

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Wednesday, 27 April 2022 2:45:25 PM
Attachments: [Floods Enquiry Submission - \[redacted\]](#)



Your details

Title

First name

Last name

Email

Postcode

Submission details

I am making this submission as A primary producer

Submission type I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public I would like this submission to remain anonymous

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story I attach a letter that explains all points raised along with recommendations.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#)

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- [Floods Enquiry Submission -](#)
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27 April 2022

NSW Independent Floods Enquiry

Dear Sir/Madam,

DISASTER PREPARATION, COORDINATION AND RECOVERY

INTRODUCTION

First of all, I would like to express my sympathy to those families who have suffered due to the recent floods.

Secondly, as a primary producer in a flood affected LGA, these floods have had a direct impact on our farming activities. This has included damage to creek crossings on the property as well as prolonged saturated soils that has impacted orchard tree health as well as our ability to access the orchard to harvest and realise our income.

I recognise that this is a lengthy submission but it is a very complex subject that requires a detailed planning effort as well as clear lines of authority and communication between all actors, if it has any chance of success. Without political will and focus, there will be no success and repeat failures will ensue.

PURPOSE

The reason for writing to you, is to present an initial idea relating to how coordination could be improved, so that responses are better targeted and support a faster recovery of the affected community. I find it incredible that for a first world country such as Australia, the preparatory planning, immediate assistance and initial post disaster recovery has been so painful to watch. I am sure the feeling of neglect has been more severely felt by those affected families.

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Professionally, I have worked internationally for the last 25 years in high risk and complex environments including large natural disaster recovery and reconstruction events, such as:

- a. Tsunami in Banda Aceh, where I was seconded by RedR (Register of Engineers for Disaster Relief) to UNCHR, who were supporting BRR (Badan Rehabilitasi dan Rekonstruksi), the Indonesian government body responsible for disaster coordination, as well as managing the UNCHR housing reconstruction programme centred on the Calang area). A secondary output that I was involved in was to advise BRR in the development of the Reconstruction Strategy and Policy.
- b. Mozambique floods in 2000, where I represented and managed the UK government's disaster relief fund based at the High Commission in Maputo.

- c. Pakistan earthquake in 2006, where I lead a team to assist the government of Pakistan set up the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority. Initially established for the single event in 2005, but in 2011 was approved as the permanent government agency to handle post disaster recovery in Pakistan.

Under such significant natural disasters the international community steps in to support the national and local government institutions until they are fully capable of taking over responsibility. There is a parallel between the international approach and the need for an affected domestic Local Government Authority (LGA) to receive funding and human support from State and Federal levels. Consequently, I feel that my experience and knowledge is relevant and appropriate, to provide observations and constructive comment from “outside the goldfish bowl” but also as an affected person and business.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The people and businesses of Lismore have endured two major floods in recent years, while other local government areas have suffered through bushfires, and I do not see lessons being learned to support communities in their time of need. If the National Recovery and Resilience Agency was established to reduce the risk of future disasters as well as improve preparation for such disasters so that communities can recover more quickly, then I am not convinced they have achieved that objective.

The international community spends many hundreds of millions of dollars supporting developing countries, in both disaster preparedness to try to reduce to cost of dealing with a disaster and the resultant reconstruction costs, which runs into billions of dollars and takes many years to complete. For Australia, the tax payer and the insurance industry cover the majority of the associated costs. For some community members who cannot afford the insurance premiums, repeat reconstruction costs become prohibitive and they often do not have the financial freedom to move. Consequently, a robust plan to mitigate risks and to manage the reconstruction effort for all the community is necessary. Often, this part of the community includes vulnerable members, who also have no political voice, while it is the responsibility of government at all levels, to care for these community members.

While the NSW government has announced this inquiry into the events leading up to the floods and the immediate response, I am anticipating much finger pointing by the various institutions to deflect accusations and so ensure security of their annual funding as well as apportionment of any blame. This approach does nothing to ensure that the issue is not repeated, and lessons are learned from each major disaster, and most importantly, the community gains confidence that the management of the next disaster will be more successful, with reduced negative impact. Any disaster management organisation must be apolitical to serve all members of the community as well as being the advocate for the vulnerable.

Furthermore, my wife is an RFS volunteer, who supported the clean up activities in Lismore. Her experiences of the lack of coordination, as well as lack of information available to affected residents who she spoke to, indicates that coordination and information sharing was a major aspect that needs improvement.

