# New South Wales Independent Bushfire Inquiry, May 2020

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the New South Wales Independent Bushfire Inquiry. We do so in a constructive spirit and pay our respects to those who lost their lives, properties or livelihoods or were injured in the fires which raged across multiple regions of New South Wales over many months. We also acknowledge the incredible response at a scale unprecedented in New South Wales from emergency agencies, civil society organisations, the New South Wales and federal governments as well as the general community. Our submission and the recommendations within it are offered constructively and with great respect to the expertise and dedication which is well evident in the bushfire response.

Australian Red Cross is one of 192 National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement - the world's largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

In New South Wales we are part of the state-wide emergency management response and worked closely during the 2019/20 bushfire season with the Office of Emergency Management, disaster welfare services, the Department of Communities and Justice, affected councils, Department of Primary Industry and response agencies such as New South Wales Police and the Rural Fire Service.

Between January and March 2020, we supported more than 27,500 people affected by 26 fires across five states and territories and registered 44,800 people through the Register.Find.Reunite service (27,262 of whom were in New South Wales). This response required 1,800 Red Cross volunteers and staff working a total of more than 45,000 hours.

In New South Wales alone we supported 99 evacuation centres and continued to support the community through local recovery centres, Disaster Assistance Points, community meetings and mobile outreach points until the outbreak of COVID-19 forced our outreach activities to move online or to telephone.

We also raised $216 million in donations to our Disaster Relief and Recovery fund between 1 July 2019 and 30 April 2020 thanks to an outpouring of generosity in Australia and internationally which we continue to expend and distribute these funds to support impacted individuals and communities in their recovery.

We are pleased to make this submission to the inquiry which highlights in particular:

- The impacts of climate change on the severity and frequency of disasters, and the total (including social and economic) costs that flow from this which are projected to reach $33 billion per year by 2050
- The need for greater investment in resilience
- The need for greater household and community level preparedness
- The particular impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- The need to foster an eco-system that promotes volunteering, community mobilisation and humanitarian action
- Cross border arrangements as they apply to Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements
- The need to enhance ongoing disaster response and recovery capability in the emergency management system
- The need to build capacity to respond to multiple events simultaneously

- The need for human centred preparedness, response and recovery systems which are supported by accessible data
- Ensuring continued community trust in emergency management systems

We thank the Inquiry for considering our response.

Poppy Brown

Director, New South Wales

1. **The causes of, and factors contributing to, the frequency, intensity, timing and location of, bushfires in NSW in the 2019-20 bushfire season, including consideration of any role of weather, drought, climate change, fuel loads and human activity.**

The fires of 2019/20 are a stark demonstration of what the future in New South Wales will look like unless we take action to help communities to adapt to climate change, and to increase community resilience. Addressing the issue of climate change is critical to the future wellbeing of Australian communities, including reducing future disaster impacts and response requirements.

As is well documented, including in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 'The Cost of Doing Nothing' report, and in the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities, 'The Economic Cost of the Social Impact of Natural Disasters', there will be significant humanitarian and economic impacts as a result of climate change. In Australia alone, we will see:

- An increase in heatwaves
- Increase in warmer days, and a reduction in cooler days
- Increase in drought conditions, and a trebling of fire danger days in southern Australia
- Fire seasons in eastern Australia lengthening, into October and April
- An overall reduction in rainfall in south eastern Australia, but increased severe storms and high intensity rain events, leading to flash flooding
- Increased storm surge and coastal flooding due to raised sea levels
- The number of moderate and medium cyclones in northern Australia may reduce, however the number of intense cyclones may increase
- The number of days over 35 degrees per year in Adelaide will increase from 20 to 47 by the end of the century

With a changing climate, and increasing urbanisation, there will be more people at risk of experiencing disasters into the future. More than 9 million Australians have been impacted by a natural disaster or extreme weather event in the past 30 years. In Australia, over one in three people have faced the threat or actual disaster in their lifetime. In New South Wales the majority of the state has experienced drought conditions for longer than 24 months and even after recent rainfall, 91.4% of the state remains in drought or is drought affected. Many New South Wales communities which were impacted in the bushfires had also been experiencing drought conditions for many months or years which exacerbated the impacts of the bushfires on these communities, particularly in terms of further loss of income and capacity to re-establish homes and businesses and mental health impacts.

