



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

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

Northern Australia Indigenous Reference Group

The IRG is an expertise-based advisory group comprised of Indigenous people with experience in Indigenous economic development in Northern Australia. Current IRG members were appointed in 2019 to provide policy advice to the Minister for Northern Australia and the Minister for Indigenous Australians on practical actions to enhance the economic prosperity of Indigenous Australians.

Northern Australia comprises 53 per cent of Australia's landmass, defined as all of the Northern Territory, as well as the Northern parts of Queensland and Western Australia that intersect with the Tropic of Capricorn, including the Indian Ocean Territories. The region is abundant with untapped potential and talented people. Northern Australia has a competitive advantage in resources, energy, agriculture, aquaculture and tourism and its proximity to Asia and the Pacific creates trade potential to drive Australia's economic growth over the next decade and beyond. This continues on established trade between Indigenous Australians and South East Asian peoples over millennia. Northern Australia is mineral rich with deposits of lithium and rare earth metals that will be vital to the electrification of the country as we move toward a net zero future. It is on the frontline of the nation's defence, border protection and biosecurity and it is home to a young and growing Indigenous population which will play an increasing role in its growth. Unlocking the north's potential is key to the development of the nation as a whole.

Developing the north, however, is not without its challenges. Northern Australia is home to only 1.3 million people or around 5.3 per cent of the Australian population. Its sparse population, the vast distances between major centres and extreme weather conditions can make it difficult, and costly, to do business and to provide adequate social and economic infrastructure. Housing shortages and higher costs of living can make attracting and retaining a skilled workforce difficult. This leads to a prevalence of fly-in, fly-out workers which results in benefits of economic activity being siphoned away to southern centres.

Indigenous Australians have significant assets to bring to the Northern Australia development agenda. Indigenous people comprise 16 per cent of the Northern Australian population, far greater than their three per cent share of the national population, and maintain rights or interests in around 78 per cent of the land mass in Northern Australia. The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate





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than the rest of the Australian population. Indigenous Australians are projected to constitute approximately half of the working age population of Northern Australia by 2050. Outside of major population centres in Northern Australia this is already the case.

The IRG brings a wealth of diverse experiences and insight on doing business in the north and is committed to using this expertise to advance Indigenous economic development across Northern Australia.

Individually IRG members have experience in accessing, administering and/or receiving Commonwealth disaster relief and recovery funding; and have direct experience of the impacts of funding shortfalls on individuals, and communities.

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

The IRG advocate for a coordinated approach between Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments including industry and communities, to address shortcomings of planning and delivery, through the development of place-based disaster resilience strategies. In our submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development Infrastructure and Transport's inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network (the inquiry) we identified the increased frequency and magnitude of weather events as severely impacting First Nations communities across Northern Australia.

We provided examples of rain events during 2023 that led to the closure of large sections of roads, isolating communities for months at a time and requiring evacuations of some distance. We acknowledged that while flood-proofing a lot of communities will not be possible, what is possible is to reduce the time of isolation by improving accessibility and the resilience of civil infrastructure in and around our communities. Doing this requires the development of place-based disaster resilience strategies, working in collaboration with communities in design and delivery.

During the public hearing to the inquiry, IRG member and Doomadgee Council CEO, Mr. Troy Fraser illustrated that incorporating local knowledge in disaster resilience strategies could help reduce isolation times from months to weeks. Mr. Fraser explained that there is no denying the need for better materials and improved ways of building infrastructure. However, had local knowledge around the need for a 1.5 metre high bridge been incorporated into planning this would have reduced isolation times significantly.

Further, the IRG note that failure to make assessment criteria and damage reporting requirements available to Indigenous community organisations and representatives leads to a flawed process where Local Indigenous knowledge is being left out of costing for any major disaster or extreme events. This includes the potential to consolidate service providers that operate in regional and remote communities.

Place-based disaster resilience strategies, by design, would embed and be informed by First Nations' knowledge and a deep understanding of local environments that build on more than 60,000 years of disaster resilience.

Our submission to the inquiry also highlighted the need for the Australian Government to implement a 'build back better' principle which aligns with Australia's commitments under the Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction 2015-2030. To reduce the disaster risk of communities we need to build resilience into our infrastructure. Building back better requires place-based planning, using a common-sense





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approach and incorporating local knowledge and scientific evidence to build more accessible and resilient infrastructure.

Government must work with Communities and local authorities including service providers to ensure safety and appropriate planning is the blueprint for future rebuilds or building back better in regard to Disaster Recovery and response. To utilise the current system, resources and services that these Communities have on offer. The CDEP's that operate in all Indigenous Communities and other services providers, there must be a contract weighting on all relief funding for Indigenous service providers.

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

The IRG understands that the Commonwealth offers various forms of financial assistance to help with the recovery and rebuilding efforts. To be eligible for disaster funding, individuals and communities must meet certain criteria set by the government. This includes demonstrating that the damage or loss incurred is a direct result of the disaster event. Additionally, there may be specific requirements based on the type of assistance being sought.

The application process for disaster funding involves submitting relevant documentation and information to demonstrate eligibility. This may include evidence of damage or loss, proof of residence or business ownership in the affected area, and any other supporting documents as required.

Once an application is submitted, it undergoes a thorough assessment by the relevant authorities. They evaluate the extent of damage or loss, verify eligibility criteria fulfillment, and determine the appropriate level of financial assistance. The aim is to ensure that funds are allocated fairly and efficiently to those most in need.

