

Landcare NSW Limited

ABN 24 958 819 359

Unit 7 | 56 Church Avenue | Mascot NSW 2020

T: 02 8339 4816

enquiry@landcarensw.org.au

www.landcarensw.org.au



Grassroots Community Landcare: The Linchpin for Disaster Preparedness in NSW and Australia

A response to the "Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response"¹, Discussion Paper – August 2023

By Dr Turlough Guerin, CEO, Landcare NSW²

As the Federal Government unveils the "Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response" (referred to as the discussion paper), it's crucial to highlight the indispensable role played by our communities in mitigating state and national-level crises. This Federal Government discussion paper underscores the significance of grassroots initiatives, like those advocated by Landcare NSW, in building resilience and preparing communities against the escalating threats posed by climate change and other natural disasters impacting rural and regional areas. Landcare NSW argues that further investment in disaster preparedness through the lens of nature-based solutions, delivered by local communities, is a compelling investment of taxpayer dollars, but also insurance against the most extreme effects of natural disasters in NSW and Australia.

Introduction

The Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper acknowledges that crisis response and recovery begin at the community level, and as crises escalate, local governments and states and territories are the first responders in Australia's emergency management system. Therefore, community organisations are expected to play a critical role in disaster preparedness by working with local governments and emergency services to develop and implement community-based emergency management plans, raise awareness of risks and hazards, and build community resilience and capacity to respond to and recover from disasters.

The discussion paper does not provide specific information on the role of Landcare in emergency management. However, the paper does mention that the Commonwealth seeks to gain insights from a broad range of stakeholders, including industry experts, non-government organisations, not-for-profit groups, volunteer organisations, and corporate Australia. It also highlights the critical role of the not-for-profit sector, including volunteer organisations, in emergency management. Therefore, it is implicit that Landcare, as a not-for-profit organisation, could and does play a role in emergency management efforts in Australia. However, the specific role of Landcare depends on its local capabilities and capacities and how they align with the emergency management needs of the Commonwealth and states/territories.

¹ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/submissions-and-discussion-papers/alternative-commonwealth-capabilities-for-crisis-response-discussion-paper>

² Submitted 27 September 2023.

Nature-based solutions, which are highlighted in this response, such as green infrastructure, ecosystem-based approaches, and nature-based engineering, have been increasingly recognised as effective measures to reduce the risk and impact of natural hazards and climate change. These solutions can provide multiple benefits, such as reducing flood risk, improving water quality, enhancing biodiversity, and providing recreational opportunities. Therefore, it is possible that nature-based solutions could be considered as part of the emergency management capabilities and capacities of the Commonwealth and states/territories. However, the specific role and implementation of nature-based solutions would depend on the context and needs of each emergency management situation.

This response articulates some of the issues for the Commonwealth to consider as it sets out its pending and future plans for leveraging the extensive reach of the grassroots Landcare community in NSW, and more broadly across Australia.

The Unwavering Power of Community

The community is mentioned several times in the Discussion Paper. The paper acknowledges that crisis response and recovery begin at the community level, and as crises escalate, local governments and states and territories are the first responders in Australia's emergency management system. Therefore, the paper emphasises the need to build community resilience and capability so that communities are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises.

While the emphasis of the discussion paper centres around response and recovery, it rightly acknowledges the undeniable truth: *effective crisis response and recovery are deeply rooted in community-level interventions*. It's at the community level that local governments, states, and territories become the first line of defence against emergencies. To bolster Australia's emergency management system, it's paramount to invest in community resilience and capabilities, enabling them to respond and recover adeptly from major crises.

Grassroots Landcare: Generating Resilience

The discussion paper also recognises the pivotal role played by not-for-profit groups, like Landcare, in fortifying communities against disasters. These grassroots organisations not only bolster resilience but also enhance community cohesion, underlining their role as the lifeblood of disaster preparedness. Given the increasing frequency of extreme weather events and the associated risks they present, it's evident that preparedness is no longer just an option, but a necessity. The paper highlights the significance of moving towards such initiatives and explicitly recognises community-led efforts as pivotal in building resilience and mitigating disaster impacts.

Landcare NSW Response: Landcare NSW supports the premise that effective crisis response and recovery are deeply rooted in community-level interventions. Funding allocations to Federal and State agencies should recognise the need for funding to ensure grassroots community Landcare organisations are available and able to operationalise the network of Landcare Coordinators which, depending on the state or territory, have varying capacity to incorporate landscape and community preparedness activities into their core and traditional Landcare activities.