The impacts of climate change will also affect regions not historically associated with particular emergency risks. For examples, some areas of New South Wales including northern and mid north coast experienced fires in subtropical areas which are normally low risk for bushfire activity evidencing the level and intensity of drought conditions across New South Wales.

2. **The preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities and the community for bushfires in NSW, including current laws, practices and strategies, and building standards and their application and effects**

With regards to the preparation and planning for the bushfires in New South Wales, Red Cross would like to make a number of comments and recommendations based on our experience. These are:

I.   The need for greater investment in resilience
II.  The need for greater household and community level preparedness
III. The particular impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
IV.  The need to foster an eco-system that promotes volunteering, community mobilisation and humanitarian action
V.   Cross border arrangements as they apply to Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements

### I.    The need for investment in resilience

The costs of disasters are well understood and extend well beyond impacts to infrastructure. In fact, costs can extend for many years beyond an event and include significant social and mental health impacts. The Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience and Safer Communities commissioned research by Deloitte Access Economics to determine the cost of disasters to the Australian community, and the benefits of increasing investment in mitigation. Their most recent report ([The Economic Cost of the Social Impact of Natural Disasters](#) released November 21, 2017) finds that the total economic cost of natural disasters is growing. The current costs are $5 billion per year and will reach nearly $33 billion, by 2050, (equal to nearly 40% of the total New South Wales FY20 budget).

These costs include significant, and often long-term social impacts. As previous reports from the Roundtable have shown, targeted investments in physical (such as infrastructure) and community (such as preparedness programs) resilience measures are predicted to significantly lessen the increase in costs.

One of the findings of the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Natural Disaster Funding in Australia was that Australian Governments underinvest in disaster resilience ($52million, shared 50:50 by the federal government and the states and territories). It recommended a gradual increase by the Australian Government in funding to $200 million, to be matched by states and territories.

In order to respond to the impacts of climate change, further investment in disaster resilience is required to ensure that communities are able to respond to and recover from disaster events including drought.

*Red Cross recommends:*

> ➢ *That in collaboration with the federal government, the New South Wales Government increase funding for disaster resilience*

> ➢ *That New South Wales commit to including drought as part of resilience planning and preparedness*

## II.    The need for greater household and community level preparedness

The importance of preparedness is well understood in disaster management practice. Adequate preparedness not only helps to prevent losses of life, property and livelihoods but also can help with a person's recovery post disaster. Adequate preparedness must begin well before an event, and be an ongoing process. It must consider factors such as meeting immediate needs like evacuation processes and accessing essential services or goods, but also consider longer term factors such as insurance or communicating with children.

Despite this strong understanding of the need for preparedness, and a wealth of information and resources on how to prepare provided by organisations such as the New South Wales RFS and the Red Cross, there was still a lack of preparedness at play in the 2019/20 fires. This was particularly amplified by the speed and scale of the bushfires. Such was the magnitude of the event, for many communities and individual households this was their first experience of fire, or first for a number of years. The fact that the fires occurred during the summer holiday period and affected communities with many holiday makers also contributed to some under-preparedness. All of this emphasises the need for preparedness efforts to be widened and to engage those who may not have recent experience of a fire. An additional focus on preparedness must also extend to organisations and small businesses.

Such preparedness efforts must also include adequate planning for evacuation, particularly in communities that receive high numbers of tourists. As the fires advanced, some communities needed to manage the departure of thousands of tourists. The power and communications outages experienced by some towns meant that essential services such as petrol stations were unable to pump fuel, credit card and ATM facilities were unable to function and shops could not supply the amount of food needed as refrigeration needed backup generators. Preparedness at the community level for residents, tourists and businesses should be a focus for future bushfire seasons.

