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Addressing Disaster Displacement in NSW

SUBMISSION TO THE 2022 NSW FLOOD INQUIRY

Submitted May 19, 2022

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1. Overview:

We, the above-stated authors, welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the NSW 2022 Flood Inquiry, which has been asked to have regard for many matters, including making recommendations relating to “responses to floods, particularly measures to protect life, property and the environment”, and “recovery, including housing, clean-up, financial support, community engagement and longer-term community rebuilding.

We are academics with a range of experience in research projects, including post-disaster recovery and post-disaster housing. We are currently conducting a search into the phenomena of disaster displacement in Australia with the objective of understanding why people and communities become vulnerable to disaster displacement. This research also explores how mechanisms and practices surrounding disaster displacement governance could be integrated into DRR regulatory frameworks in Australia to reduce the vulnerabilities of at-risk communities.

Our submission for the NSW Government independent expert inquiry into the 2022 catastrophic flooding event across the state of NSW contextualises some of the outcomes of the research conducted at the University of Newcastle on the escalating impacts of consecutive flooding events on displacement of people and communities. Our submission details how cascading flooding events in NSW increase displacement and homelessness in Australia, consequently increasing community poverty and health issues.

This submission offers recommendations on technical solutions and strategies that will reduce the rate of people/communities being displaced and protect the needs of displaced people, particularly surrounding housing recovery.

This submission recommends that (1) the NSW Government should create baseline disaster displacement data to help identify populations and locations that may be at risk of displacement; (2) develop and integrate best-practice approaches to displacement governance into existing disaster policy and industry practice; (3) develop short-medium term housing solutions for displaced people that are created in collaboration with people who have lived experiences of displacement.

For questions relating to this submission, please contact:

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2. Introduction

The February and March 2022 flooding in New South Wales has demonstrated the escalating impacts of disaster-related housing loss on human displacement. While official figures are still in the process of being released, it is estimated that the floods that occurred on February 28 and March 29 in NSW have resulted in over 5,000 homes being damaged in NSW and that an estimated 3,600 homes were deemed uninhabitable in the Northern Rivers region alone [1]. Moreover, the displacement resulting from this housing damage and loss rate is likely to have long-term consequences for individuals and communities impacted. For example, academic scholarship in this field explains that following a mass displacement events, community life is disrupted [2-5]. People may need to relocate and therefore lose community networks. Displacement also has severe economic implications [6]. It is estimated that the global cost of one year of displacement was nearly \$20.5 billion in 2020, including housing, education, health and security needs, and income [6]. Furthermore, displacement that has occurred after the 2022 floods presents significant challenges for governments and other agencies working in housing recovery to provide safe and affordable housing for the thousands of people who experience displacement.

Disaster displacement occurs when people need to leave their homes and communities because of a disaster, such as the February and March 2022 flooding. Most displacement occurs when people are displaced in the short-term (days to weeks), often in evacuation centres or temporary accommodation options until they can return home. However, the more insidious form of displacement is in the medium term (6 months to 2 years) or long-term form (over 2 years). This phenomenon occurs when people are dislocated from their homes or communities for extended periods because homes are damaged or destroyed, leading to uninhabitability, therefore, displacement.

This submission outlines what often makes people vulnerable to the negative impacts of being displaced from their communities, in other words, “understanding the drivers of displacement” that have been identified through our research into the phenomena of disaster displacement in Australia. Our submission contextualises these drivers within the flooding that occurred in Northern NSW, particularly Lismore. Following this discussion, this submission presents recommendations for the NSW government regarding integrating best-practice approaches to disaster displacement governance into existing disaster and emergency policy and practice at the state government level to ensure that the needs of people displaced in the floods and future disasters are protected and that the states displacement risk is minimised.

3. What makes individuals or communities vulnerable to disaster displacement

Our research into the phenomenon of disaster displacement has found that it is a result of coexisting and compounding social, environmental (physical and built), economic and political factors that determine displacement vulnerability for individuals and communities and the likelihood of recovery [7-11] (see Figure 1 below). Underlying these overarching drivers are a variety of issues that exacerbate displacement risk for communities and individuals, including:

- Exposure in hazard-prone areas.
- Poverty and low-income status.

- Housing access and tenure status.
- There is a lack of policy mechanisms of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation management and planning that incorporates displacement governance.

In the context of the recent NSW floods, the housing loss which occurred in the Northern Rivers and, in particular, Lismore, it is not the case that the level of housing loss and displacement was ‘unpredictable’. As discussed in the following sections, these drivers are present in the community and arguably have contributed to the displacement rate seen during the recent floods. By better understanding, these drivers, governments and those working in the field of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and emergency response and recovery can plan for future displacement risk and attempt to mitigate displacement.