Dealing with the aftermath of a natural disaster, only highlights the lack of planning to limit or mitigate the risk of damage, or the lack of logistical planning to deal with the disaster itself and its immediate aftermath. Only analysing or managing the post disaster recovery effort, does not provide any confidence to associated communities, that the next time will not just be a repeat of last time. There is a significant lack of application of proper a Project Management Cycle approach where analysis of successes and failures from the last event are fed into planning for the next event.

Some additional observations are listed below:

- More focussed use of preparatory/cautionary pre evacuations, especially for vulnerable community members or those areas likely to be cut off for significant periods of time.
- Plan for the worst, hoping the situation does not reach that point.
- Identification and agreements with schools, universities and sporting facilities for use as emergency evacuation centres, along with catering services.
- While the use of camper vans provided temporary accommodation, and was a good solution, contracts should have already been in place for any emergency as the need for temporary accommodation is predictable.
- Why was bottled water being trucked in to Lismore, when pre placed mobile water treatment and storage facilities could have been set up quickly, even connecting to the municipal network.
- Any flood is highly likely to put the waste water system out of use, while discharging bacterial effluent into the waterways, creating a significant health risk. Pre positioning PPE, Porta potty along with waste processing facilities, to reduce further bacterial discharge for downstream communities.
- Any natural disaster will impact the power supply, resulting in community members not being able to re charge mobile devices or use UHF radios to connect to the outside world, while mobile network towers will also be impacted by power outages. Communities should be encouraged to use battery operated radios, as a mechanism to understand what is happening from the Disaster Operations Centre. House to house visits should be an action of last resort as it is inefficient and a poor use of valuable skilled emergency resources eg SES.
- Having to transport emergency equipment to support the operation and recovery stresses the logistics system even further. Pre positioning essential supplies eg PPE, diesel, generators (and spare consumables) etc.
- As soon as an emergency and funding is announced, all prices rise. Thus, as much pre contracting using Blanket Purchase Agreements (for commodities and consumables) or Framework Agreements (for professional or logistical services) should be completed as part of the Planning phase to obtain best value for money. These contracts need to be tested during test exercises, to be included within the Scope of Work of the agreement.

DISASTER PROJECT MANAGEMENT CYCLE

Preparation and coordination for any major disaster event is commonly broken down into six phases:

1. Preparatory Planning
2. Ramping up immediately prior to a disaster

3. Immediate response
4. Post disaster recovery
5. Reconstruction
6. Post disaster analysis, lessons learned fed back into Phase 1.

It is also recognised that the local community governance structures are impaired by the disaster, and as such need external support to manage the crisis. Equally, the community members themselves are not able to function at anything like normal capacity, and 25 to 30% effectiveness can be expected, requiring additional support to help them through the anxiety and enormity of the disaster.

Sir Peter Cosgrave indicated that the ADF should have a special arm assigned to support domestic disasters. While I can understand why he stated this, it is not appropriate for the ADF to lead such a situation, as that is the responsibility of the civilian government to lead the planning and coordination of any such disaster. The ADF are eminently suited to the planning, logistical support and coordination of such an event, as all their systems are designed to be operable in battle, and so has resilience and redundancy already built in. They already have a mind set to plan for the unexpected, which should be used to support a civilian lead coordination effort.

TYPICAL ACTIVITIES BY PHASE

Below I will outline some of the activities and aspects relevant to each of the five stages above, to provide an indication of what should be included in a thorough review of the systems in place to create improved resilience for any future disaster. This is nowhere near comprehensive, but provides an idea of a more appropriate way forward for the future.

History has shown that natural disasters will continue to occur in Australia, with certain LGAs being at higher risk than others. Consequently, a series of contingency plans and scenarios needs to be drawn up, with tasks assigned to departments, agencies and contracted entities, and funds pre assigned to be released based on need.

1. Preparatory Planning:
 - a. Identifying and engaging all government institutions and community bodies who need to be part of the planning process, to create a series of detailed contingency plans based on a series of situations. One organisation is declared the Chair of this group, with a Deputy organisation that is not part of the local community (a State or Federal level institution). The Deputy organisation needs to be pan government eg Department of Resilience, for a major disaster when Council is incapacitated. The lead agency is given the authority to make decisions and to task all supporting entities, irrespective of who they are.
 - b. Contingency plans are developed based on conditions, so that support is “switched on” when that condition is met.
 - c. Definition and documentation of clear lines of governance as well as authority at each level, to be included in the local government plans as an updateable information resource.
 - d. External support bodies eg State, Federal and ADF etc, are all co opted to ensure that plans are agreed to and that support is considered and included in the plan.

