



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

Response ID: IRCDF_1362_110

Consent option: Publish with name

Submitted by: Save the Children and 54 reasons

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

Not-for-profit and community services organisations like ourselves play a critical role in supporting communities across disaster preparedness, response, recovery and resilience-building.

As Australia's leading child rights organisation, we know that children have unique needs in disasters and are uniquely vulnerable to their harmful short and long-term impacts. We have directly responded to the series of recent major disasters striking Australia and are supporting the long-term community recovery process that follows such disasters, as well as supporting community resilience both before and after acute events. This includes the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires and major floods across Australia since then.

In our experience, Commonwealth disaster funding is overall neither adequate in amount, nor appropriately coordinated or structured, to enable children's unique needs in disasters to be met through essential child-focused services. This includes children from birth to 18, across preparedness, response, recovery and resilience-building. Current funding does not enable systematic integration of child-focused not-for-profit organisations into service planning, coordination or delivery, and does not enable sustainable provision of the services that are increasingly required and demanded by communities.

For example, no Commonwealth funding has been available to support the delivery of our child-focused services during acute disaster response in recent years, including our work in evacuation, relief and recovery centres, and through mobile outreach into communities in the immediate period once centres close. This results in inefficiency, service gaps, unmet need, and ultimately avoidable harm to children.

Some Commonwealth funding has been available to support children's post-disaster recovery. For example, the Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Grants Program (BSBRGP) enabled critical support for children's recovery. Importantly, the BSBRGP specifically included social and recovery needs in its outcome areas. Other positives included clear funding envelopes for local government areas (LGA) enabling proposals to match need, criteria for demonstrating community need and buy-in, and an increase in the original funding allocation to meet high community demand. Challenges with the BSBRGP included the gap between the bushfires ending (early 2020) and grant applications opening (July 2021) and funding commencing (late 2021 and early 2022), the absence of clear allocations for children, and





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the limitation to two-year funding despite research being clear that five years is the minimum timeframe for recovery.

Overall, despite important positives, children's recovery funding remains inadequate and fragmented. For example, our evidence-based, award-winning 'Journey of Hope' program has been in high demand by disaster-impacted schools and communities. Initially, its delivery was funded by non-government donors. This is not sustainable. Subsequent funding has been ad hoc and from a number of Commonwealth agencies and other sources, including the BSRGP. Journey of Hope's range of funders shows a wide recognition of its value; a coordinated funding approach would allow greater efficiency, availability, coordination and targeting to need.

We communicate with the National Emergency Management Agency about where particular need exists and the support that communities are seeking. For example, we have provided detailed information about the unmet recovery needs of children following the February-March 2022 floods in coastal NSW and Queensland.

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

First, Commonwealth funding should ensure that specialist child-focused services can be effectively delivered by not-for-profit organisations in the immediate response to all disasters and made available in all evacuation, relief and recovery centres.

Without such services, children's psychological, emotional, and mental health and wellbeing needs are not met when crisis strikes, and children miss out on the psychological first aid and other supports that could make a crucial difference to their long-term recovery and resilience, creating significant risk of lasting harm.

Child-focused disaster response services are delivered by not-for-profit organisations through specialist, trained professionals and practitioners. This de facto standing workforce deploys in response to disasters ad hoc and at short notice. Examples are child friendly spaces and specialist child safeguarding services that keep children safe and advocate for them where needed.

Child-focused disaster response services are essential services. It should be standard practice for them to be available in a timely way for communities in all disasters, and integrated and coordinated with other essential disaster response services.

Yet, currently, there is no designated Commonwealth funding support for child-focused disaster response services. This reflects a long-standing broader gap in policy, coordination and funding at both a Commonwealth and State level.

Second, Commonwealth funding should enable effective support for children's recovery as part of community recovery and resilience efforts.

Experiencing a disaster can significantly undermine children's development, unless effective community-based recovery support is available. Schools are a key site for providing the social and emotional wellbeing, resilience and recovery support that children need after a disaster. They provide stability, routine and connection for children, and often are effectively the centre of their communities.