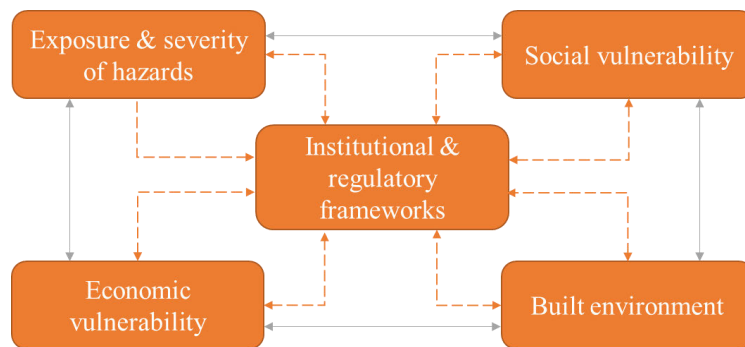


Figure 1. Drivers of disaster displacement risk.

Environmental risks

Australia faces high levels of exposure to flooding caused by extreme rainfall. Furthermore, it is predicted that the severity of flood events will increase due to climate change as they become more frequent, intense and unpredictable [12-18]. This exposure places people, their property and other assets to the adverse impacts of hazards [19], making people living in hazard-prone regions vulnerable to displacement [20, 21]. Furthermore, Australian populations and built environments continue to develop in hazard-prone areas across Australia, increasing the vulnerability of individuals and communities to natural hazards such as bushfires [22], cyclones [23], and floods [24-27], therefore increasing the likelihood of human-related loss [22, 28].

Lismore is highly susceptible to floods. In the last ten years, Lismore has experienced seven moderate to major flood events (2022, 2020, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2013, 2012)[29]. The position of the Wilsons River and Leicester Creek to the town, and the town being established in a low-lying region, sees 30,000 people living in area that is susceptible to flooding [30]. This exposure, and a legacy of poor urban planning decisions, create the conditions of the environmental vulnerability of the region to displacement.

It is essential to recognise that this is not an isolated event. Climate change will increase the likelihood and severity of a variety of natural hazard types across the state [31], which is estimated to lead to more instances of displacement [32]. Therefore, it is necessary to start processes of identifying communities at risk of displacement [21], which consider a variety of environmental, social, spatial and economic vulnerability risk factors [33].

Economic inequality and social vulnerability risk factors

It is well-established that the adverse impacts of natural hazards are not distributed equally [19, 34]. Vulnerability to displacement is created, exacerbated, and alleviated by broader economic determinants [3, 35-39]. In Australia, the increasing cost of living through energy price increases, housing unaffordability and social security and wage stagnation means that people living in poverty or who exist on the precipice of poverty are highly vulnerable to shock events [18, 40-42]. Such people may have a limited capacity to prepare for or recover from displacement [34, 35, 40, 43-46].

A 2019 report from the New South Wales Council of Social found that residents of the Northern Rivers experience some of the highest poverty rates in NSW [47]. In Lismore, approximately 2,700 residents of inner-city Lismore are affected by poverty or income insecurity [48]. These groups are overrepresented in the low-lying suburbs of East, North and South Lismore [48], which faced extensive housing damage in the recent floods. Internal displacement research indicates that medium and long-term displacement is primarily experienced by groups and individuals who experience underlying social and economic vulnerabilities, which constrain their ability and opportunity to prepare and recover from the adverse impacts of hazards, including displacement [3, 46, 49, 50]. While it is still unknown who experienced displacement in the recent floods, those who are most impacted likely have limited capacity for recovery from displacement, particularly due to the current housing insecurity crisis in the

The recent flooding in the Northern Rivers exists within a pre-existing housing crisis that disproportionately impacts low-income groups [51]. Housing affordability and accessibility in Northern NSW, particularly Lismore, have been a persistent problem [51]. It is well documented by service providers that the region faces major housing insecurity, which limits the ability of socially and economically vulnerable groups to access safe, affordable housing [51]. The flow-on effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic have exacerbated housing access issues [52, 53]. The mass influx of people into regional NSW caused a 6.3 per cent rise in rent prices in the Lismore LGA [54]. The coexisting housing insecurity crisis, Pandemic, and recent floods have likely compounded the housing issues experienced by marginalised groups in the community.

The recent housing damage and losses from the Northern Rivers floods have further exacerbated housing issues in the region. This poses significant issues for providing short-medium term housing solutions to displaced people. Research highlights that rental pricing increases following a disaster and housing shortages, as there are not enough housing structures at affordable prices to meet the increased demand for housing created by displaced people [42, 55-57]. A lack of affordable and available housing solutions in Lismore and the Northern Rivers would exacerbate the displacement crisis in the region, which may lead to long-term or permanent displacement.

