

Acknowledging the primary role of state and territories in emergency response, what longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?

The Australian Government holds responsibility for the security of the nation – creating a nexus between human security and national security that enables and demands Federal participation in preparation, protection and resilience of the people, and the security of human life.

There are two macro-options available across the sector. Option one is to reinforce the state and territory services and systems already in place. The second option is to use the state and territory authorities as a basis for an expansion and creation of a national service.

In option one, there is opportunity to alter the arrangements with the states and territory governments, the SES and the RFS, in a manner that: i) removes the barriers constraining the states from improving their emergency response and, ii) more importantly, foster state-led resilience building, adaptation and preparation for emergency and for slow onset climate changes.

In option two, the state authorities like SES and RFS are nationalised and brought under a national created professional part-time and full-time service entity, much like the Army reserve. This entity would be responsible for more than the current state authorities including resilience and preparedness of the community before disaster.

Both options demand that in the face of a changing climate and increased disaster occurrence and scale that the need is confirmed, and that Australia acts accordingly and appropriately. The most important action is to create the new rationale, that of resilience and preparedness building in the physical, social, and psychological realm.

There is opportunity to pivot from response-focused to a greater long-term outcome-based proposition by being better prepared and more resilient before the response is required. There is much evidence that the response and recovery actions are still occurring when the next disaster arrives – it is likely this trend will increasingly continue.

At a national level, what are likely to be the key pressure points or challenges for the Commonwealth responding to competing and concurrent crises?

Personnel available:

A key challenge is having the capacity to sufficiently meet personnel/labour resourcing needs during emergency response. An intermittent reliance on volunteers continues to be critical in meeting this need. While there was contrary proof during COVID, where there were amazing levels of volunteering, the culture of volunteerism has been waning and needs to be improved. There are multiple suggested reasons for this.

- Filling multiple roles: This is seen in the multiple roles often filled by a few in the community, for example police holding positions that also include SES or Army Reserve. When called for they are often torn between their job and their volunteer role.
- An aging population of volunteers: there is a consistent theme that many of the people volunteering are being asked to undertake activities that may be beyond their capability due to their age and fitness levels which, in turn, could jeopardise their own as well as others safety.

- Too busy to help: there is a sense that people are so busy in the modern world that there is no time to give on a regular basis. This is especially true in the younger demographic of mums and dads.
- Job versus unpaid: There is a sense that long volunteering comes at a financial and professional cost. Many firefighters and emergency responders can spend months “on the front line” and do so without pay.

There may need to be consideration of altering Australia’s view of volunteering. Some have suggested a volunteering national service approach. This could be difficult to achieve success where compulsion is not viewed well.

An alternative approach which proved valuable many years ago within Defence was a form of reserve service that provide education benefits, such as reduction of HECs debts (or complete removal based on service), and the payment of a wage for the period while serving. There was also the opportunity to take the first year in training almost as a gap year; uniformed, paid and training.

How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability, so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?

The engagement with the community at the local level is the key to preparation and response mechanisms, and this can only be done effectively with systems and measures that key into the local community. This might be done by altering the current arrangements with SES and RFS, local government and state governments with respect to preparation activities.

Our view is that a professional service should take a controlling interest in the resilience building of community. We submit that the following might occur as but one method, with a particular focus on the earlier option two: a nationalised and/or re-created SES / RFS.

The following characteristics are a part of a force that will meet our future preparedness and response needs.