The Determined Spirit of Volunteers

Volunteers form the backbone of Australia's disaster management efforts. From spontaneous volunteers to those engaged in multifaceted roles, their contributions are undeniably paramount. However, as this discussion paper reveals, supporting our volunteers is not just a necessity, but an obligation. The challenges faced by volunteers, including burnout, skill mismatches, and financial burdens, need urgent attention.

With the ethos "Landcare is People care" as our guiding principle, there is an urgent need to address these challenges. Strategic initiatives, centred around volunteer well-being, including health programs, training, financial support, and open communication, can pave the way for a more resilient and prepared volunteer force.

Landcare NSW Response: Landcare NSW supports the need for investing in the wellbeing and capability of volunteers. Funding allocations to Federal and State agencies should recognise the need for funding to ensure grassroots community Landcare organisations have funding available to ensure their wellbeing and capability are not overlooked but allocated for as part of future disaster planning.

Nature-Based Solutions: The Way Forward

Grassroots community Landcare groups can play a significant role in enhancing the resilience of landscapes and communities against extreme weather events and natural disasters. The paper aptly points out the invaluable contributions of nature-based solutions in disaster management. Such solutions, ranging from restoring degraded ecosystems to leveraging natural flood management techniques, are instrumental in enhancing community resilience. Emphasis on community-led initiatives, such as reforestation, further accentuates the critical role grassroots organisations like Landcare play in disaster management.

Landcare NSW Response: Here's a list of nature-based solutions that members of Landcare NSW and similar groups can adopt and bring as a solution to the problem of landscape and community preparedness:

1. **Reforestation, Afforestation, Agroforestry and Bush Regeneration:** Planting native trees to restore forest cover, which can act as windbreaks, stabilise soils, and reduce flooding risks. Integrating trees, shrubs, and crops on the same parcel of land, enhancing soil quality, reducing erosion, and ensuring water retention. Placement of trees strategically and using those that have fire retardant properties will be critical in future tree planting and restoration projects.
2. **Wetland Restoration:** Restoring wetlands to act as natural sponges, absorbing excess water during floods and releasing it slowly, reducing flood impact. They can also act to minimise the detrimental impacts of low rainfall and drought.
3. **Preserving Indigenous Knowledge:** Collaborating with Indigenous communities to understand and implement traditional land management practices that have long protected the landscape. Landcare NSW has a program called "Working Together" which successfully brings indigenous knowledge to traditional Landcare activities.
4. **Grassland Rehabilitation:** Establishing and maintaining native grasslands to prevent soil erosion, enhance groundwater recharge, and reduce the impacts of floods by slowing overland flow (of floodwater).
5. **Coastal Ecosystem Restoration:** Protecting and restoring mangroves, sea grasses, mangroves, and coral reefs which act as natural barriers against storm surges and, to some extent, sea-level rise.
6. **Green Engineering:** Using living plants and natural (living) materials to stabilise slopes and riverbanks, reducing the risk of landslides and erosion (wind and water-based).

7. **Urban Greening:** Promoting the establishment of green roofs, walls, and urban parks to manage urban heat (reducing the impacts of heat waves) and enhance stormwater management to better manage the availability of water.
8. **Permeable Pavements, Swales and Waterway Buffers:** Encouraging the use of natural materials for roads and paths in community areas, allowing rainwater to infiltrate and reducing flood risks. Creating gardens specifically designed to absorb rainwater, reducing the impact of heavy downpours and minimising runoff (reducing erosion). Establishing vegetative strips along rivers and streams to filter runoff, stabilise banks (from water erosion), and enhance aquatic habitats.
9. **Community Nurseries:** Developing community-run nurseries for native plants and trees, promoting local species that are adapted to local climate conditions. These will be increasingly critical as part of the natural capital supply chain necessary if Australia is to meet the growing demand for seeds, tube stocks, shrubs, and trees for a range of landscape management, stabilisation, and restoration works.
10. **Collaborative Monitoring, Community Education, and Enhancing Participation:** Engaging community members in monitoring local ecosystems, tracking changes, and reporting potential threats including those from floods, fires, landslips and other natural disasters. Landcare communities have the reach and trust to bring critical messages regarding nature-based solutions and community-led landscape preparation for disasters, across regional areas – a challenge faced by State and Federal Government agencies.

Through nature-based solutions, such as those highlighted above, grassroots community Landcare groups can significantly contribute to the resilience of Australian landscapes and communities against extreme weather events and natural disasters.

Landcare NSW is currently supported through a State Risk Reduction stream of the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund (DRRF)³ to deliver Landcare Projects to Increase Community and Landscape Preparedness for Disasters. Building on this investment and acknowledgment by NSW Government (and the Commonwealth) in our ability to be part of the solution, Landcare NSW has set itself a strategic objective to secure funding to expand the current project (above) and will seek further funding from the State and Commonwealth funding for an expanded program developed and delivered by the grassroots community of Landcare in NSW.

