

Royal Commission
Royal Commission into
Natural Disaster Arrangements,
Locked Bag 2000, Manuka, ACT 2603

via email: rcnda.enquiries@royalcommission.gov.au

28 April 2020

Dear Commissioners,

Re: Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to a safer and more resilient Australia.

I write from the perspective of an economic researcher who has worked on national natural disaster research programs,¹ and a community leader who is interested in helping communities flourish in a changing and uncertain climate.

As this summer's devastating bushfires and the ongoing pandemic have shown, disasters do not recognise state boundaries. It is encouraging therefore that the Commission's terms of reference include examining:

“ways in which Australia could achieve greater national coordination and accountability – through common national standards, rule-making, reporting and data-sharing – with respect to key preparedness and resilience responsibilities...”

From my experience, there are two fundamental pre-requisites to achieving greater national coordination and accountability when it comes to disasters:

1. Prioritisation of disaster preparedness and resilience outside of the emergency management sector
2. Removing cultural inhibitors to a prepared and resilient Australia.

¹ Economic Research Fellow and end-user government liaison lead for the Optimising Post Disaster Recovery Interventions in Australia: <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/research/policy-economics-hazards/231>.

1. Prioritisation of disaster preparedness and resilience outside of the emergency management sector

Part of being prepared is acting on what we have learnt. If we do not know our risks, we cannot reduce them. If we cannot reduce them, we are less resilient.

Disaster risks sit outside the emergency management sector. Data that could help us *reduce* these risks is often held by non-primary players, especially other government agencies.

However, other agencies collect data for different sets of priorities, and there is no current incentive for them to do otherwise. This makes integrating data to provide a coherent national picture exceedingly challenging.

For instance, a recent multi-agency data integration² project led by Geoscience Australia to understand community and business responses to historical disaster events was ultimately unsuccessful:

Analysis across the project's datasets was not able to provide the level of visibility expected on the cost of disasters to the Australian Government. It was difficult to adequately compare the project datasets as each dataset was provided in different scales of space and time. Analysis results were aggregated to a level where it made it difficult to draw inferences. The community and business impacts and outcomes observed using this model could have been influenced by a range of factors unrelated to natural disaster events.³

Because of this, without an urgent directive from government to do so, we cannot always **consistently** and **confidently** answer fundamental questions Australians expect us to know, like:

1. What is the cost of a disaster?
2. Who is affected by the disaster, how were they affected, and for how long?
3. How did government activities help, if at all?

This has been a challenge not only for governments, but for researchers keen to enhance Australians' capacity to adapt and respond to disasters.

With natural hazards expected to become more frequent and more intense,⁴ this lack of visibility over how disasters are impacting us, and whether we're responding appropriately, is clearly untenable.

² The project attempted to add value to the National Exposure Information System (NEXIS) by adding other Australian Government data on access to services and benefits: transactional data from the Multi-Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP), the ATO Business Longitudinal Analysis Data Environment (BLADE) and other Australian Government data holdings.

³ Physical Environment Analysis Network, Natural disasters: Supporting development of a natural disaster impact forecasting capability, <https://www.pean.gov.au/projects/natural-disasters> [14 April 2020].

⁴ Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO, State of the Climate Report 2018, <http://www.bom.gov.au/state-of-the-climate> [14 April 2020].

We need to treat disaster management with the urgency it deserves. Agencies outside of emergency management must see the “shared responsibility” principle as a government-mandated priority. Critically, these agencies must also be appropriately funded to collaborate on any data capture and data-sharing platforms, and legally enabled to share agency-held data.

From the experience of other countries in managing natural hazards, we know that while costly and lengthy, such disaster-risk reduction efforts can pay off (see below).

CASE STUDY – DISASTER RISK REDUCTION IN TAIWAN

Since experiencing SARS in 2003, Taiwan has been highly alert to the risk of further outbreaks from the mainland. This risk is real and significant: Apart from physical proximity, 850,000 of its citizens reside in China and 404,000 work there [1].

Taiwan was quick to act on the 31 December 2019 WHO alert of pneumonia of an unknown cause in Wuhan [2].

It mobilised its pandemic prevention plan and activated the centralised disaster management centre (now responsible for COVID19 responses); arrangements it had put in place following SARS in 2004 [3].

Officials boarded planes and assessed passengers on direct flights from Wuhan, quarantining those who displayed symptoms before deciding whether they needed hospital treatment, thus alleviating pressures on the hospital system [4].