- e. Emergency funds are assigned (included in a ring fenced budget) along with persons authorised to commit the release of those funds when needed.
 - f. Contracting out of support services, eg transport, housing, clean up, etc.
 - g. Identification of pre positioned/deployable equipment and operational staff eg water production and storage, sewerage services, emergency power, surge medical support, emergency communications (both community and internally), housing for both affected persons and support staff. Staging areas for displaced persons and support staff, logistic areas for material and the coordination centre itself.
 - h. Communicate the plans with the respective communities.
2. Ramping up immediately prior to a disaster:
- a. Communication with community.
 - b. Checking all preparation plans and availability of nominated persons detailed in the plans.
 - c. Checking all sub contracts for support are ready.
 - d. Establishing coordination team and control centre, staffed by all key institutions and making sure communications in and out are all working.
 - e. Initiating aspects of the plan as necessary.
 - f. Confirming which budgets may be required and who will make the decision, based on the impending situation.
 - g. Manage preparatory evacuations and routes.
3. Immediate response during the disaster:
- a. Tracking of information on what is happening, where, who, when. The ADF are likely to be highly adept at this, and can be used as a central body of information collection and sharing from SES, Police, Fire, Council etc.
 - b. Assigning resources to meet demand.
 - c. Forward plan the current situation to prioritise resource allocation, as the situation develops.
 - d. Identification of priority of support and advance notification to relevant organisations to deploy/mobilise.
 - e. Oversight of special services eg air assets and boats.
4. Post disaster recovery:
- a. Coordination centre continues, but expands to include oversight of all initial clean up, health and safety aspects, community outreach, in a systematic manner.
 - b. New support services for water, sewerage, power, housing, food stations, health, transport, Services NSW, Social services, insurance, banks/atms, internet/mobile phones etc.
 - c. Support to livestock, for feed and veterinarian services.
 - d. Initial damage assessments on property, infrastructure, utilities etc.
 - e. Re instatement of utility services of power, phones, water and sewerage.
 - f. Immediate repair of key roads/bridges for access. Use of military style equipment bridges?
 - g. Security of assets in vacated homes and businesses from looting etc.
5. Reconstruction:
- This depends on the nature of the disaster and the severity of damage caused. However, it will take far longer to complete than the planning phase considers. Specific aspects that will linger include:

- a. Assignment of funds and management thereof.
- b. Need for the coordination cell to remain, to assist affected persons with insurance, housing, health and education issues, employment/businesses etc.
- c. Retention at the local level by State and Federal institutional representatives is essential, as they are likely to be the major funding agencies. Council will still need support by government institutions, to ensure that decisions made during the post disaster recovery period are realised on the ground in a timely manner, including access to funds and support services. This is not the sole domain of the MPs and Senators, but the Deputy Coordinator (Possibly Resilience) needs to remain as a minimum.
- d. Community fatigue and frustration at lengthy bureaucratic processes leading to slow repair.
- e. "The event is over" and the community is now forgotten.
- f. State and Federal blame game, which does not support community recovery.
- g. PTSD becomes evident at this stage, as individuals now have the time to think and remember, as well as to look to the future or lack of. The soft social aspects rather than the physical reconstruction is what holds the community back, while community spirit only goes so far. Specialist support will continue to be needed for years to come.
- h. A Post Disaster Review needs to take place, so that Lessons Learned can be identified and fed back into the Planning process, to adjust contingency plans as necessary. This rarely happens mainly due to points e and f above.
- i. Revision of Local Planning Policies as necessary.

KEY ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

While the above provides a simplistic overview of the type of aspects to be considered during each stage of the process, the following fundamentals need special focus:

- One organisation is in charge of preparation for, throughout the disaster itself and the immediate recovery. A central coordination operations room needs to be established and staffed, using common radio/communications networks for command and control.
- A Post Disaster Review must take place to feed lessons learnt back into the planning phase. The Chair of this Review body needs to be independent so that real issues are identified and resolved and the Review does not become the usual blame game.
- Access to decision makers is essential for timely decisions and actions.
- The process must be apolitical.
- Engagement of and communication with the community is critical.
- Exercises need to be included to test coordination and response processes.

I am available to discuss the above with yourself or any member of your staff.

Sincerely,