

Firstly, I'd like to thank the Department of Home Affairs and the National Emergency Management Agency for deciding to open this opportunity for written submissions regarding the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper. I think it is so important that active efforts are being made to consider the opinions of the Australian public in this rethinking of how the Commonwealth can bring its capabilities to bear in response to future national crises.

The redirection of the Australian Defence Force's efforts away from crisis response and back to its primary mission is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to re-design from first principles its capabilities in mitigating the hazards that Australians will face in the future. Rethinking aspects of our current approach – particularly around risk – could help Government's capabilities achieve much higher expected value.

Why We Should Care About Catastrophic Hazards

Much of Australia's crisis management efforts are directed towards domestic natural disasters – floods, bushfires, and the like – but as a fairly typical Australian, the most profoundly impactful event I've experienced in my life was COVID-19; an international crisis. I'd also argue that most Australians would feel similarly. **In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic killed around 30 times more Australians than every bushfire in Australia's recorded history combined.**

In early 2020, politicians and commentators were calling the COVID-19 pandemic “unprecedented”. However, although it was certainly unexpected, saying it was “unprecedented” – and thus implying it could not be prepared for – is simply not true. Human history gives us many examples of hugely impactful pandemics from the Black Death to the Spanish Flu, and even in the modern day, experts and influential figures had warned for many years prior to 2020 that the world was unprepared for the next big pandemic. As just one example, in 2015, Bill Gates gave a TED talk titled “**The next outbreak? We're not ready**”, during which he bluntly stated “*We're not ready for the next epidemic*”.

Given pandemics are simultaneously not all that rare and hugely consequential, I think it is reflective of a real problem that state and federal emergency managers were ill-prepared for COVID-19. Moreover, if we expand our scope, there are many other plausible hazards that could be hugely consequential – from further pandemics to volcanic eruptions causing famine, from nuclear war to bio-terrorism – that we are similarly ill-prepared to face.

Reviewing the Government's documents, including the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, it seems that we have, at best, a general governance framework to address these kinds of threats. We don't have specific plans or specific capabilities, and in the event that such a threat was to materialize, these shortfalls would likely mean that Australia would be unable to appropriately respond. In rethinking of Commonwealth crisis response capabilities, we need to include some focus on these catastrophic hazards and ensure we have the plans and capabilities needed to manage them at a national level.

Why the Commonwealth Should Invest in Capabilities Pertaining to Catastrophic Hazards

The economic concept of ‘diminishing returns’ applies to a great many areas of human endeavour, and crisis response is no exception. Further investment towards better management of any single cause – like bushfires – results in an ever-diminishing level of harm prevention and risk mitigation for every additional dollar spent.

Given that catastrophic hazards pose very significant risks to Australia – something that I hope is clear – and that such hazards are severely neglected by the Commonwealth's current crisis management approach, if the Government began to seriously consider and address these kinds of hazards, it could have a real and significantly positive impact on Australia's management of overall crisis risk exposure.

For example - consulting with relevant stakeholders to create, update, and regularly exercise a crisis management plan is remarkably cheap when compared to physical risk mitigations. NEMA is proud to have committed more than \$3.85 billion in recovery assistance and \$400 million to risk reduction programs like flood levees and cyclone shelters. In that context, the cost for NEMA to develop and maintain a national plan addressing each kind of catastrophic hazard type across an all-hazard spectrum is comparatively tiny. Having and exercising plans would reduce risk and create a pathway for finding other high-impact risk mitigations and capability ideas.

How the Commonwealth Should Invest in Capabilities Pertaining to Catastrophic Hazards

Given the above, I believe that Australia needs a National Risk Assessment that compares risk across all-hazards. The UK recently completed a similar assessment, and many nations like ours have also done so. Our efforts to combat hazards should be proportionate to the risk they pose but at present, even though catastrophic hazards are orders of magnitude more risky than commonly occurring natural hazards like bushfires, catastrophic hazards are neglected. A robust all-hazards risk assessment is essential to ensuring we build the capability we actually need.

There is potential for NEMA to be a leader – domestically but potentially even globally – by taking the risks posed by catastrophic and existential hazards seriously. The neglect of less likely but highly consequential risks occurs across government and society. If NEMA begins exploring what it looks like to prepare for, respond to, or recover from events like nuclear war, it will be well placed to communicate about the nature of those hazards to policy leaders, regulators, and others who could contribute to prevention. Rather than society ignoring these risks, NEMA could understand the challenges and help focus minds on how important it is that these risks never come to pass.

Conclusion

Again, I express my appreciation for the chance to share my views on this opportunity to reform the Commonwealth's crisis management and response capabilities. Although this is just a single submission, I hope the Government genuinely considers the risks of catastrophic and existential hazards. I believe the evidence is overwhelming that these are very significant risks – much more so than fires, floods or storms – and it is the role of the Commonwealth to take these risks seriously and build the capabilities we need to address them.