> *Red Cross recommends:*
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> ➤ *That disaster preparedness initiatives targeting households and  organisations are increased including with a particular focus on supporting the preparedness of communities that will experience events intermittently and responding to challenges specific to tourist hot spots*

## III.    Impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Red Cross acknowledges the intrinsic connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to their Country and the unique pain and impacts felt as a result of natural disasters and emergencies. We also acknowledge the wealth of cultural knowledge held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with regards to preparedness and emergency management.

In order to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people, the work of emergency management services (including Red Cross) must be continually improved in order to ensure cultural safety and that we are taking into account the unique needs of particular communities. There are a range of ways this can be achieved, one of which is by ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are employed in and informing the work of emergency management agencies. Reconciliation Action Plans are another mechanism whereby organisations can enhance the cultural safety of their work.

On a practical level there is a critical need for emergency management agencies to understand the location of sacred cultural sites in order to be able to avoid damaging them in the course of their

duties. How this might be achieved whilst protecting cultural knowledge should be determined in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Finally, there is a need to ensure that the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in emergencies (throughout all stages) is captured in research and literature – a field which traditionally does not adequately capture such experiences.

*Red Cross recommends:*

> ➢ *That the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities are involved in emergency management preparedness, response and recovery planning and implementation. This could be achieved through inclusion of relevant Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander leaders in the relevant emergency planning committees and response management structures*

> ➢ *That disaster and emergency management agencies continue to build or foster meaningful and respectful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities with a particular focus on leveraging the deep and long-standing knowledge of First Nations people in disaster preparedness, response and recovery*

> ➢ *That the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and volunteers in emergency response organisations is increased.*

### IV. Foster an eco-system that promotes volunteering, community mobilisation and humanitarian action

The 2019/20 fires prompted an outpouring of humanitarian actions in the form of a range of activities as well as cash support. Some of these efforts are supported by traditional mechanisms such as civil society organisations including Red Cross; others are operating independently of any formal organisation.

To quote research from our partners at Swinburne University's Social Innovation Research Institute: *"While it is true that established organisations played a critical role in the emergency response to the bushfire crisis, and will continue to be instrumental in recovery and rebuilding efforts, it is also apparent that Australians are bypassing charitable organisations and organising their own local, bespoke and agile humanitarian responses using whatever knowledge, skills and resources they have to hand".*

Both traditional volunteering, and emerging forms of community mobilisation that are run independent of any organisation are equally important and have tremendous potential to meet community need during times of crisis or emergency. As such, there is a need to ensure that our emergency management frameworks and systems are supporting and fostering such actions. This means both supporting traditional volunteering activities and organisations who provide essential supports in times of need, but also acknowledging and fostering community mobilisation.

Whilst important to foster and support community mobilisation, it is also important to acknowledge that communities may need the support of organisations or local government whilst mobilising in order to avoid community conflicts. Disasters are traumatic events and have significant impacts on individuals and communities so it is important to ensure that communities are able to access the supports and services required including coordination supports. There is a need for sophisticated and locally embedded community development approaches which can support community mobilisation whilst mitigating the risks of conflict and fracture.

Such capability may already be present in some communities and may just need to be better linked into arrangements. In others more significant work could be undertaken to identify and harness the potential for community mobilisation.

*Red Cross recommends:*

> ➢ *That emergency management systems and frameworks be regularly updated to reflect both formal volunteering contributions and less formal community mobilisation that will increasingly be present during all phases of an emergency.*

### V. Cross border arrangements as they apply to Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) are implemented in different ways across state and territory borders. With different lead or commissioning agencies in each state or territory administering the DRFA, there can be significant variance between states and territories. This is problematic from an equity perspective generally, but is most pressingly an issue in communities that straddle state or territory border lines.