Recommendations

The current financial trajectory whereby the vast majority of taxpayer funds are committed post-disaster is fiscally unsustainable. Not only does it impose a considerable burden on the national and state budgets, but it also indicates a reactionary rather than proactive approach. Such a strategy increases vulnerability, exacerbates socioeconomic disparities, and diminishes our capacity to effectively respond to and mitigate the impacts of disasters. Grassroots organisations like Landcare NSW are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between policy and practice, operating at the nexus of community knowledge, engagement, and environmental stewardship.

³ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/emergency/nsw-reconstruction-authority/disaster-risk-reduction-fund-state-risk-reduction-stream>

The following are put forward for consideration by the Commonwealth Government:

a. Localised Knowledge and Engagement: Landcare groups possess intimate knowledge of local ecosystems, terrains, and vulnerabilities. They offer invaluable insights into localised preventative measures that can be instituted well in advance of potential disasters.

b. Proactive Environmental Management: Through restoration projects, land rehabilitation, and soil conservation efforts, these organisations actively reduce environmental vulnerabilities. This not only minimises the impact of natural disasters but also aids in faster post-disaster ecological recovery.

c. Community Mobilisation and Education: Landcare initiatives often engage communities in hands-on conservation projects. Such engagements can be leveraged for disaster preparedness training, creating a populace that's informed, equipped, and ready to act pre-emptively.

Proposed Strategic Realignment at the State and Commonwealth Levels:

The following can be done in a pilot or in a staged manner:

a. Enhanced Collaboration: Establishing partnerships between government agencies and Landcare organisations can ensure a two-way flow of information, resources, and expertise.

b. Financial Re-prioritisation: A portion of the current disaster recovery budget could be redirected to fund Landcare projects with specific disaster prevention and resilience objectives. Landcare NSW provides a working example of how grassroots community organisations can better prepare our communities and landscapes for disasters.

c. Integration into Policy Frameworks: Landcare initiatives can be integrated into broader disaster preparedness policies, ensuring their efforts are recognised, supported, and scaled.

d. Monitoring and Reporting: Establish a framework for regular reporting on community-led disaster preparedness initiatives to track progress, identify best practices, and recalibrate strategies as needed.

Conclusion:

The discussion paper recognises that while response and recovery efforts are essential, preparedness, prevention, and resilience-building efforts are now critical to reducing the impacts of natural disasters on Australian communities. The discussion paper highlights that there is now a shift towards preparedness because of the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in Australia. The acceleration of major climate events risks are overwhelming our emergency services, and national capacity to respond effectively. Therefore, the paper emphasises the need to invest in preparedness, prevention, and resilience-building efforts to reduce the impact of natural disasters on Australian communities. It also recognises that community-led preparedness efforts are critical to building resilience and reducing the impact of natural disasters on communities and highlights that community-led preparedness efforts can help to identify and address local risks, build community capacity and resilience, and reduce the impact of natural disasters on communities.

As we brace for an uncertain future fraught with climate challenges, there's a pressing need for Australia to refocus its strategies, prioritising preparedness over recovery. Grassroots community Landcare, with its vast network of dedicated volunteers and community-driven initiatives⁴, remains at the forefront of this shift. By investing in such organisations to undertake the work of landscape and community preparedness, Australia will not only enhance its disaster preparedness, but also cement our commitment to safeguarding the nation's future against disasters. Public servants and

⁴ See how the National Landcare Network could scale community-led interventions nationally <https://www.nln.org.au>

agencies at the Federal and State levels must recognise this potential and integrate community contributions towards Landscape and community preparedness into Government-led disaster management plans and strategies. Landcare NSW is available to support Commonwealth initiatives to pilot, trial and scale community-led disaster risk reduction efforts and acknowledges the Minister and the Department for considering the important role that community organisations play in alternative approaches to disaster mitigation.

By embracing the potential of grassroots Landcare organisations, we not only empower our communities but also work towards a more balanced and sustainable model of disaster preparedness and recovery. A shift from a predominantly reactionary approach to one that is proactive not only represents a fiscally prudent choice but a strategic commitment to safeguarding the well-being and resilience of our nation.

References

Commonwealth Government (2023) Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response⁵, Discussion Paper – August 2023, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/submissions-and-discussion-papers/alternative-commonwealth-capabilities-for-crisis-response-discussion-paper>.

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⁵ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/submissions-and-discussion-papers/alternative-commonwealth-capabilities-for-crisis-response-discussion-paper>