

Submission for: Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper

Ideas For a Federal Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Organisation

Prepared by: Saba Sinai

I thank the Australian Government for this opportunity to contribute to the discussion on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response. This is a much needed and important initiative. The August 2023 discussion paper clearly articulates the challenge that Australia faces in disaster response and the responsibility that communities and governments must shoulder.

I would like to begin my submission by highlighting that I am by no means an expert on this topic, but I write this submission as a citizen with an interest in the welfare of my fellow Australians and our partners around the world who look to good, functioning governments and institutions to provide crisis response. I write this submission predominantly from the perspective of the PhD I am undertaking on the use of the "Building Back Better" paradigm as a mechanism for primary producer-led post disaster resilience. However, the submission here is not specific to agriculture. In my professional capacity, I am a lecturer in agriculture at CQUniversity.

This submission seeks to respond to the points raised in the August 2023 Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper.

The humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) role of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and the competing priorities it faces has been a topic I, together with many other Australians, have reflected on for some years, especially after the summer of 2021/2022 as the ADF's personnel and equipment were simultaneously utilised for disaster relief, particularly flooding in Eastern Australia, and in the efforts to control the COVID pandemic.

The twin challenges of flooding and COVID response in the summer of 2021/22 period made two particular points clear. Both of which are highlighted in the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper.

Firstly, that Defence has a "core business" to fulfil in national defence and as the global security environment continues to deteriorate and as security actors devise more complex means to wage conflict, the ADF's focus will increasingly need to turn to defence and the

deterrence of conflict. This is a point clearly outlined in the Defence Strategic Review, which argues that the use of the ADF in HADR should be a "last resort".

Secondly, while the international security situation becomes more perilous, climate change continues to contribute to more severe and frequent disasters in Australia and across the globe. Communities can face successive and different disasters which cause injury and loss of life, sap the economy, and perturb social wellbeing.

Many others have articulated these two points before, yet it bears repeating here to frame this submission.

Both of these points coalesce to make a third point apparent: the ADF can no longer act on a regular basis to provide a HADR function, yet the need for an agile, well equipped, well organised, and physically capable organisation that state and territories can draw on in times of disaster will only grow as climate change drives the intensity and frequency of disasters.

In this submission I would like to highlight my perspectives, limited as they are, on the need for a federal HADR body and how such a body could reinforce grass roots/local as well as state/territory level disaster response efforts and institutions. In writing this submission I would like to highlight what the ADF has offered in HADR and why some of these personnel and equipment/plant capacities should form part of any new HADR body, and then turn to some strategies for recruitment and activities which may be suitable for a Commonwealth level body.

Equipment and personnel capabilities

The ADF equipment capabilities have been critical to disaster response in recent years. The use of HMAS Choules in assisting with the evacuation of hundreds from Mallacoota during the Black Summer bushfires is one such case. The use of ADF helicopter missions for search and rescue during Operation Flood Assist 2022 is another. In outlining the role of Defence in Operation Flood Assist 2022, the organisation cites also the use of:

- “Bushmaster and other high-clearance vehicles to conduct damage assessments and welfare checks in isolated areas.”
- “HMAS Shepparton, HMAS Yarra and Clearance Diving Team Four completed hydrographic survey and clearance of sub-surface obstructions.”
- “Seven ADF helicopters providing reconnaissance and support in NSW”

From these and other examples, it is clear that the ADF's assets, and the professionals who operate them, are a significant aspect of the organisation's contribution to disaster response. Therefore, any federal/national body designed to fulfill the role that the ADF may have otherwise been called to play will require the use of these assets. While the provision of more equipment to state and territory emergency agencies would contribute to their capability, the option to raise a number of these assets which can be manoeuvred as required potentially provides a more cost-effective solution.

In addition to the important equipment-based capability that the ADF has provided, Defence's personnel offer an important pool of human resources that can be drawn on for a range of skills, including the provision of medical assistance, patient transport, logistics, to more generalist duties and laborious tasks such as rubbish removal, welfare checks, debris removal, clean up, road clearing and infrastructure damage assessment. The spectrum of tasks that the ADF has been required to perform is broad. A federal body would need to likewise fulfil a multiplicity of roles, enabled by appropriate assets and personnel.