- Professionalise the SES, develop a stronger more educated (in resilience building like activities) and permanently staffed in most leadership roles and some technical roles, much akin to the Army’s Reserve forces.
- It should be based on a regional and local country / town model, having deep connections to the indigenous Country understanding and the local community network.
- It should be paid and funded, again akin to the Army Reserve, when called to conduct activities individuals should be paid and this can be weighted in areas with the most defined needs (development of equity).
- It should have a ‘role’ to provide physical, social, and psychological support to the preparedness of the communities on which they are part. This may include fixing houses, preparing flood monitoring devices, cultural burning, ranger support, replanting and forestry management support, health support and preparation roles, exercising the community in disaster training, a conduit for the community to prepare supplies and services. This would require a further significant body of work. The most essential element being the outcome of a more prepared and ready population for the potential future climate change events, such heat, flood, fire, and pandemic disasters.
- It should be funded through a series of shared arrangements with states and territories and where there is cross over of service provision such an indigenous health or public works there may be a ‘service arms’ behaviour undertaken.

- Advocacy within the community for the provision of a preparedness motivation to all local and community works and activities.

What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?

The crises need to be properly defined. The crises are multiple and additive in our view.

1. Mitigation through the transition to a low carbon economy remains critical, to avoid the worst impacts of climate change and reduce the long and worsening need for greater adaptation.
2. Adaptation to deal with the results of already difficult climate changes; the increased severity of natural disaster events and hotter weather conditions.
3. The lack of trust in big government at the local community level and the inability to have a permanent face to the development of resilience building.
4. The persistence of recovery and response actions which are often uncompleted when the next disaster arrives.
5. The lack of truly preparing for the disasters and building back better or stronger rather than building back in the same location with the same problems.
6. A lack of community education and clear warnings to householders about the threat present at house sites.
7. The lack of equity in information access and the development of resilience and adaptation plans and action.

Once properly defined, the crises can be acted upon, noting prioritisation of:

1. Decarbonise as fast as possible.
2. Build resilience to and adapt to the likely effects of climate change and increasing disasters through multiple actions, through an entity that has the capacity to act. (This we believe is the answer you seek from the question above)
 - a. The greatest and most appropriate change is the acknowledgement of a need to prepare the communities. This is not current a role held by any other part of government, except by clever design of considered future events under more planning arrangements.
 - b. Climate change however has changed this need. There is now a requirement for a force of individuals who have a job, a role, or a calling to be part of a “force” or entity that will make the community they are part of more prepared.

What models could the Commonwealth explore to replace or supplement support currently provided by the ADF (Australian Defence Force) during domestic crisis?

– What does the right mix of Commonwealth capabilities look like?

In the near future, characterised by climate change events, the Commonwealth will require agencies that provide emergency response, and agencies that can also provide preparation and resilience building before the response. Readiness and preparation being provided to reduce the response and recovery effort, the loss, and the damage.

Commonwealth has the ability to provide emergency response but not the preparation and readying. SES has the ability and the legislative cover to respond, not the latter. And the RFS are designed for the emergency and not the preparation and resilience building.

We have a gap that needs to be filled if we recognise the need to 'get ready' before the disaster. Likewise, the actual response needs to consider a reduced role of the ADF in future responses.

There tends to be a continued focus on "business as usual" in emergency response, rather than preparing to transition to a well-adapted country (to future climate and associated emergencies). This requires a greater focus on preparation and resilience building, which is an emerging role for the Commonwealth that is not adequately filled. Today the 'new normal' is a changing state, and a future climate state that needs preparation for beyond the status quo.

A capability assessment of the suggested option two in this submission would allow the following considered capability shortfalls, if the ADF were not called.

- Rotary wing lift. This may be a leased option that might be preposition and ready to assist where a national entity might make a judgement of the most at need.
- Engineering emergency assistance. This might be a part of the new force but collected at a regional rather than township level.
- Health reinforcement. While there are already a couple of organisations that reinforce on response, this could be professionalised and as per engineering regionalised and with a role to coordinate additional support when provided through contract or good will.

– How could a Commonwealth workforce surge capacity be replicated in a scalable, efficient, and effective way?

The Army reserve model, based on a regional and country/town model would potentially have great merit. This however should be reinforced with a model that would see members of the force paid and well educated, well lead, with support provisions that met their needs such as payment for ranger like services, or removal of HECS, and consideration of a paid gap year like behaviour (in your local community).

