

Submission to the 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry

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Summary of Recommendations

1. Elevate children's voices, priorities and experiences in our disaster frameworks
2. Establish a directory of agencies and expert providers to ensure a skilled and community-led rapid response in local communities
3. Invest long-term in proven programs and transparent funding pathways across the sector

UNICEF Australia's response to the 2022 NSW Floods

The 2022 floods in New South Wales (NSW) are likely to become one of Australia's worst-ever natural disasters according to the Climate Council.ⁱ While the floods have devastated communities and been felt by many, we know that children are particularly vulnerable to the risk of negative, long-term consequences after experiencing these kind of events.ⁱⁱ For children, these consequences can change the trajectory of their lives, reducing education, employment and psychosocial outcomes immediately and for the rest of their lives. For children in rural and remote areas, this comes in addition to the already significant disadvantage they experience, because of where they live.ⁱⁱⁱ

UNICEF Australia's focus, as the world's leading children's organisation, is to ensure that children's needs are being prioritised and addressed throughout the current flood response and recovery process, as well as looking forward to ensure we're better prepared for disasters in future. Based on our ongoing response to the 2019/2020 Black Summer Bushfires across NSW and Victoria, UNICEF Australia has been uniquely positioned to draw upon our experience and invest in key strategies to ensure the needs of children and young people are met throughout the current flooding event. Our key initiatives have included:

- **Provision of a micro-emergency relief package for families in the Lismore Region** – we provided a relief funding package supporting 67 families impacted by flooding in Northern NSW. Families were able to choose how to use the funds to purchase fuel, groceries, furniture, clothing and a variety of other household items.
- **Support of specialist mental health and psychosocial support programs** – we are working with our community partner organisations to support mental health and psychosocial programs for impacted communities. In order to ensure an effective program that meets the unique needs of each impacted community, UNICEF Australia will be conducting a Needs Assessment with local communities and schools over the next few months. The package of support options delivered through the final program will include a range of services including counselling, trauma response programming, and specialist support to children in affected communities.
- **Elevate the voices of children and young people** – we have helped coordinate consultations with young people to ensure their perspectives are heard by decision makers and the wider community, and have an influence on shaping public policy. This work is also vital in understanding what the critical short-, medium- and long-term needs are for young people in the community.
- **Ongoing advocacy in disasters and emergency response** – we continue to push for reforms to ensure the needs of children and young people in Australia are met when disaster strikes, and that they are supported long after. Our key calls to action are included in this submission.

Our work on the 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires

Following consultation with impacted communities and experts in disaster recovery, UNICEF Australia in partnership with [Royal Far West](#), developed the Bushfire Recovery Program. The program aimed to support the wellbeing and resilience of children impacted by the 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires and reduce the likelihood of long-term adverse effects.

The Bushfire Recovery Program is a multidisciplinary community-based model that involves working with both children (aged 0-12 years) and their parents, carers, educators, and service providers. The Program team includes social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists and speech pathologists. Each discipline brings unique skills to meet the varied needs of the community and their combined wisdom enhances the delivery of the whole program.

To date the Program has supported some 3,000 children in more than 30 bushfire-impacted communities. It is designed to support the wellbeing and resilience of children affected by bushfires and it is helping to give these children a “voice”, making sure their needs are both seen and met, and ensuring they are supported during the recovery process. The model continues to be delivered across seven Local Government Areas including Bega Valley Shire, Eurobodalla Shire, City of Shoalhaven, Glen Innes Severn Shire, Clarence Valley, Nambucca Valley and Kempsey Shire in NSW.

Charles Sturt University conducted an independent evaluation of the first 12 months of the Bushfire Recovery Program to determine whether it had a demonstrable impact and for whom, in what ways, and in what circumstances the outcomes were achieved. [This evaluation](#) demonstrated that the Program had an overall positive impact on children, on parents/carers, and on educators.^{iv} More information on this work can be found in our two joint-reports, the initial [After the Disaster: Recovery for Australia’s Children](#), followed by the more recent [Bushfire Recovery: The Children’s Voices](#).

Our recommendations to the 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry

Drawing on our current work on the 2022 NSW Floods, as well as the findings of our reports based on our experience with the 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires, we offer the following recommendations which will ensure the needs of children and young people are better met when we are inevitably faced with the next natural disaster.

