

# Submission to Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

20 February 2023

## About ACOSS

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is a national voice in support of people affected by poverty, disadvantage and inequality and the peak body for the community services and civil society sector.

ACOSS consists of a network of approximately 4000 organisations and individuals across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Our vision is an end to poverty in all its forms; economies that are fair, sustainable and resilient; and communities that are just, peaceful and inclusive.

## Recommendations

Our recommendations are as follows:

**Recommendation 1:** Create a permanent enabling fund, the Community Sector Disaster Resilience Fund, to strengthen the sector's preparedness and capability to respond to disasters.

**Recommendation 2:** Create a permanent flexible contingency fund, the Community Sector Disaster Contingency Fund, to allow service providers access to additional funds to rapidly respond to specific disaster incidents.

**Recommendation 3:** Fund the sector to strengthen its disaster management tool to improve the knowledge, skills and continuity plans of providers in relation to disasters and extreme weather.

## Introduction

ACOSS welcomes the creation of the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience and appreciates the opportunity to contribute to its inquiry. Our submission focuses particularly on the role of not-for-profit organisations in the disaster response system and strengthening public investment in their operations.

Australia has entered an era of 'concurrent, consecutive and compounding' disasters and severe weather. Extreme weather-related incidents occur throughout the entire year, they are no longer restricted to certain seasons.<sup>1</sup>

The unprecedented 2019/20 bushfires and 2021/22 floods in Australia have had significant economic, health and social impacts on millions of people. During 2021-22 alone, there were 36 significant events requiring governments to enact emergency measures.<sup>2</sup> Recovery will take years for most and some people may never fully recover. Climate-induced disasters, and extreme weather, are only set to worsen and grow more constant in the immediate future.

Similarly, the forecasts for 2023 include the risk of extreme bushfires returning to parts of the east coast with the decline of La Niña weather patterns, as well as the build-up of natural hazards.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, there is now increased reliance by government on the ability of community organisations to help people and communities impacted by disasters. This requires a rethink of how to invest in the community sector to be able to meet the demand caused by such incidents.

## Funding the community sector to respond to disasters

Disaster response and recovery is now a core responsibility for community services. The sustained, increased demand for help is neatly put by the CEO of a peak body based in New South Wales, "*Our member organisations have never been busier - following multiple disasters the inevitable tsunami of need (emergency relief and severe financial distress; mental health; family and domestic violence; housing and homelessness - including lack of tradies & building materials)*".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, [Major Incidents Report 2021-22](#) Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2022, p 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 13

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Meteorology, ['Rainfall and temperature long-range forecasts'](#) 19 February 2023, Australian Government; Leeming, Lachlan, ['Bushfire risk skyrockets as La Ninas spur thick plant growth and prevent hazard reduction'](#), *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 February 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M, [Helping people in need during a cost-of-living crisis: findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey](#), 2022, ACOSS, p 14.

Community organisations provide goods, equipment, clothing, shelter as well as counselling and other advisory services (such as legal and financial) for people navigating trauma. These organisations also help reduce risks of future harm coming to people affected by disasters, such as by ensuring that emergency shelters are suitably designed, and that proposed evacuation procedures are safe and effective. Demand for these services remains high and not just in the initial aftermath of an event, but for months and years to come. Deloitte Access Economics estimated that the 2019 Queensland floods cost at least \$2.3 billion in health, social and community impacts, which included hardship applications, calls to recovery hotlines, mental health supports, and outreach services.<sup>5</sup> There are disproportionate impacts on particular cohorts, including First Nations peoples, people living with disabilities, as well as culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

The sector's emergency response capability is very poorly resourced, which restrains its capacity to assist people in need after disasters.<sup>6</sup> In the 2021 Australian Community Sector Survey (ACSS), only 35% of respondents agreed that funding appropriately supported them to address emergencies in their local communities such as bushfires.<sup>7</sup>

Further, government still tends to rely on short-term funding arrangements that do not provide sufficient certainty for organisations to plan their workloads and effectively manage their workforces. Only 26% of organisational leaders agreed that funding timeframes were sufficiently long and 59% disagreed. Only 40% of leaders said their organisation had a service contract with government which was five years or longer in duration.<sup>8</sup>

While being first responders, community organisations and their personnel are also directly affected by disasters; workers and volunteers themselves being survivors (or disaster-impacted) and local offices suffering damage and loss. As such, providers face widespread staff burnout and exhaustion. This can also place at risk the continuity of community services after a disaster.