Protection gaps for displaced people in Australian policy and legislation

Research on governmental approaches to internal disaster displacement argues that policies on displacement are an effective and efficient way to reduce disaster displacement and protect vulnerable groups [58-60]. This is because they provide a framework for DRR, government and emergency management officials to plan for internal displacement risk, respond to it, and protect the rights of the displaced [11, 59]. However, there are no direct policy or legislative mechanisms for addressing displacement in Australia [61]. Furthermore, legal and policy frameworks on disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation (CCA) do not

adequately incorporate prevention measures against displacement. For example, Australian disaster frameworks such as the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework and National Strategy for Disaster Resilience do not include Targets (B) and (E) of the Sendai Framework – which focuses on displacement governance. In this context, ‘displacement governance’ refers to the mechanisms, policy and legal frameworks and other arrangements that guide the management of displacement events and related policy areas.

Disaster displacement in Australia is governed by our emergency management arrangements which primarily focus on the initial emergency response phase and the weeks directly following a disaster. Such policy enforces that pre-emptive evacuations are undertaken at the Local Government level during an emergency event, under the direction of disaster risk management agencies, emergency services, and aid organisations such as the Red Cross [62]. People are temporarily displaced during these evacuations and housed in emergency evacuation centres and, sometimes, temporary accommodation until the direct threat of a disaster has passed [62, 63]. These procedures are the primary way Australia governs displacement to ensure that people’s lives are protected [62].

There are arguably flaws in our current approaches. They assume that people will be able to return home directly following a disaster [63], and they primarily support the needs of displaced people during the initial emergency response phase. This leaves people who experience medium- or long-term displacement unaccounted for in current approaches [64], such as those who cannot return home due to housing loss, damage, or lack of available housing stock in their communities. In such circumstances, people are not being viewed as displaced people; they are seen as being homeless, and the services provided follow that already being made available to those experiencing homelessness [64]. For example, in circumstances where people do not have alternative living arrangements, they are told to apply for social housing following disaster-related housing loss or temporary displacement during the rebuilding phase [45, 64, 65]. However, the pre-existing housing insecurity crisis in Australia means that waiting lists for emergency housing exceed two years [42]. These are significant response gaps for disaster displaced people in Australia’s current approaches, particularly for people experiencing protracted displacement [63]. As a result, such approaches fail to provide durable solutions to displaced people surrounding housing recovery [63]. Figure 4 below summarises the state of existing policy in Australia.

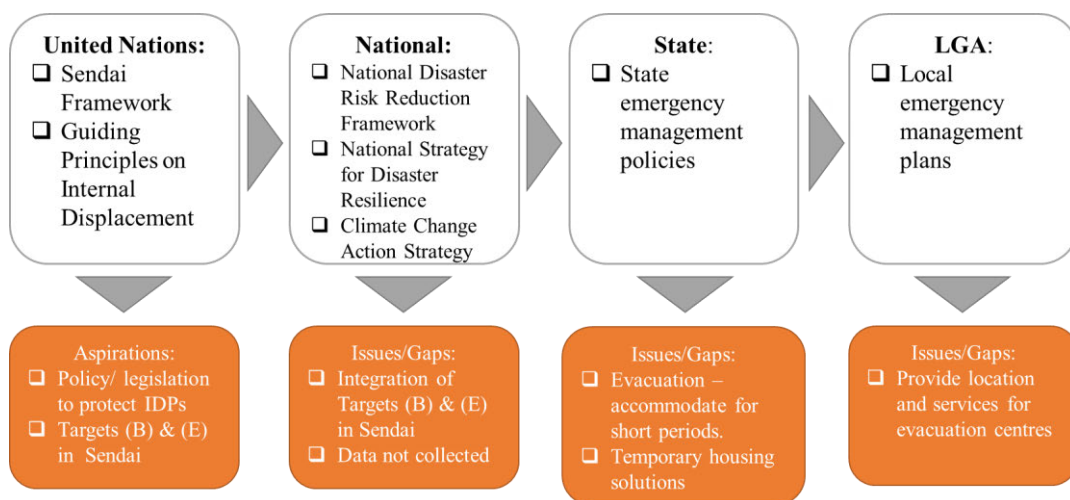


Figure 1. Institutional Regulatory Frameworks in Australia.

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Create baseline disaster vulnerability displacement data and monitoring approaches

After an emergency, the rate of people being displaced and the duration of their displacement are not being tracked. This means that there is insufficient data on the rate of past displacements, information on groups of people who were most affected by displacement, and understanding of the lived experiences of being displaced and whether those who were displaced managed to recover [21]. Therefore, establishing a knowledge base on internal displacement issues for policy and DRR professionals to draw from has practical implications for addressing future issues of disaster displacement. Furthermore, integrating displacement indicators and monitoring into existing government agencies' tools will enhance coordination and provide greater accountability in tracking the progress made by public and civil sectors in resolving displacement [21].