Having integrated its national health insurance database with its immigration and customs database, Taiwan has been able in real-time to provide clinicians with travel history and clinical symptoms to aid case identification [4].

These combined efforts made it easier to control its borders and prevent wide-scale importation of the disease via its citizens.

Sources:

[1] Wang CJ, Ng CY, Brook RH. Response to COVID-19 in Taiwan: Big Data Analytics, New Technology, and Proactive Testing. *JAMA*. 2020;323(14):1341–1342. doi:10.1001/jama.2020.3151

[2] Lin C, Braund WE, Auerbach J, Chou J-H, Teng J-H, Tu P, et al. Policy decisions and use of information technology to fight 2019 novel coronavirus disease, Taiwan. *Emerg Infect Dis*. 2020 Jul [14 Apr 2020]. <https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2607.200574>

[3] Taiwan Centres for Disaster Control, <https://www.cdc.gov.tw/En/Category/MPage/gL7-bARtHyNdrDq882pJ9Q>

[4] Duff-Brown B, 3 March 2020, How Taiwan Used Big Data, Transparency and a Central Command to Protect Its People from Coronavirus, Stanford Health Policy, <https://healthpolicy.fsi.stanford.edu/news/how-taiwan-used-big-data-transparency-central-command-protect-its-people-coronavirus> [14 Apr 2020].

2. Removing cultural inhibitors to a prepared and resilient Australia.

"...a repeated cycle of response by governments and the community to major fire events: first, suppression and recovery processes are always accompanied by assertions, accusations and allocations of blame, even while the fires are still burning; second, inquiries are established and report; third, recommendations are acted upon, to varying degrees; fourth, the passage of time sees growing complacency and reduced levels of preparedness... and the cycle begins again with the next major bushfire event..." - Professor Kanowski⁵

Long-time players in emergency management may feel a sense of déjà vu. Between 2009 and 2017, we have had 51 bushfire inquiries, resulting in 811 recommendations; not all accepted, not all actioned.⁶ Those that are actioned, are not always followed up with funding to implement any changes.

Even if the inquiry's terms of reference are new, what will change if our culture has not changed?

We already know that disaster risk reduction pays off, yet have historically underfunded disaster prevention in favour of funding recovery efforts *after* a disaster strikes.⁷

Our government policies and frameworks promote the principle of shared responsibility. Yet we have deep and recurring problems communicating disaster risks to our communities, which makes it difficult for them to know how to act when disasters strike.⁸

Added to these challenges, our public has lost trust in our social, economic and political institutions – institutions which bind Australians together in times of crisis.⁹

The bushfires are a wake-up call that we cannot continue to operate as business-as-usual.

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia 2010, The incidence and severity of bushfires across Australia, 13 August 2010,

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Former_Committees/agric/completed_inquiries/2008-10/bushfires/index, [14 April 2020].

⁶ Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Disaster Inquiries: Data Discovery Resource, <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/utilisation/ddr>, [14 April 2020].

⁷Productivity Commission 2014, Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements, Inquiry Report no. 74, Canberra. JEL code: H77, H84.

⁸ Dootson P, Greer D, Miller S and Tippet V, 2019, Impacts of conflicting cues in emergency warnings, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/news/2019/impacts-conflicting-cues-emergency-warnings>, [14 April 2020].

⁹ Evans G, 2019, Don't blame voters for a lack of trust in institutions, <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/dont-blame-voters-for-a-lack-of-trust-in-institutions>, [14 April 2020].

For national coordination to be real and enduring, we must embed changes that will cultivate a:

- **Prepared culture** – one that is not afraid to make the hard choices, invests in disasters before they occur, and collaborates with individuals, groups and sectors beyond the usual emergency management players
- **Trusting culture** – one that is transparent, one that fosters trusts in our government, our institutions, and in each other, to do the right thing when the next disaster strikes
- **Constantly learning culture** – one that is vigilant to and acts to reduce its disaster risks, incorporating learnings from its own experiences and those of other countries
- **Kind culture** – one that works collaboratively and respectfully across political, social and economic divides, so that when the time comes, it is easier to believe that we are in it together.

This requires whole-of-society changes to how we perceive and manage disaster risks, one that our governments have already acknowledged and signed up for, both nationally, through the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework and internationally through adopting the Sendai Framework 2015.

From responses to the bushfires and the pandemic, there are promising signs that our businesses and society can support this culture.

It is now up to our governments – through national coordination and collaboration – to make the whole-of-government changes necessary to make this culture a permanent reality.

Yours sincerely,

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Economist,
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