During the recent bushfires there were numerous cross border communities across the country and in New South Wales impacted and many struggled to access recovery supports, as their normal geographic service centre is across the border from where they reside. Red Cross had anecdotal feedback about people were turned away from recovery hubs where financial assistance was being provided as they were not classed as residents of that state. Such situations would cause additional stress for residents, potentially raise conflict within communities and lead to people having longer distances to access support.

*Red Cross recommends:*

> ➢ *That the New South Wales Government implement cross-border arrangements for Disaster Recovery Funding with neighbouring states to ensure assistance is able to be provided closest to where people reside.*

3. **Responses to bushfires, particularly measures to control the spread of the fires and to protect life, property and the environment, including**
   a. **immediate management, including the issuing of public warnings**
   b. **resourcing, coordination and deployment**
   c. **equipment and communication systems.**

Red Cross does not have the expertise or experience to comment on the measures undertaken to control the spread of the fires however, there are a number of comments Red Cross would like to make with regards to the response and recovery arrangements to the New South Wales bushfires. This includes long term response activities including disaster recovery.

Specifically these are:
   I. The need to enhance ongoing disaster response and recovery capability in the emergency management system
   II. The need to build capacity to respond to multiple events simultaneously
   III. The need for human centred preparedness, response and recovery systems which are supported by accessible data

**I. The need to enhance ongoing disaster response and recovery capability in the emergency management system**

The nature of recovery from a disaster or emergency is complex and dynamic and is affected by the unique experiences and circumstances of individuals and communities. Successful recovery relies upon understanding the context, recognising the complexity, using community led approaches, ensuring coordination of all activities, employing effective communication, and acknowledging and building capacity. It must also be trauma informed and culturally aware.

During the New South Wales fires emergency management response organisations including Red Cross effectively worked together in the immediate response and aftermath across multiple regions under previously agreed arrangements. In addition, due to the scale of the fires a number of organisations from the private and not for profit sectors as well as government agencies became involved in the response. Many of these organisations or agencies had little local knowledge of context. Whilst this outpouring of support was valuable and formed an essential component of the response, coordination between the various organisations could have been strengthened in order to enhance overall effectiveness and reduce duplication between organisations.

For example, we saw an oversupply of material aid provided by individuals and groups to some communities where storage was an issue and items supplied did not always meet the needs of communities.

The established practice of setting up local and regional recovery committees is a tried and tested approach to managing recovery at a local level. Due to the high level of need in impacted areas and the multiple providers of support, it would have been helpful for these structures and the overarching state-wide structures to have been implemented immediately after the evacuation/response stage of the fires to help manage the diversity of offers of support and significant needs from community.

Red Cross has been part of a working group of charities/NGOs led by the Office of Emergency Management which has assisted coordination of support by the larger charities and effective information sharing. This working group has met at least weekly throughout the bushfire response and recovery period and has facilitated collaboration with other government agencies such as Service NSW. Initiatives such as this should be embedded into future recovery work to coordinate available state-wide supports across government agencies and civil society organisations.

As we look to a future with more frequent and severe extreme weather events, as well as other emergency events such as collective trauma events or pandemics such as COVID-19, the need for effective recovery responses has never been more important. This can only be achieved by ensuring and supporting recovery capacity and capability that can be scaled up and down in response to demand,  embedded into the system to develop the appropriate capabilities and working relationships and roles within the sector.  We need disaster recovery to be embedded in emergency management arrangements as an ongoing and pivotal piece, not activated only when there is an emergency through the formation of new, time-limited agencies.

The recent announcement by the New South Wales Government to establish 'Resilience NSW' in order to lead preparedness and recovery work is a significant step towards embedding ongoing recovery capability. Such a capability will work best if well integrated with response functions. Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to continue our collaboration with the functions within Resilience NSW.