Understanding and identifying people and locations at risk of disaster displacement can help ensure that pre-disaster mitigation initiatives implemented in policy and practice are targeted to the most vulnerable people and communities. This can assist in developing targeted response efforts that protect IDPs' rights and treat IDPs with dignity, such as risk and impact assessments, early warning systems, preparedness and response plans, humanitarian interventions, development plans, land-use plans, climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts, environmental management, migration management, and human rights promotion for past and future disasters displaced people in Australia.

Providing foundational data on disaster displacement for the Australian context can contribute to the development of state mechanisms for addressing disaster displacement risk and responding to disaster displacement. Such data is essential for preparation and planning by agencies, government, other entities, and the community to mitigate displacement risk and respond to displacement when it occurs. This will help emergency managers at each LGA and overall NSW because it will limit displacement events from occurring and help protect populations vulnerable to displacement across the state.

Recommendation 2: Integrate best-practice approaches to displacement governance into existing disaster policy and practice

It is recommended that state-level policy surrounding disasters, emergencies and climate change in NSW incorporate measures based on best practice approaches for displacement governance to ensure that the rights of displaced people are protected when displacement occurs. This includes incorporating Targets of the Sendai Framework [66]. State policies such as are essential tools to achieve Sendai Framework Target (E) [66]. Furthermore, such actions would aid in achieving Target (B), which calls for the reduction in the rate of people impacted by disasters [66].

There is a pressing need to establish policy interventions on internal displacement in Australia. Research highlights that countries that have implemented approaches to internal displacement have seen a reduction in overall displacement because the potential issues surrounding displacement can be planned for or mitigated [58, 67]. This can either be achieved by integrating best practice approaches to displacement governance into current disaster and emergency management arrangements such as NSW emergency management policy and

municipal emergency management policies in NSW. Or by establishing direct policy and legal mechanisms to directly protect the rights and needs of displaced people [4, 20, 68-71], such policy or programme on disaster displacement in NSW. Incorporating the *Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement Governance* can assist in ensuring the rights of people who are displaced within their home countries are protected. *The Guiding Principles* are a regulatory framework for displacement mitigation recognised as the global standard [72]. They iterate the right of people not to be arbitrarily displaced within their countries and are an extension of international human rights law and international humanitarian law [73, 74].

Recommendation 3: Develop short-medium climate-safe affordable housing solutions for displaced people in the short-medium terms

Access to safe, affordable, and long-term accommodation is key to recovery from disaster displacement [75-78]. Therefore, in the transition phase from response to recovery, it is recommended that the NSW Government provide a plan of action to address displaced people's immediate and long-term housing needs. This should include approaches targeted to support the housing needs of renters and low-income groups and be created in collaboration with people who have been displaced.

As discussed throughout this submission, the Northern Rivers region of NSW is amidst a housing crisis. Across many areas of Australia, there has been an ongoing housing affordability crisis for over a decade, which disproportionately impacts socioeconomically marginalised groups [42, 75]. The recent Black Summer Bushfire season and COVID-19 Pandemic occurred within the nation's pre-existing housing crisis, which was exacerbated by the failure of the rental market to meet housing demand in the aftermath of the bushfire crisis, which resulted in mass displacements [see for example, 52, 79, 80-83].

Housing tenure status determines one's vulnerability to disasters and displacement [57, 84]. Those who own a home, land, or savings have more significant potential to mitigate disaster risks and a better chance of post-disaster housing recovery [84-88]. Whereas renters, particularly low-income renters, are frequently entirely displaced after catastrophic events as they reside in dwellings owned by someone else, and housing recovery programmes tend to favour owner-occupied housing recovery [57, 87-89]. In terms of post-disaster housing recovery, researchers have documented that low-income communities with a large percentage of people who rent have drastically drawn-out recovery trajectories, which result in their protracted displacement following a disaster [55, 85, 88, 90]. Additionally, existing housing crises are barriers to reducing homelessness and preventing disaster displacement [42, 87, 91, 92]. Homelessness or housing insecurity often hinders the paths to recovery for displaced people, therefore leading to protracted displacement, which further increases their vulnerability to future shock events [91, 92]. Instances of protracted displacement have severe and often long-term impacts on people and economies. Relying on market solutions to the recent floods is not an equitable solution to housing recovery. Renters or those living in insecure or informal accommodation need to be front of mind when planning for housing recovery programmes following this recent disaster [93-95].

It is the opinion that such approaches to housing recovery must consider the needs of people who are most vulnerable to long-term displacement through engagement with people who have lived experience with displacement to share their ideas on what housing recovery looks like to them. This can lead to carefully tailored approaches for response and recovery assistance that helps people displaced by disasters rebuild their lives and end their displacement quickly.

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