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However, following the Black Summer bushfires and the major floods across multiple communities in the past three years, we have seen a significant unmet need for recovery support for children in impacted communities. Schools themselves have often felt, and been, overwhelmed and sought access to specialist externally-provided programs and support which has not always been available. It is important that all schools can access evidence-based programs that specifically respond to children's wellbeing and recovery needs after a disaster.

Given the significant community-level adversity caused by a disaster, a holistic, consistent continuum of child-centred, trauma-focused support is needed, including school-based and other community-based support. It should include, among other things, support that addresses the increased risks of domestic and family violence after a disaster, including for children as victim-survivors of violence in their own right.

Recovery is a long-term process. For major disasters, recovery needs to be understood on at least a five-year timeframe. Funding arrangements should reflect these long-term timeframes.

Third, Commonwealth funding should support programs and initiatives that enable children to be heard and meaningfully participate in decisions made in their communities, across preparedness, response, recovery and resilience-building. When children's voices are heard and taken seriously, this results in better policy-making, implementation and community-level outcomes. There are existing examples of where this has been done well and impactfully in Australia following recent major disasters.

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

No response provided.

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

No. As noted in response to previous questions, from the perspective of a service provider like ourselves, securing funding to provide essential services for children during disaster response and recovery, and in community resilience-building, requires seeking funding across a patchwork of different potential sources that are collectively inadequate in amount. The better alternative would be an adequate and coordinated funding arrangement designed to ensure children's specific needs are met.

We recognise that outsourced service provision by community services organisations such as ourselves will typically be commissioned by government through processes designed to ensure value for money and quality delivery. As such, there is a 'competitive' element for any individual organisation seeking government funding to provide services. However, the difficulty that we wish to highlight is that, taken as a whole, funding for children's needs is inadequate and uncoordinated, along with a lack of clarity in funding roles of the different levels of government. This results in children's needs not being met.

For context, for services that we have provided to support children's and community recovery from disasters in recent years, the large majority of government funding has come from Commonwealth departments and agencies, rather than from state government.

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

BROADER OBSERVATIONS





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Our experience supporting communities through disasters, and our particular focus on children, also reflects broader difficulties with existing Commonwealth disaster funding.

In general, disaster-related funding is disproportionately directed to physical infrastructure, with inadequate funding to meet social, community and service delivery needs. This is particularly stark given the growing need for present-day investment to build the resilience required to avoid future costs of the anticipated escalation in climate-driven major disasters in Australia.

Funding to support recovery and resilience-building is insufficiently coordinated to ensure that all community cohorts – notably children – receive the support they need. It is also insufficiently long-term and thus not well-aligned to the nature and timeframe of community recovery.

Core funding for community services remains inadequate for not-for-profit organisations to play the role they are asked to – and expected to – in supporting community-level preparedness, response, recovery and resilience. Effective support, especially in building resilience, is built on pre-existing community connection. This is only possible and sustainable where an organisation can maintain a base of ongoing services that are valued by the community. Disaster-related support is best provided as part of a continuum with these ongoing services and through ongoing involvement and connections. In turn this should be recognised through Commonwealth funding support.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is making major disasters more frequent and more severe. The impacts are falling hardest on children, today and across their lifetimes.

This generation of children will be more exposed to natural hazards and disasters than any before. A child born in Australia in 2020 can expect to experience over four times as many heatwaves, 3.4 times as many droughts, 1.4 times as many river floods and 1.3 times as many bushfires as their grandparents (source: Save the Children, *Born into the Climate Crisis*, 2021). It is more important than ever to focus strongly on addressing children's unique needs in disasters.

The climate crisis is also multiplying the negative impact of major natural hazards on children's mental health and wellbeing. For many children, the threat of climate change is an ongoing source of anxiety, stress and fear that is compounded when major disasters strike. This adds to a context that also includes the exceptional instability and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges. The wellbeing of this generation of children is under extraordinary pressure.

Further, children are the most affected by climate change, yet the least heard in decision-making and debates about the issue. Children have a right to be heard and taken seriously in discussions and decisions about matters that affect them. Climate change, the environment and disaster risk management are collectively a paradigm example. Commonwealth funding should support children to participate meaningfully in decision-making about these matters, from decisions made in their local communities to Commonwealth policy-making.

It is urgent that Commonwealth disaster funding be refashioned and increased to better address these pressing climate-driven hazards and trends and their particular implications for children.

