



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: East Gippsland Community Foundation

Q1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?

The East Gippsland Community Foundation (EGCF) was created by the Victorian Government in 2021 to disperse East Gippsland's share of the funds remaining from the Victorian Bushfire Appeal for victims of the 2019-20 fires. The appeal was run in conjunction with the Bendigo Bank. The first tranche of funding, to individuals directly affected by the fires, was allocated through the Bendigo Bank's philanthropic arm, the Community Enterprise Foundation. Some funding was also provided for short-term community recovery and preparedness projects.

EGCF received \$8.8 million, to be used to support community recovery, resilience and preparedness projects in the medium- to long-term. To date, about half of the funding been dispersed to East Gippsland communities, through grant rounds and through project partnerships with non-government organisations or community recovery committees.

EGCF's main experience with Commonwealth disaster funding support involved the Black Summer grants program and the Local Economic Recovery (LER) program. In both cases, there seemed to be a considerable delay between the assessment of applications and the announcement of successful grants. Feedback from community groups indicated that the Commonwealth application forms were excessively detailed and difficult to complete, particularly at a time when the communities were still under extreme stress. Similar comments were made to Victorian Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) inquiry into the 2019-20 fire season (Victorian Government, 2021).

The immediate impact on EGCF was that many applicants for our first grant round had also applied to Black Summer but had not been advised of the outcome. EGCF approved funding for several projects which were subsequently awarded Black Summer grants. Because the applicants were community groups, EGCF felt obliged to allow them to reallocate it's funding to alternative projects, rather than requiring them to return the money. Payment of LER grants was excessively slow, so that escalating costs meant that the communities are now coming to the Foundation for supplementary funding to meet the shortfall and allow them to complete their projects





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Q2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?

The Victorian IGEM report noted that communities had found it harder to access funds for preparedness and resilience projects than for 'softer' community recovery activities. Preparedness and 'build back better' did not seem to meet the grant criteria as readily as some other projects.

From our experience, the best way to encourage affected communities to reduce their disaster risk would be for them to be strongly supported (financially and in terms of personnel) to develop a comprehensive plan for their recovery priorities. This should then form the basis for grant-giving bodies (Commonwealth, State, regional, philanthropic, etc.) to commit to funding components of the plan, in a coordinated way, over an extended period. Funding from all levels of government could potentially be directed through a community foundation or similar body, to simplify allocation and reporting relationships.

This type of coordinated funding model would be consistent with the 'community led' recovery principle espoused in the Australian Disaster Recovery Framework, 2022. It also reflects the recommendations made in the report of the Victorian IGEM, which advocated developing a model that, amongst other things, enabled 'short, medium and long-term recovery planning and resourcing' and 'immediate local recovery progress by reducing administrative funding impediments for local organisations while retaining appropriate accountability mechanisms for expenditure' (Recommendation 5). The IGEM report also recommended 'a streamlined application process for individuals, families, business and community recovery groups' (Recommendation 6).

EGCF believes a coordinated approach would be far more effective than the competitive grants programs that operate at present, which put far too much responsibility on community members, who are mostly going through their own recovery journeys. Our feedback indicates that more three years on from the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfire disaster, community leaders are suffering from 'grant exhaustion' and find it almost impossible to keep pursuing resources that are still needed, even though there are grant programs on offer that might provide them.

Q3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.

EGCF's directors are familiar with the Australian Disaster Recovery Framework. The Foundation supports the Australian Disaster Recovery Payment system and the Disaster Recovery Allowance; the amounts allocated under each program could be increased, as recommended by the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) and others, and should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Our comments, above, are directed to support for community recovery and resilience. We seek to assist communities to maximise the achievement of their priority projects and programs, while minimising the load on individual community members.

Q4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?

As the framework points out, each community and each disaster are different.

For disaster events that are localised, the roles of states / territories and local government (at least in Victoria) are clear.





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In the case of 'emergencies of nationally significant harm' there is probably more work to do to clarify roles and responsibilities, including the use of the Australian Defence Force.

Having said that, Foundation directors who were living and working in East Gippsland during the 2019-20 fires greatly appreciated the ADF contributions.

Q5. Is there any further information you would like to provide?

As noted in the Victorian IGEM report in 2021, the amount of support provided by the Australian and Victorian governments to Victorians after an emergency varies greatly between emergencies, making it difficult for recovery organisations to develop pre-determined recovery plans and financial assistance strategies. The same is true of public fundraising for people affected by disaster events. For example, an official Victorian Bushfire Appeal was held for the victims of the 2019-20 fires (the source of EGCF's funds to support recovery, resilience and preparedness in East Gippsland Shire), but this did not happen for the North-East and Murray River floods. Informal feedback from the north of the state indicates the amount of funding and assistance provided by the Commonwealth and State governments was also less than East Gippsland had received for the fires.

This inconsistency makes it very difficult for philanthropic organisations to develop strategic plans that enable them to provide timely and ongoing support to their communities after a disaster.

Finally, if follow-up consultations are proposed, EGCF would like to be able to expand on this submission.