> *Red Cross recommends:*
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> ➢ *That recovery capacity is established and resourced through Resilience NSW or another agency as appropriate*
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> ➢ *That the role of civil society organisations that contribute to and have expertise in recovery work is recognised and leveraged in any new recovery arrangements*
>
> ➢ *That local and state-wide recovery structures be implemented immediately after a large scale disaster to coordinate supports to communities based on need*

## II. The need to build capacity to respond to multiple events simultaneously

The 2019/20 fires were unique in terms of their geographic spread across New South Wales and also the extended period of time that they were active for. This meant that whilst existing response and recovery arrangements proved sufficient for one or a couple of regions, as the demand grew and continued, it became clear that the New South Wales disaster management infrastructure struggled to meet the simultaneous need across the entire state and resources were stretched. Assistance from other New South Wales agencies, other states/territories and from federal government agencies including the Australian Defence Force eased this however, for future large scale disaster events in New South Wales, there is a need to enhance capacity to scale across multiple events at the same time.

Red Cross experienced this challenge in terms of supporting our volunteers who were deployed for much longer periods than previously which caused workforce challenges in managing fatigue.

In order to respond to future challenges including an increase in frequency and intensity of disaster events, there is a need for arrangements to be developed in order to manage the need for significant and long-term disaster response arrangements.

> *Red Cross recommends:*
>
> ➢ *That efforts are made to increase capacity to respond to multiple events simultaneously in order to meet the demand for large scale disaster events*

### III. The need for enhanced human centred preparedness, response and recovery systems supported by accessible data

In addition to a significant increase in disaster resilience investment, we must ensure that our disaster and emergency preparedness, response and recovery systems are human centred, trauma informed and put the needs of the community at the forefront. We must also ensure that the systems meet the needs of individuals and communities and people are able to access supports when and where they need them – a 'no wrong door' approach. Key to achieving this, is access to safe, reliable and ethically managed data.

The experience of a natural disaster or emergency can be one of the most traumatic of a person's life. The aftermath of the event can also be traumatic as people grapple with loss of life, property, livelihood, injury and more. Individual people and communities will respond in different ways and at different speeds.

In a country the size of Australia, there are also a number of logistical challenges including the ability for individuals to access evacuation and recovery centres. In the 2019/20 fires, Red Cross was aware that many people were geographically unable to access physical recovery and/or evacuation centres.

The range of agencies and levels of government can also pose challenges. Many individuals report having to access multiple agencies and navigate multiple systems in order to access the supports they are entitled to. These systems and agencies are often not integrated – a person must themselves advocate for the supports they need and are entitled to, rather than a system where a person would engage with one agency and have that engagement open the door to the other supports they need.

As we confront a future of more disaster events, it is timely to consider how we can ensure that the systems and agencies which exist to respond to disasters can be more human-centred and can collaborate more effectively.

One way of achieving this is by investing in timely, accurate, verifiable and ethically managed data systems that cut across geographical and system boundaries. Despite consistent recognition that effective disaster response requires real time access to data and information on disaster impacts, Australia still lacks a capacity to manage data across geographic and system boundaries. Nor do we have a mechanism to verify data once but use multiple times. This is a particular issue in distributing grants to people who have been affected; people are required to have their impacts verified multiple times and by multiple agencies rather than once with multiple applications.

The absence of strong cross-border data sharing arrangements also means that it is difficult to understand where recovery and evacuation centres are needed, and how many people will require outreach and other ongoing support because they are unable to access a physical centre.

Where there are some mechanisms in place to share information and data, often these are restricted by state or territory borders which have little practical relevance for many communities that are spread across the border line. For example it is not possible for an evacuation centre in Queensland to notify colleagues in New South Wales (assuming that consent has been given for such a notification) that a person might require additional follow up or support. Similarly, there is no consistent, verified national system that gives data on property damage in real (or close to real) time. Whilst ad hoc arrangements have emerged in some locations, these are inconsistent and not embedded to the extent required to ensure that people or information isn't lost between systems.