Interoperability with state, territory, and local agencies

The role of a national disaster response body will require the organisation to work hand-in-hand with state, territory, and local institutions. Again, the ADF demonstrated their capacity to do this in previous disaster events. This cooperation or interoperability goes to a key principle in the ADF's relationship with Australia's partners. As such it would appear to be a natural posture for the ADF to assume. While Defence has worked closely with emergency services in carrying out disaster relief responsibilities, ADF representatives have also worked with members of other government departments, such as the Victorian Department of Transport during the Black Summer bushfires and the Australian Government Department of Health to assist with COVID outbreak control and staff shortages in residential aged care facilities during the peak period of the pandemic in 2021/2022.

This interoperability capacity would be essential for a standalone national HADR force to seamlessly integrate with state or territory emergency services and other stakeholders. Given the range of government departments, emergency service organisations and international agencies a federal HADR group would be required to work alongside, this interoperability capacity allows for efforts to be quickly combined in a manner that does not distract from the disaster response task at hand. For such a capacity to be realised, a federal HADR body would require frequent and meaningful engagement with the emergency services and other

organisations it would likely work with, in a fashion not dissimilar to the ADF's interoperability program with international defence partners.

Organisational structure and duties

The financial impost of a standalone national HADR body is likely to pose a significant challenge for the federal government. This is a challenge made all the more difficult given the increasing budget pressures outlined in the Intergenerational Report 2023, among other forecasts. As such, the composition and seasonal or surge availability of a standalone HADR body will be important to consider. Others will be far more able to articulate this composition based on a more acute understanding of disaster response/relief realities. However, I wanted to pose two possible options. One that addresses the role of full or part time permanent professional staff during non-operational periods and another that addresses the challenge of Australia's seasonal disaster response requirements in which disasters seem to be concentrated over the summer period and where a disaster demands surge capacity.

The role of full or part time permanent professional staff during non-operational periods

While state or territory level emergency services are called to respond to emergencies on a very frequent basis (daily and more), a national HADR body which will be called upon to respond to larger emergencies will likely experience more non-operational time availability. Yet a completely volunteer organisation that only operates during disasters risks losing out on the benefits that a professional force provides. Taxpayers and governments will want to ensure that this non-operational time remains productive, in addition to the training and preparedness exercises that would naturally be undertaken. One option is for these personnel to engage in interoperability training, as outlined above or to train volunteers for the HADR body. Another is to engage with communities to enhance grassroots emergency response: from in-school training, to capacity building in volunteer organisations, providing SES members with advanced training and other useful strategies. Such initiatives can ensure that communities are prepared for a variety of disasters and respond to them in a way that assists emergency responders. In India, the National Disaster Response Force engages communities in awareness and preparedness training to equip individuals and communities with basic skills that may prove helpful during a disaster. There is also the option to engage with our international partners in the provision of training to emergency services in other nations, contributing to Australia's role in the world.

Seasonal and Surge Capacity

The discussion paper poses two related questions: How could a Commonwealth workforce surge capacity be replicated in a scalable, efficient and effective way? How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model? One possible approach I would like to propose acknowledges what tends to be a seasonal upsurge in disasters across Australia (and in our partners in the South Pacific and East Africa) during the Southern Hemisphere summer. This is also the period in which many university students are on their summer vacation. This three-or-so month period provides an opportunity to engage these students for surge capacity at the most pressing time of need for disaster response. Students who volunteer and are selected for such a surge capacity force could receive training throughout the year (delivered by professional staff in the HADR body), and receive a stipend and other benefits with an acknowledgement that they would only be called on during non-semester periods in summer. This provides the HADR force with a cohort of members who could provide generalist role and who may also opt to continue in a volunteer capacity once their university studies have concluded.

I thank the Australian Government for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion. I would be delighted to discuss any aspect of this submission further.

Kind regards,

Saba