The IRG's experience is that current Commonwealth disaster funding processes could be more effective. Concerns about current funding processes include; community capacity to access funds, delays, and the lack of timely and adequate support to those affected by disasters, particularly those in First Nations Communities.

Complexity of disaster funding processes is a major problem. Having overly complicated guidelines and arduous requirements creates unwanted barriers for individuals and communities navigating the system in order to access desperately needed funds in a time of despair. For that reason, any and all bureaucratic red tape only adds unnecessary delays and frustrations during times of crisis.

The IRG is concerned that there is a lack of transparency about how funds are allocated and distributed. It is also concerned that people in metropolitan areas receive more support than those in very remote First Nations communities. This lack of clarity raises concerns about favouritism or bias in decision-making processes. It is crucial for a fair and equitable distribution of resources that these concerns are addressed promptly.

It is imperative that Australia's Commonwealth disaster funding process undergoes significant reforms to ensure efficiency, transparency, and timely assistance for those affected by disasters. The government must streamline the guidelines, simplify application procedures, enhance transparency in decision-making processes, and allocate sufficient funds to meet the demands effectively. Only then can we truly address the shortcomings of this critical system and provide effective support to our communities during times of crisis.





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

The IRG understand that each level of government plays a distinct role in providing financial support and resources to help individuals and communities effectively respond to and recover from disaster. The Commonwealth government provide financial assistance through various programs such as the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). This funding is aimed at supporting states and territories in their response and recovery efforts.

States and Territories' roles include the responsibility of implementing emergency management plans, coordinating response efforts, and allocating resources on the ground. They often contribute their own funds to support immediate response actions. Local governments' role is at the community level. They are responsible for emergency planning, evacuation procedures, and supporting local communities during recovery phases. Local governments may receive funding from both state or territory governments as well as the Commonwealth for their disaster-related activities.

That said, the IRG are of the view that the percentage contributions between the Commonwealth, state and territory and local government authorities do not take into consideration the need for cash poor local governments to transfer costs to local people through taxes and other means, especially in remote communities where the cost of living is already high. The IRG recommend a review of the contribution formula between the Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments for disaster funding to ensure that there is no downstream impact on the standard of living of already struggling communities.

Further, it is crucial that all levels of government collaborate closely during these times to ensure efficient use of resources. Regular communication channels should be established to share information on funding allocation decisions, allowing for coordinated efforts that address both short-term emergency needs as well as long-term recovery plans.

Whilst funding roles of the various levels of government may be easy for the IRG to discern, this is not necessarily the case for First Nations people living in remote communities where English is often a second, third or even a fourth language. Most, First Nations people would have either their mother tongue or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Island Creole as a first language, thus making guidelines and processes difficult to understand and complete.

The IRG recommends that all levels of government provide simple, clear, culturally appropriate information and engagement for people to access supports. Processes need to be streamlined and to account for nuances in the various First Nations communities. This means government needs to invest resources engaging with the community to understand their unique set of circumstances.

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

The IRG would like the review to acknowledge that disrupted supply chains and forced relocations resulting from natural disasters intensify what is an already very high cost of living. For that reason, the IRG advocate for;

- * the current Australian disaster recovery payment of \$1,000 per eligible adult and \$400 per child be increased to reflect the cost of living in these very remote regions.





- * consideration be given to rent and or relocation allowances. In some cases, whole communities have had to relocate, and the costs of relocation is extreme.
- * investment in culturally appropriate disaster recovery buildings. This means, funding needs to be tailored to meet the cultural needs of First Nations people and community but also highly vulnerable groups such as elders and people with disabilities and or chronic health conditions.
- * strengthening the resilience of digital networks, the failure of which can be a major barrier to disaster recovery efforts in First Nations communities. Funding needs to be directed to building and maintaining communications services and equipment. This could mean tailoring funding to train and employ local technicians, with consideration to warehousing a stockpile of essential parts, to enable quick resolution of outages. Other measures for consideration include, utilising Mobile Base Stations or low earth orbit satellite services, such as, Starlink.

The IRG would also like the review to acknowledge the constraints that Indigenous local councils face in raising co-contributions to access funding to build and maintain resilient infrastructure such as roads and bridges. As non-ratable communities Indigenous councils mostly work with severely constrained budgets to deliver a complex level of community services. Importantly this includes services generally not provided by mainstream local governments such as aged care and accommodation.

To support our communities the IRG propose that funding be quarantined or set aside to enable Indigenous councils to seek up to 100 per cent of funding for infrastructure and maintenance projects where they can demonstrate need. This will help to ensure that our most vulnerable and disadvantaged Indigenous communities receive the support and resources they need. By prioritising these communities, more equitable distribution of funds can be achieved, while addressing historical inequalities and delivering on socio-economic objectives.

The IRG also propose that restrictions on Indigenous councils making a profit from disaster recovery funding should be lifted, treating councils in the same way as external contractors. Indigenous councils often have the plant, equipment and workforce to deliver projects such as road construction. Enabling Indigenous councils to conduct business like the private sector, would provide an opportunity to leverage their resources for economic growth, self-sufficiency and self-determination. This opportunity would lead to job creation within our communities and an improvement in living standards. Many of Australia's Indigenous communities face significant infrastructure gaps, including inadequate road networks. By enabling our communities to generate revenue from infrastructure projects, we would be better equipped to address infrastructure needs, improve transportation access, and foremost help reduce risk to the social wellbeing of residents by reducing isolation times caused by disaster events.