1. Elevate children’s voices, priorities and experiences in our disaster frameworks

Australia’s disaster’s response frameworks do not currently give comprehensive consideration to the needs of affected children, despite the fact that we know they are particularly vulnerable to effects of disasters. We need to strengthen these frameworks at all levels of government so they focus on the specific needs of children and young people, taking into account contextual factors that surround disasters and emergency events – in particular the geographic location in which they occur, with most disasters occurring in regional and rural areas of Australia.

Some of the immediate needs of children and young people in a disaster include:

- **child friendly spaces** in evacuation, recovery and relief centres, as well as community hubs, to support children and also give parents and carers time and space, knowing their children are cared for;
- **tailored plans for affected children** to keep them connected to their learning as disruptions to schooling continue;
- **mental health and psychosocial support** provided through lead agencies who are best equipped to respond to children’s needs and can link into Primary Health Networks. It is important to note that a balance of clinical and non-clinical elements is beneficial during this disaster phase eg a combination of mental health and trauma trained specialist support, along with games and activities for children and young people to access; and
- **opportunities to share their views** so their most pressing needs and priorities are best understood.

Many children, families and communities in regional and rural regions face multiple layers of disadvantage such as an over-representation of pre-existing exposure to trauma and/or mental health challenges coupled with greater issues in accessing services – this ‘double disadvantage’ is then amplified by natural disasters. Given children’s unique needs, vulnerabilities, and perspectives, there is a need for child focused policies, frameworks, programs, and resources, to reflect children and young people’s experience of disasters and their negative impacts, and to support stronger outcomes for children and young people.

Child-centric disaster frameworks also mean elevating the voices of children into their design. We recommend the active involvement of children in the design of child and youth focused policies and frameworks to address all phases of disasters, taking all stages of a child’s development and the multiple determinants of disadvantage into consideration. We also recommend greater consultation and engagement with children and young people in the design of services and for children to be included in decision-making at all stages of the emergency management cycle (planning, preparation, response, relief and recovery).

Australian children and young people are often resilient and demonstrate leadership, with strong thoughts and feelings about how they can support and guide society in relation to disasters. They are seeking opportunities to share their

experiences and to participate in enhancing their own resilience and that of their community. As an example of this, UNICEF Australia recently partnered with [Youth Action NSW](#) to conduct consultations with young people and youth services in flood affected regions of NSW, including Lismore. Some of the preliminary findings from the consultations include:

- **Community has led the response** - from food to clothing and cleaning to checking on vulnerable people.
- **Housing needs** - both immediate and long term, there were comments about families being separated as a result. Many young people were sent the furthest away out of all people who were relocated, some moving several hours away from their hometown.
- **Emergency shelters and recovery centres** - family and child appropriate spaces have improved but young people often cannot use these or don't feel welcome to.
- **Education** - many smaller schools which have been affected have been absorbed into larger schools, greatly changing the demographic and needs and resources required. Families with one child in primary school and another in high school were struggling to get them around. The commitment to getting kids back at school was really appreciated. University had to move back online with an extra pressure to do so for students.
- **Healthcare** – disruption to access to their regular GP, some young people didn't feel comfortable going to a new GP and couldn't get medication. For others, their mental health notes were lost in the flood and had to retrigger them as support was re-established.
- **Youth services** - many of the young people who would normally be engaged with youth organisations or drop-in centres haven't been attending regular support, and outreach capacity is lacking. Youth Development Officers (YDOs) from local councils are often no longer funded for that specific role (taking a broader community development approach). YDOs play a key role in sector coordination, and you can see the difference in service provision in areas that have one.
- **Lismore itself** – isolation and the destruction of the city centre is devastating and there is a need to get spaces back for young people, to socialise and reconnect with friends.

Whilst a relatively simple consultation, the above insights show the value of engaging with children and young people in disaster response. It is clear that their active involvement in the design of disaster frameworks and policies will result in responses better targeted to their needs, ultimately resulting in better health and social outcomes.

2. Establish a directory of agencies and expert providers to ensure a skilled and community-led rapid response in local communities

We recommend the identification and establishment of a directory of agencies and expert providers that is fit for purpose and has the skills, relationships, and geographic reach to respond to the range of disasters and emergency events. This includes providing support to children and young people, their parents and caregivers, and communities before, during and after disasters and emergency events.

After a crisis event, many communities feel overwhelmed by offers of support, but also a lack of coordination. This places pressure on a small number of community-based services and leaders to carry out that coordination locally and is exhausting and unsustainable over the medium to long term.

When disasters hit it is widely known that emergency services are best equipped to respond in the moment of crisis, however, there are no 'lead agencies' who are widely recognised as responding to psychosocial needs. A directory of agencies and expert partners who are equipped to respond to these needs would provide a specific, rapid response in communities, that would link into Primary Health Networks, to ensure existing relationships and knowledge across geographical locations is fully utilised.

