional mechanisms such as civil society organisations including Red Cross; others are operating independently of any formal organisation.

Doing good and responding to community need is not the domain of any one organisation or institution alone. There is a need to update our emergency management frameworks and systems so that we can continue to foster and support such actions, which will increasingly be led directly by communities. This means supporting traditional volunteering activities and organisations who provide essential supports in times of need, but also acknowledging and fostering community mobilisation. These can be understood as two separate but equally important behaviours that have tremendous potential to meet community need during times of crisis or emergency.

To quote soon to be published research from our partners at Swinburne University's Social Innovation Research Institute:

"While it is true that established organisations played a critical role in the emergency response to the bushfire crisis, and will continue to be instrumental in recovery and rebuilding efforts, it is also apparent that Australians are bypassing charitable organisations and organising their own local, bespoke and agile humanitarian responses using whatever knowledge, skills and resources they have to hand".

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *That there be greater recognition of and fostering for community mobilisation in the emergency management system*

A key priority of the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience is for decision makers to "adopt policies and practices that support and recognise emergency services and the importance of volunteering in our communities". One of the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the changing nature of volunteering. Volunteering has moved from a static commitment to an organisation to one that is more cause-focussed and often time limited. This shift makes it challenging for organisations to recruit, train, engage and retain volunteers on a long term basis. Expectations of volunteers have also changed, with a shift to a more educated and skilled workforce.

The provision of services to support people to prepare for, assist with meeting their basic relief needs and recover from disaster is increasingly being understood as a complex and dynamic issue that requires sensitive and skilled management. These issues include dealing with people under a great deal of stress, marginalised people with issues relating to homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, and mental illness. This recognition signals a need to shift the view of emergency relief from a "welfare" approach of managing on the fly, to recognising that the situations people are dealing with are volatile, that they deserve to be treated with dignity and that their needs are complex and require skilled personnel during disasters.

The development of capacity for emergency relief and recovery activities, most often through the not for profit and health sector, should be treated no differently to the development of capacity for the emergency response activities, e.g. firefighting, flood rescue etc. However, while state fire services and emergency services are funded by State/Territory Governments to provide a range of services, this funding is generally not available for the development of the not for profit sector's relief or recovery capacity. As a result, there is a strong reliance on the goodwill of not for profit agencies and their supporters to provide relief and recovery services and activities.

It has become increasingly obvious to volunteer organisations that they not only need to manage their volunteers better and with more skill, but that they and their volunteers are vital to the

continuing development of healthy, flourishing, democratic communities and societies. They need to effectively recruit and retain volunteers and for those volunteers in turn to be able to contribute positively and meaningfully to the sustainability of their volunteering organisation. ABS General Social Survey (2010) also indicates that more Australians are volunteering, but for less time. This means rising costs for volunteer engagement and support activities as well as infrastructure improvements due to rapidly changing technology, rise of social media, and communication channels.

There is also a call from the peak body, Volunteering Australia, as well as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, to invest in building the capacity of volunteer trainers, leaders and coordinators. If organisations seek to build capacity and community resilience, then focusing on training and development of these roles (quality) can be more effective than increasing the number of volunteers (quantity). Professional volunteer management competencies are recognised and the need for accreditation of these roles is a pressing need.

As an example, Red Cross supports the recruitment, training, and support of 7,700 volunteers. These volunteers perform a range of increasingly complex tasks including evacuation centre management, incident management, psychological first aid and longer term recovery outreach support. It has been calculated that it costs approximately \$150 to have a Red Cross volunteer ready to deploy and our staff to volunteer ratio is 1 to 400. This is based upon direct staff engagement with the recruitment, training and engagement of volunteers. Other staff costs are involved in program management, operational readiness, and preparedness and recovery activities.

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *Emergency management systems and frameworks are responsive to and able to foster traditional humanitarian or voluntary actions as well as community mobilisation initiatives*

### **Q3 – In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?**

The points raised in our response to question 2 are all essential in order to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination however rather than reiterate those points again, Red Cross would like to address the need to ensure public trust in disaster response and the agencies which contribute.

#### **Ensuring trust through transparency**

In the context of a future where we will be more reliant than even on the emergency management sector because of climate change impacts, it is important that there is public and community trust in the sector and that the sector meets the needs of the communities it exists to serve. However, this need is challenged by a general decline in trust in all institutions, as well evidenced by measures such as the Edleman Trust Barometer. This trust is not just important for traditional institutions or structures, we must ensure trust and transparency across the system including in emerging actors of systems such as crowd-funding or non-traditional fundraising methods.