## Investing in the sector's capability to respond to disasters and build local resilience

ACOSS acknowledges the Federal Government's Disaster Recovery Funding to help communities respond to disasters and the new Disaster Ready Fund to help

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<sup>5</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, [The social and economic cost of the North and Far North Queensland Monsoon Trough \(2019\)](#), June 2019, p26-27.

<sup>6</sup> For instance see Community Legal Centres Australia, [Impacts of Covid-19 on the Community Legal Sector](#) March 2022; Community Legal Centres NSW, [Report: Community legal centres' disasters response](#), November 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M., [Carrying the Costs of the Crisis: Australia's Community Sector through the Delta Outbreak](#), 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M., [Carrying the Costs of the Crisis: Australia's Community Sector through the Delta Outbreak](#), 2022.

communities prevent and build resilience to disasters. However, we think this funding arrangement lacks a critical focus on community organisations and their role in disaster response, recovery and resilience.

We recommend a specific funding stream be established focused on improving the core capabilities of community sector to complement, or be integrated within, the Disasters Recovery Funding and the Disaster Ready Fund. Such a stream would ensure the community sector has the capacity, capability and readiness to prepare for and respond to disasters, as part of the overarching national approach to readiness and risk reduction.

A community sector funding stream would be the missing piece in the government's emergency and disaster readiness strategy and would ensure those responding on the ground are enabled to do so more efficiently, effectively and cohesively. It would also be an appropriate acknowledgement of the fact that disaster response is now a core operational requirement for community organisations.

**Recommendation 1: Creating a permanent enabling fund, the Community Sector Disaster Resilience Fund.**

This would complement or be integrated within the Disaster Ready Fund, so community services have core funding to improve preparedness and improve response and recovery due to disasters.

It should include funds to participate in planning, response and recovery at appropriate levels, provide training for staff, volunteers, and local communities, undertake risk assessments and service continuity plans, and undertake adaptation and preparedness benchmarking.

The estimated budget impact for this recommendation in 2023-24 is \$262.5 million.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to a permanent enabling fund, we also recommend the creation of a flexible contingency fund, so that community service providers can access additional funds in the aftermath of a particular disaster to rapidly respond to escalating demand in affected communities.

**Recommendation 2: Create a permanent, flexible contingency fund for response in emergencies**

The Community Sector Disaster Contingency Fund would complement or be integrated within the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, so

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<sup>9</sup> ACOSS has estimated costings utilising an estimation of 14,000 community service organisations under DSS service provision. ACOSS has assumed up to 25% of these organisations a year would aim to access the funds to support costs of participating in local area planning, update and provide disaster training for staff and volunteers, update risk assessments and continuity planning, and benchmarking at a cost of \$75,000.

community services in disaster areas can rapidly respond to specific disasters. This includes better supporting local recovery, as well as quickly replacing equipment and addressing workforce constraints.

The estimated budget impact for this recommendation in 2023-24 is \$140 million.<sup>10</sup>

Thirdly, we recommend that the government provide modest funding to the sector's peak body organisations to strengthen the sector's own capability to manage disaster risk and ensure it has suitable knowledge, skills and continuity plans to anticipate and navigate future disasters. This will help community organisations to continuously improve their responses to future incidents.

**Recommendation 3: Fund the sector to strengthen its disaster management tool and practice**

Fund community sector peaks to strengthen the sector's disaster management tool, establish a community of practice and provide training to community sector organisations to implement the disaster management tool (to conduct sector specific risk assessments and develop disaster management and service continuity plans).

The estimated budget impact for this recommendation in 2023-24 is \$4 million.

ACOSS wishes the Committee well with its inquiry and looks forward to seeing its findings and recommendations. In the interim, we are happy to continue to assist the Committee with its work.

## Contact

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<sup>10</sup> ACOSS has estimated costings utilising an estimation of 14,000 community service organisations under DSS service provision. ACOSS has assumed up to 20% a year may be affected by extreme weather events and estimate an average of up to \$50,000 per organisation would be required to manage impacts from disaster, manage surge capacity, and compensation for additional service provision.