– How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?

A formal body capable of conducting resilience building and preparation would link with both full-time local council and Government of States and Commonwealth, as well as community-based volunteer organisations and local first responders.

Recognising points made earlier that volunteering needs to be re-invented, a Force that would provide preparedness and readying behaviours might look to the Army reserve model and include special provisions for the creation of a benefit for service behaviours, such as HEC reduction or a paid employment in the preparation and readiness activities of the local force. This connection should be reinforced with paid (potentially tax free) service such as the reserves in Defence.

– How do these models supplement, but not replicate, existing models operating at a state and territory and local level?

There is currently no force responsible for resilience building and disaster and adaptation preparation, this new force or adjusted current force, would need to be appropriately resourced and staffed. While there are policy agencies and the NEMA (National Emergency Management Agency) who have specific roles, the role of preparing and readying a community is not one that has a home.

– What role could industry / the private sector play? How can the Government attract increased investment in emergency management from the private sector?

Private sector has an interest in maintaining or resuming business operations as quickly as possible after a disaster, reducing impacts on its built assets, and minimising harm to its workers and the those who buy services or goods from them. It is in the interest of industry and business to be part of the preparation of the community for disasters. A reduction in threat or risk for the funds provided, otherwise it is philanthropy.

Risk reduction expertise from the agency should be part of the business and chamber of commerce to assist building and conducting resilience building with community and government (local, state and Commonwealth).

– What gaps currently exist in state and territory emergency management capability?

Almost all emergency management capabilities are defined by their title, conducting emergency management and response. There needs to be a definable change to the conduct of disaster management and commence or include the preparation for disasters by building resilience and preparing for the changes that climate will bring.

Are there sectors that could replicate the capabilities provided by the ADF?

Almost all of the ADF role could be replicated and indeed improved upon for the use in disaster response.

The question this encourages is, what is the nation prepared to fund to support another entity or force to conduct those roles which can be performed by the ADF, and tasks that go beyond those normally conducted by the ADF? It may also be phased; can the nation afford not to invest in a preparation and readiness organisation or force.

Another consideration is that when conducting emergency response, the ADF is removed from their primary task of preparing for and conducting conflict of varying types. They are expected to assist beyond the capacity of the local resources of the states. And this assistance is generally beyond that of any non-defence agency, and this is often with exceptionally large fleet sized support, mass people use, sophisticated equipment such as helicopters and deployable assets like hospitals, and large planes and ships for the provision of logistic support and for rescues.

There is an argument that ADF deployment to support other nations in disaster response is a strategic operation.

And, that deployment in Australia is also a strategic national operation. So important that conflict preparation is set aside for human security imperatives. This should be a national priority that Defence should be comfortable with.

What are the critical functions the Commonwealth Government should continue to perform in disaster relief and recovery, in support of local, state and territory governments?

The Commonwealth currently provide NEMA as a coordination of emergency assets and forces. This coordinating body is needed.

The National Resilience Task Force has program capacities that allow funding and funded activities to occur to support national objectives. This might be part of a future force headquarters and coordination system for preparatory and readiness activities. Or it may sit alongside as the policy body that supports the Force.

There is also the DRA which should in our view be rolled into the force being discussed at Option Two.

What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability?

Should option Two be taken up the following considerations may be made.

- Legislation drafted to create body with its rules, functions, and roles (these must include preparedness and readiness of the community for disasters and climate change, response, and recovery) to natural and human-made disasters.
- Legislation to nationalise the SES and RFS functions across the country.
- Legislation to support the paid volunteerism and any potential benefits that flow from participation such as HEC relief, gap year training and pay, and part-time called-up service which is tax-free pay.
- Funding arrangements to allow that force to enact its role and resource its community locations.
- Funding arrangements for the force's activities.
- Policy guidance (potential NRTF) for the activities undertaken by the force.
- Training systems and hierarchy for the proper leadership of the organisation.