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National Emergency  
Management Agency

# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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**Consent option:** Publish with name

**Submitted by:** Rotary Australia World Community Service Ltd.

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

Rotary Australia World Community Service Ltd (RAWCS) is the organisation that facilitates the humanitarian projects of Australian Rotary Clubs and Rotarians. RAWCS operates charitable trust funds that enable projects within Australia, as DGR registered Public Benevolent Institutions, including the DGR-1 Rotary Australia Benevolent Society (RABS) and the DGR-2 Rotary Australia Relief Fund (RARF). These funds have been actively involved in assisting communities and individuals that have been impacted by natural disasters since 2018 including drought, bushfires and floods in every State of Australia.

RAWCS has worked closely with various Federal Government agencies to assist in delivering direct aid to families impacted through the severe drought of 2017 to 2020 by assisting with the delivery of the Drought Community Support Initiative (DCSI) and the Drought Community Outreach Program (DCOP) through well managed grants of \$6.5 million and \$7.5 million respectively. In both programs RAWCS was able to leverage the extensive network of Rotary Volunteers and local Rotary Clubs to efficiently deliver the program assistance to those in need of support.

Of course, these programs were in addition to numerous local and regional support programs that were carried out and funded through the Rotary network and public donations. RAWCS drought programs alone totalling \$13.3 million. Many of these programs addressed the obvious need for mental health support as well as direct practical support to desperate primary producers.

Similarly, RAWCS is continuing support programs in communities that have been impacted by bush fires, cyclones, flooding and Covid 19. These projects are often collaborations with other NFP organisations but involve coordination by Rotary Clubs who are leaders in their impacted communities using funds raised by public appeals for donations through the RARF. For example, RAWCS has applied \$2.3 million to bush fire recovery and \$1.8 million to flood recovery as well as large volumes of in-kind assistance. Due to the damage inflicted during the disasters to private as well as public infrastructure and extended deliberations by insurers and Government recovery funding agencies these programs often need to operate for long periods post the actual disaster event.





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

Building familiarity and understanding of disaster risk, pre-emptive planning for mitigation and recovery as well as appreciation of the range of support services available all works to reduce risk and build resilience. The Commonwealth, in collaboration with various state and local government and not-for-profit agencies with proven capability, could assist communities to systematically know their risk and develop mitigation and coping plans.

To some extent this is a role for local government however post Council mergers there are many significant communities which do not host resident local government. However, all communities develop homegrown leadership structures through Chambers of Commerce, Progress Associations, Service Clubs and even Community Meeting Hall Committees. Recognition of existing local leadership structures is key to developing disaster risk planning and mitigation / recovery planning. Similarly significant damage and inefficiency can be caused by external, short term recovery programs that fail to recognise local leadership.

The Commonwealth could fund place-based planning and risk awareness training engaging local leadership and the local volunteers who will inevitably be required to step up to implement immediate response to a disaster event and to guide and implement appropriate recovery projects. The same leadership that is best placed to carry out reviews and assessments of the effectiveness of responses to specific events and build experience into future planning.

National volunteer organisations with experience in community support and disaster response with members on the ground, integrated in affected communities and part of their leadership structures, such as Rotary, are well placed to assist Commonwealth funded initiatives.

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

RAWCS has been actively engaged in disaster response for many years and in particular over the last five. In working with the Commonwealth and in communities all over the nation, we understand that the Commonwealth funds response and recovery programs across multiple portfolios and agencies. Drought response is a good example where the Commonwealth provided grants to local government as well as providing support to state governments including matched program funding as well as direct support to individual families and rural enterprises through Services Australia, through tax (farm management deposit schemes) and long-term financial planning and mental health support services.

It is recognised that the state and territory governments have a direct responsibility for disaster response funding and support services, but Commonwealth funding has been critical in achieving recovery outcomes in the past. Unfortunately, natural disaster events often do not recognise state or territory boundaries and often there is a role for the Commonwealth in coordinating responses and program delivery across borders.

The establishment of the Disaster Response Fund (DRF), which commenced on 1st July 2023, is seen as a potentially valuable, proactive facility to provide an existing, ready to respond source of funding to support state and territory programs and should provide an additional level of confidence. It has the potential to fund significant preparation and risk reduction work by communities outside of periods of emergency.





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If the DRF is to be effective, however, it is imperative that the affected communities are actively consulted and engaged in the processes and planning. A top-down imposed approach to disaster risk reduction planning that fails to recognise and engage existing leadership structures, is unlikely to achieve the desired results.

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

The current roles and structures of disaster response across the three levels of government in Australia are relatively clear at arm's length. However, the types of impact of actual disasters in communities are incredibly diverse and the appropriate level of government response is seldom clear or understood on the ground at the time of an emergency. Better planning and pre-emergency engagement is clearly required in most communities.

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

Through the national network of Rotary clubs and other partners, RAWCS has a capacity to assist in facilitating pre-planning and pre-emergency engagement as well as delivery of outreach programs such as the DCOP. RAWCS is well placed to commit to ongoing engagement in these processes because our network is integrated in the community and because delivery of community support and humanitarian projects is at the core of what we do.

From what we have witnessed there are many challenges being experienced through managing disaster recovery, mostly due to the complexities of a multi-layered disaster response system. Further, the lack of education and learning from previous disaster recovery leads to a cycle of constantly repeating mistakes in how we as a nation are responding. Short term responses with poor local coordination leads to duplication of effort and significant funding lost to administration rather than program delivery within the communities impacted.

This review is a welcome strategic initiative. Currently there are numerous responders to disaster, each with their own priorities, including federal, state, territory and local government and an increasing presence of external disaster organisations many of which operate on a short-term basis, often within the news cycle. This can lead to poorly quantified recovery priorities and local frustration within the impacted community. For example, confused responses to the 2022 flood disasters response caused heightened frustrations with residents, disengagement of community members and prevented input from community leaders which led to restricted local engagement due to the lack of direct local intelligence involved.

A funding model that allocates funds for local community recovery to various government departments and external organisations, that are not represented within the community structure, can lead to a significant reduction in the expenditure that is actually delivered on community prioritised recovery projects; disengaging community and negatively impacting resilience.