This has particular impacts for response and recovery planning as it is not appropriately informed by data on needs such as property losses, number of people impacted, and business losses. The lack of consistent information causes a range of logistical challenges in response planning and

slows down the overall response and recovery planning. It also has impacts on people who are not able to access an integrated system of supports and have to 'repeat their story' numerous times in order to access the various supports needed. This experience can be traumatic as well as frustrating and inefficient.

While pre-arranged data sharing arrangements could meet this need, an alternative is a single database for response and recovery. There are a number of systems that could be useful starting points from which a national system could be developed. This includes the nationally supported and consistent system for reconnecting people displaced by disasters, Register.Find.Reunite.

Of paramount importance in the development of any data-sharing arrangements or systems is that data sovereignty and privacy is respected so that people are empowered to control their own data and that data is shared in the least intrusive way possible. For example, verification of circumstances (e.g. loss of property) may suffice, without necessarily requiring sharing of personalised data and information. Such a set of arrangements or system and the data within it would need to be held to the highest ethical standards and managed with great transparency so that people would have confidence in the arrangements/ system, and to avoid infringing on civil liberties including a person's right to privacy.

*Red Cross recommends:*

➢ *Cross-border/ national data sharing arrangements or systems providing accurate data and information on human, infrastructural, environmental and other impacts be developed but that any such arrangements/ system ensures that the privacy and data sovereignty of individuals is respected and protected*

➢ *That such data systems inform disaster response and recovery planning including where additional outreach capacity is required*

### 4. Any other matters that the inquiry deems appropriate in relation to bushfires.

**Ensuring continued community trust in emergency management systems**

In the context of a future where we will be more reliant than ever on the emergency management sector because of climate change impacts, it is important that there is continued public and community trust in the sector and that the sector continues to meet the needs of the communities it exists to serve. This is particularly relevant given a general decline in trust in all institutions, as well evidenced by measures such as the Edleman Trust Barometer. This trust is not just important for traditional institutions or structures, we must ensure trust across the system including in emerging actors of systems such as community mobilised responses, and non-traditional fundraising methods or actors.

For civil society organisations such as Red Cross, this relates to all aspects of our emergency operations including raising funds to support disaster response and recovery. We recognise this need for trust and accountability and have sought to ensure absolute transparency in our operations including through extensive public reports on the collection and distribution of our Disaster Relief and Recovery Fund including our recent Bushfire Report. We have also provided regular updates on the distribution of funds to the general public and to the National Bushfire Recovery Agency.

To inform Red Cross work on the distribution of these funds, we appointed external, independent experts onto our Bushfire Funds Advisory Panel who advise and guide the allocation and distribution of funds to support individuals and communities. We also continue do all we can to keep support costs low, which have so far been less than 4 cents in each dollar donated.

The process we have utilised in distributing funds has sought to balance the need to get assistance out to people for immediate, medium and long term needs, making it as easy for people to seek this assistance as we can, while ensuring appropriate due diligence checks are in place to protect donated funds from potential fraud. We have unfortunately experienced a large number of 'bot' and other suspicious applications, and we have faced challenges in verifying property destruction/damage in many instances, but we have continued to focus on getting assistance out to people in need and expanding the assistance available. We have sought to be transparent about our approach and these challenges.

The example of Red Cross' experience is just one component of a much broader need for trust and transparency across the emergency management system. In order to maintain relevance and to ensure that the public can trust organisations and agencies, there is a need to ensure that there are transparent systems which drive accountability.

One strategy to achieve this could be the development of national standards in emergency response and recovery. Such standards might be well suited to sit within the National Recovery Framework currently in development. They might also include sections specific to charitable fundraising and distribution. The focus of any such standards must be on community outcomes and reflect best practice in disaster response and recovery.

*Red Cross recommends:*

> ➢ *That the New South Wales Government (in partnership with other governments) consider the development of national standards in emergency response and recovery that seek to continue and further build community trust.*