Too often, large scale natural disasters where multiple agencies and/or organisations are involved are plagued by divisions between agencies and duplicative or competitive activities, rather than the collaborative and responsive approaches required to effectively meet community need.

In the context of a future with more disasters and extreme weather events, there is a need for the emergency management eco-system to work more collaboratively and to increase transparency in its operations to protect and build public trust across the whole system.

For civil society organisations such as Red Cross, this relates particularly to raising funds for disaster appeals. During the 2019/20 fire season, Red Cross experienced unprecedented generosity from Australians and people around the world, followed by some media reports of mistrust relating to the distribution of funds. This cycle of generosity to mistrust is sadly not new to this event nor to Australia alone.

Red Cross recognises and has sought to demonstrate that the appropriate response to this is radical transparency and has provided extensive public reports on the collection and distribution of our Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund including our recent [Bushfire Report. This has included providing regular updates on the distribution of funds to the general public and to the National Bushfire Recovery Agency.](#)

The example of Red Cross' experience is just one component of a much broader issue across the system. That is, the need to ensure radical transparency in all emergency management operations so that the public can maintain trust and the system will be accountable to those it exists to support.

As such, we suggest that the Royal Commission consider the development of national standards in emergency response and recovery that achieve the required levels of transparency. Such standards might be well suited to sit within the National Recovery Framework currently in development. They might also include sections specific to charitable fundraising and distribution. The focus of any such standards must be on community outcomes and reflect best practice in disaster response and recovery.

*Red Cross recommends:*

- *That the Royal Commission consider the development of national standards in emergency response and recovery that achieve high levels of transparency. Such standards might be well suited to sit within the National Recovery Framework currently in development. The focus of any such standards must be on community outcomes and reflect best practice in disaster response and recovery.*

#### **Q4 – anything else to tell the RC?**

##### **Use of technology**

We would like to encourage the Royal Commission to consider the best use of technology, including emerging technologies, in emergency management and response. One such application might be in enhancing communications in remote communities where we know there is a reliance on satellites which can be unreliable. There are many other potential applications for technology in emergency management and Australia would benefit from a proactive approach to adoption.

##### **Impact of climate change**

We would like to again emphasise the role of climate change in the 2019/20 fires and reiterate our view that these fires can be viewed as the 'canary in the coalmine' unless decisive and strong action is taken on climate change which includes increasing adaptation measures such as enhancing resilience to emergencies and natural disasters. This includes the renewal of the Australian government's National Resilience and Climate Adaptation Strategy.

Finally, as a humanitarian organisation, we are particularly concerned that people experiencing vulnerabilities will bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change and urge particular action to support vulnerable groups.

### **Changing nature of charitable giving**

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the changing nature of fundraising and donations and bring to the Commission's attention that increasingly, people are drawn to causes as opposed to organisations and will give according to particular cycles of need in times of disaster or need. Looking at the not for profit organisations that received the largest amount of support for the bushfires (Australian Red Cross, Salvation Army, St Vincents, WWF and RFS) would indicate that people gave to the cause they were interested in rather than the actual charity (eg victims, animals, RFDS, the environment). The key changes in the way that people gave to the recent bushfires (as noted in MoreStrategic and FIA research 'Public Attitudes to Bushfire Fundraising') were that 43% of people donated indirectly (through a collection organised on behalf of a charity) and 14% donated through Facebook (the majority for the first time and they expect to give this way again) in a way that would see funds distributed directly to affected individuals. When looking at previous disasters, history would indicate that support given in response to disasters is in addition to their usual giving, not instead of (it is too early to confirm whether this is the case for the bushfires).

It is important that this change is acknowledged and leveraged by the emergency management system in order to ensure that communities impacted by disasters are able to benefit from community generosity.

### **Conclusion**

Red Cross thanks the Royal Commission for considering our submission, and again would like to acknowledge the many organisations and agencies that contribute to Australia's emergency management eco-system; a system which is extremely sophisticated, enables community self-sufficiency and saves lives, property and livelihoods.

We would particularly like to commend to the Royal Commission recognising the efforts of the multitude of players who have provided support to affected communities, both in the short and longer term, from the larger scale not for profit agencies with a traditional role in recovery, to smaller scale and emergent organisations focussed on meeting a specific need.

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