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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS)

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

Our experience having applied for and received NDRR funding has highlighted systems challenges within emergency management and the need for a cultural shift to strengthen formalised community sector participation and engagement with funding opportunities.

Traditional emergency management generally takes a top-down approach, responding to known risks well-defined under each department's prescribed role in emergency. Whilst this approach has proven to support rapid mobilisation and prioritises preservation of life, there are opportunities to strengthen what is possible within emergency preparedness by better understanding the role of community in disaster resilience. The cultural and social systems at a community level include many strengths that have developed through their informal role responding to localised risk. These strengths include formal groups and organisations, services and supports, volunteers, social cohesion and connectedness, and the ability to prepare and participate in risk reduction. Despite the value of these two systems, they have not been well integrated to support strengthened capability, preparedness and gap analysis in emergency.

WACOSS's experience with Commonwealth disaster funding has shown the value of disaster preparedness projects that support inter-sector partnerships and strengthen local planning.

WACOSS has been awarded NDRR funding to implement two strategic projects focused on disaster risk reduction. A collaborative approach has been fundamental to the design and execution of both projects, with input from lived experience, community, government and the emergency management system.

The Food Resilience project was led by a Community Sector based Coordinator with a co-location arrangement within the State Emergency Relief Support Directorate at WA Department of Communities (formerly SWICC). This collaborative arrangement will enable the state government to both support and better integrate the outputs of the project within government systems.

The Heat and Vulnerability Mapping Project combines content experts from multiple government departments, research and community organisations to bring together a collaborative response to address the impacts of heat on vulnerable populations. This project partners with the Department of Health's Sustainable Development Unit and the Department of Communities with other strategic advice and input from Department of Housing, BOM, NEMA, Disaster Preparedness and Management Directorate (Health), Aboriginal Health Council of WA, Disability advocates, Climate Justice Union,





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Department of Fires and Emergency Services, Telethon Kids Institute and Curtin University & Edith Cowan University.

Both projects highlight the types of collaborations that will increase disaster risk reduction capacity, they are also quite rare as there are many systemic barriers that need to be negotiated by community organisations in developing an application such as the complicated funding application process, having resources to develop the application itself, requirement for matching funding and the time to develop meaningful partnerships with Government agencies who are sometimes resistant to community involvement. We discuss these barriers in subsequent sections.

RECOMMENDATION: The disaster risk reduction landscape should include a focus on collaborations between government, community services and community representatives. Funding should be available for projects for strengths-based approaches that are community-led and government-supported. Our risk reduction systems should include mechanisms that encourage, promote, and privilege broad collaborations, inter-sector engagement, and action across systemic risk.

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

There are opportunities to improve disaster risk reduction literacy, grant availability and ensure equitable funding is available to better support communities to reduce disaster risk through Commonwealth funding.

Literacy around disaster risk: WACOSS has found through our NDRR funded projects that disaster risk literacy "the key that must be possessed by the community so that they can fully understand their geographical location in a disaster prone area" (Triyanto et al 2021) is poor in both community and local government.

Local Government Areas that have a high disaster risk often experience severe, concurrent and subsequent disaster impacts. Whilst they may be aware of the potential risks, these communities are consistently in response and recovery actions and have little capacity, time, expertise or money, to contribute to community preparedness. In areas that have not previously been impacted by disaster or who don't have geographic factors that make them highly susceptible to hazards, communities and LGA's are likely to have lower levels of disaster risk literacy. It is important for communities to understand the risk of disaster in order to increase literacy around preparedness and encourage both local governments and community groups to pursue disaster funding across the continuum of resilience, response and recovery.

To build disaster risk literacy, funding opportunities need to be made available to different sectors to engage with their communities to increase disaster risk literacy, and subsequently reduce disaster risk. Creating a clearer, streamlined approach and promoting funding opportunities will encourage a more diverse range of stakeholders and sectors to apply for disaster funding and build better disaster risk literacy in their communities.

