

Plan C response to Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs and National Emergency Management Agency, *Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response - Discussion Paper – August 2023*

Extreme weather events are now a regular occurrence. The challenge is how to build the most effective and enduring systems of inter-agency cooperation that are capable of effectively managing such events. Building resilient communities is central to achieving this outcome.

Clearly, although state and territory government emergency services are vital in supporting communities in situations of extreme crisis, it is prior to, during and after such events that community-based organisations play a key role. Certainly, in the case of last year's floods that impacted the Northern Rivers region, the crucial role played by local community-based organisations in providing critical support became abundantly clear. Responses ranged from helping people flee inundated buildings, relocation to safe places, information dissemination, resource provision, including water, food and clothing. This was achieved through liaison with many government and non-government organisations, including the ADF.

The questions put in the discussion paper are vital in terms of addressing future management strategies. The bushfire season has already started in early spring of this year, and both governments and communities need to prepare for and adapt to further inevitable occurrences. That said, current preparedness levels are not enough to prepare adequately for the multiplicity of risks that we face. Bushfires happen in the context of a rapidly changing climate, which makes fires far more intense and the dangers considerably more present and challenging. Knowledge and awareness of the nature and extent of forthcoming extreme weather events must be matched by a carefully considered, coordinated response that includes the role of community organisations in assisting those in need, as well as developing an inter-agency culture that is inclusive and empowering.

As the climate change intensifies, we need to mitigate against and adapt to a multiplicity of compounding risks, including heatwaves, droughts, storms, localised flooding, but also the effects of these including trauma, heat-related illnesses, smoke inhalation, destruction of houses and infrastructures, water scarcity, power outages, loss of communications, food security, as well as detrimental effects on business continuity, supply chains, tourism, education, transport, etc.

As a not-for-profit community resilience organisation, Plan C addresses these and other concerns by committing itself to supporting community members through resilience training and education programmes to prepare for future climate related disaster events. Our mission is to build the resilience and regenerative capacities of Northern Rivers communities in NSW in the face of disasters and crises. We are presently engaged in proactive preparation for the compounding risks via our triad of programs, which include our Community Carers and Responders (CCR) network, our

"Facing Up" awareness-raising dialogues, and our participation in food security initiatives.

As part of our CCR training program, we have since last year's floods, provided 233 community members across 7 LGAs of the Northern Rivers with intensive and trauma-informed free training over 5 days. This encompasses a focus on self-care and disaster resilience; community building; non-violent communications, emergency communications, food, water, and energy security; first aid; and psychological first aid. These courses not only increase knowledge and awareness of the threats posed to local communities by climate change but also offer the means by which communities can respond (rather than react) most effectively. With its focus on capacity-building, our graduates are mentored to implement projects that build their own community's disaster resilience, as well as ongoing opportunities to deepen their knowledge and foster interpersonal connections.

The project has had significant success, including improved community resilience, increased awareness of disaster preparedness, and the formation of strong community bonds. Tangible outcomes include the creation of risk reduction plans, the formation of neighbourhood resilience groups, the organisation of many community-building events and food security initiatives, the setting up of emergency radio communications, and more.

One of the most important benefits of the CCR program has been enhancing networks and connecting community leaders across the Northern Rivers. The CCR model, in which local councils and emergency services are flexibly integrated to ensure a 'whole-of-community' approach, is transposable to other parts of Australia - urban or rural. Such networking and inter-agency capacity building and cooperation is pivotal to how communities manage extreme weather events in the short to longer term. The lessons of the 2022 floods in the Northern Rivers region are that this whole of community approach is vital if an effective and enduring response to extreme events is to occur. Clarity of roles and responsibilities in this regard is crucial as is the capacity to communicate through coordinated rapid response fora of which local community organisations are a part.

In light of the tremendous heat experienced in the Northern Hemisphere this year, the terrible bushfires that devastated Maui in Hawaii and the likelihood of an El Nino climate event this year and the next, we need to collectively increase our risk reduction, adaptation and resilience-building activities against compounding risks. Not-for-profit community-based organisations play a key role in this regard. There are a number of activities Plan C - alongside other community resilience groups in the region - could take to support our local governments, emergency services and communities, such as further education and training for adults and the youth, community disaster plans, improved coordination and collaboration with emergency services and other stakeholders, working bees for bushfire preparedness to help those who can't prepare their properties themselves, community-building, heatwave refuges for vulnerable people, energy security, radio communication systems and other alternative modes of communication, food security, retrofitting homes to make them more disaster resilient, psychological first aid, infrastructure repair, nature-based resilience etc. but they are costly and time-consuming.

Plan C is also well aware that working with communities can be challenging and that constructive arrangements need to be found between all stakeholders, which we strongly support. Again, lessons from the 2022-flood event in the Northern Rivers, as elsewhere, suggest the need for commonly understood protocols and guidelines to ensure clear and respectful channels of communication and processes of decision making.

Questions – responses

At this point, we would like to address a number of questions raised in the report:

- 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?

As noted above, community, not-for-profit based organisations play a key role in the immediate aftermath and on-going impacts of extreme weather events. Therefore, consideration should be given to how such organisations can be supported as they, along with other organisations, play a key role in building resilient communities capable of responding to future climate-related challenges. We are referring here to a vital interface between locally based organisations and those government agencies and organisations tasked with working alongside them. It is through such cooperative relationships, facilitated by clear processes and protocols, that the most effective outcomes can be realised. Local knowledge, and an on-the-ground awareness of community needs and aspirations is vital in achieving a truly coordinated response to disaster events. Through its preparatory training and education, Plan C makes a significant and lasting contribution to building resilient communities.

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

This question is answered in the final paragraphs of Plan C's response, above. Funding is pivotal to the continuation of building strong, resilient and enduring community-based responses to extreme weather events. The resources needed to train, educate and generally prepare communities into the future are time-consuming and costly. Financial support is required to guarantee the very best outcomes.

Plan C has already been recognised in other regions and been invited to provide training and information. Plan C with adequate funding could provide a model for use in regions across Australia.

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

Certainly, recognition of the key role played by local communities seeking to respond to extreme weather events, clear coordination of inter-agency roles and responsibilities, and adequate (ultimately, cost-saving) funding to cover all activities.

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

Please see above.

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

Plan C's model of community resilience training and education is vital to local response-building strategies. This is about building a culture of interagency cooperation and collaboration, as well as empowering community connections as the foundation for an overarching resilience response.

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

Please see above.

In conclusion

Plan C is committed to playing its part in ensuring that Northern Rivers communities adapt to the compounding risks presented by climate change. We have approached both the National Emergency Management Agency and the NSW Reconstruction Authority for funding in anticipation of possible future climate-related disruptions. Unfortunately, there seems to be no such funding available at the moment, which is all the more regrettable given that *research consistently shows that investment in adaptation and resilience is far more cost-effective than a focus on response and recovery*. Plan C is already applying for funding from a number of grant providers, however, the sums accessible through these channels are insufficient to meet the pressing and comprehensive needs of the communities we serve.

Given the enormous benefits that flow from an investment in initiatives like Plan C, we would warmly welcome consideration of further funding to enable us to invest in building climate resilient communities. Specifically, we would appreciate your guidance on any governmental schemes, grants, or appropriations that may be rapidly leveraged Plan C's goals.

Your support would be instrumental in lessening the impacts of future disasters on our communities and thereby help create a safer and more sustainable environment for all residents.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We recognize the unexpected nature of this request but believe you would concur that the gravity of the situation necessitates rapid and effective actions, especially if we aim to align our efforts with current climate science.

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