Selected service providers that work with communities (including rural and remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and others) must be required to have knowledge and experience of working with those local communities and a strong understanding of the complexities they face to respond most effectively and appropriately.

The establishment of a directory of evidence based, specialist trained, and 'disaster ready' organisations and multi-discipline partnerships will ensure the deployment of support to children, young people, their parents, carers, and community, during or after a disaster or emergency, is timely, efficient, effective, and sustainable.

3. Invest long-term in proven programs and transparent funding pathways across the sector

We recommend investment in practical and proven multifaceted programs and approaches that support children, young people and those that care for them who are affected by disasters, as well as the building of resilience and wellbeing in preparedness for future events.

The long-term impacts of disaster events and need for long-term funding for programs to respond to them has been highlighted by research into the 2009 bushfires in Victoria. As the 10 Years Beyond Bushfires report found - "Ten years after the fires, the likelihood of having one or more of these conditions (posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and psychological distress) was still more than twice as high for people from high impact communities compared to those from low/no impact communities."^v

The *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* outlined it is crucial to fund effective intervention programs, which can be used as preventative programs, to build resilience in families and communities. These programs should be directed at areas in rural and remote Australia which are identified as having the greatest need – having a higher percentage of children who are vulnerable in two or more developmental domains.^{vi}

Programs similar to the Bushfire Recovery Program provide a community led, multi-disciplinary wraparound model of supporting children, parents, care givers and communities, that could be replicated across the country. The model could be a key tool in building resilience and preparedness in communities before a crisis.

School based, child centred disaster resilience programs are important as they are accessible to where people live, focus on social and emotional learnings, and vocational support for children to mitigate disaster related mental health impacts and poor educational outcomes. Multidisciplinary approaches, delivered by a skilled workforce and supported by technology bring together health, education, and physical/social development, and can be ramped up or down as needs change or disasters and emergencies occur.

Any future funding (5-10yrs) needs to provide the resources to focus on the health and wellbeing of children, young people and care givers. Focus must also be on the coordination of local services and supports to strengthen the local service system to address pre-existing vulnerabilities and reduce the impact of disadvantage - providing the best chance of building resilience and overcoming future disasters.

Lifting our gaze – a note on climate change and natural disasters

Climate change is only making natural disasters worse and more frequent,^{vii} and the NSW floods have brought this into sharp focus. In this submission we have spoken about the changes needed at various points of intervention to meet the needs of children affected by disasters, be it after disaster strikes, while the crisis itself is unfolding, or intervening early in order to prepare. However, the earliest form of intervention is to take every possible measure we can to reduce the likelihood and severity of natural disasters in the first place, a challenge that we are realistically confronting for the first time as a community.

To this end, we need to take action to reduce emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change, and to reduce the rate of this change and the severity of its consequences for human populations including children and young people, the current floods being a telling example of this in Australia. We acknowledge though that this is largely work that falls under the remit of the Australian Government. Whilst there are undoubtedly measures that states can take in support of this, the most impactful may be joining the chorus of voices urging the Australian Government to take transformative

action to reduce emissions in line with international expectations, and we would encourage the NSW Government to do so.

About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF believes in a fair chance for every child and we are the world's leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of children in over 190 countries. At UNICEF Australia we work to protect and promote children's rights by advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas.

UNICEF Australia would welcome the opportunity to expand further on any of the measures we have outlined in this submission.

ⁱ <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/supercharged-climate-rain-bombs-flash-flooding-destruction/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.unicef.org.au//Upload/UNICEF/Media/Our%20work/Australia/After-the-Disaster-Recovery-for-Australia-s-Children-Report.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.unicef.org.au//Upload/UNICEF/Media/Our%20work/Australia/After-the-Disaster-Recovery-for-Australia-s-Children-Report.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.royalfarwest.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Evaluation-of-RFW-Bushfire-Recovery-Program-Report.pdf>

^v Gibbs L, Molyneaux R, Harms L, Gallagher H C, Block K, Richardson J, Brandenburg V, O'Donnell M, Kellett C, Quinn P, Kosta L, Brady K, Ireton G, MacDougall C, Bryant R. 10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report 2020. University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

^{vi} <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/5b7112be-6402-4b23-919d-8fb9b6027506/National-Children%E2%80%99s-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Strategy-%E2%80%93-Report>

^{vii} <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/supercharged-climate-rain-bombs-flash-flooding-destruction/>