Vulnerable populations: Specific Commonwealth disaster funding should be directed to groups most vulnerable or who are disproportionality impacted during a disaster, to support risk reduction and mitigation. The Royal Commission on Disaster Arrangements highlighted the unique and often disproportionate impacts of disaster events on people in the community who live with vulnerability that





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is then worsened following a hazard event. The United Nations Office of Disaster Risk Reduction defines vulnerability as the 'conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards'. For example, persons with disability are often disproportionately affected by disasters and have varying and uneven levels of resilience and capacity to recover yet 71% of persons with a disability do not have individual preparedness plans for disaster. Funding guidelines and allocations need to reflect this disproportionate impact, it is imperative to include vulnerable populations, in the funding and grants administration process. The Royal Commission, also recommended that Australian, State and Territory governments should take steps to develop tools, methods and guidance to identify and assess the vulnerability of individuals and community to hazard events. Commonwealth funding should also prioritise and encourage applicants to incorporate adequate lived experience in their applications and budgets, as well as a demonstrate a co-designed process with vulnerable populations to ensure that these unique risks have been identified and considered.

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?

Please see ACOSS' submission which details a general response to this question. The following is information from WACOSS' experience navigating the roles and responsibilities of Commonwealth, state and territories and local government, during times of disaster events.

Funding support during disaster events should be seamless and timely, this includes funding provided in the extended recovery phase.

The process should ensure that impacted people and communities are able to access financial resources when they need them on the disaster continuum and that support is sustained into the long term.

We have found the EM system complex with different siloed roles and responsibilities, many of which the community do not understand. The responsibility scale differs greatly from LGA to State and Federal jurisdictions. The on-the-ground misunderstanding of who is responsible for what contributes to the creation of community tension and distrust in government responses during times of disaster. In WA, NEMA employs one assistant manager for WA & SA jointly, and one recovery support officer for the Great Southern and Esperance. These individuals work across preparedness, recovery and response, are regionally based and have limited capacity to engage due to conflicting priorities. Commonwealth funding should invest in more personnel who can have a stronger presence within communities with high disaster risk, this would build capacity and enable a stronger understanding from community members of the different responsibilities in times of disaster. This will also allow for stronger engagement with decision-makers to ensure informed activation, response and recovery choices are being made to suit individual impacted communities.

During the recent flooding event, some funding streams were made available quickly and effectively however some funding programs to support impacted individuals & communities were and are still being





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delayed whilst state and federal governments negotiate the most appropriate way for people to be financially supported and while bureaucratic processes are being undertaken.

EM practises and processes should be flexible and compassionate at all times along the disaster continuum.

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

This submission intends to support the ACOSS submission by providing supporting evidence from the specific WACOSS experience with the NDRR grant funding process and subsequent project experience.

Additions from Q2

Peak bodies play an important role providing policy and sector support to member organisations, however there are currently no disaster risk reduction funding programs that resource Peaks to deliver such support.

Recent disaster events in Western Australia have highlighted the impact of disaster on the community service sector within and outside the activated impact zone. Services experience impacts on their capacity to meet demand resulting from disaster events. The Royal Commission into National Disaster Arrangements illustrates further detail about the impact on charity and community organisations, which include:

- * System impacts such as when logistics systems fail, resulting in less food availability both inside and outside of the declared impact zone.
- * Cascading impacts such as when people travelling through the impact zone are unable to leave and return home to natural supports. When they do return home, they may have been impacted by the costs of being stuck in the impact zone and may need services and supports to get back on their feet.
- * Often local community leaders and agencies have been impacted by the disaster and have reduced capacity and capability to undertake their usual role in supporting coordination and relief distribution.
- * Additionally, if an event occurs but does not trigger the activation of the State or local Support Plan, services are likely to experience a rise in demand while also navigating their own organisational impacts.

Within this context, Peak organisations play a role in coordinating information and support on behalf of the sector and assisting state governments by providing access to our diverse networks. We are also aware of the need to support the sector to understand and identify opportunities to apply for commonwealth funds to address disaster risk reduction. Peak bodies are not funded to assist community sector organisations to better identify opportunities for building disaster risk reduction and preparedness. Commonwealth funding availability should be extended to include longer-term support for peak bodies delivering policy and sector coordination in their respective field.

Contingency: WACOSS supports ACOSS and others call for a complementary or integrated Disaster Contingency Fund so that increased demand can be met during times of disaster response or recovery. Many BAU activities change in times of disaster, and often the scope of community service work changes rapidly. A large part of community service activity is grant-based, and rapidly changing activities - to





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meet the service needs of individuals and communities in times of disaster – are not built into grant programs.

Disaster funding requires a 50% co-contribution on grant applications. This needs immediate review and evaluation as communities, the Not-For-Profit and community sector will rarely be able to provide this monetary support. This co-contribution is a significant barrier to contribution to disaster risk reduction activities for communities, organisations, and entire sectors, that have a limited cash flow.

