

Submission to the Independent Inquiry into Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Consult with experts and develop a model to employ a child-sensitivity lens within Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements.

Recommendation 2: Embed key principles of child-sensitivity in a more proactive 'build-back-better' approach to Commonwealth recovery funding.

Recommendation 3: Build the knowledge, capacity, and practical resilience of children and young people to survive and thrive in response to worsening climate change impacts by:

- **Developing a national Disaster Education strategy that sets out principles, content, messages, and activities for practical knowledge and can be mainstreamed into curriculums;**
- **Elevating practical disaster education within primary and secondary education curriculums, early learning centres, and extracurricular settings, complemented by preservice training and regular professional development for educators.**

Recommendation 4: Commit to developing a child-sensitive national climate and disaster risk assessment in Australia.

Recommendation 5: Pilot a proactive, place-based disaster funding plan in one of the ten communities included within the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative.

Introduction

UNICEF Australia welcomes the *Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding*, and the opportunity to respond to the review. Australia has comprehensive Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements for individuals, businesses, communities, Local Governments, and States and Territories. These arrangements have been refined over time, in part because of previous Royal Commissions, inquiries, and reviews. With climate change fuelling an increase in the severity, intensity, and frequency of disasters across the country, there is a need to reassess these arrangements for scalability, sustainability, effectiveness, and access.

UNICEF Australia's focus in this submission is to highlight the importance of child-sensitivity in the review of Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements. Children needs and perspectives – including those of infants - are too often missing from investments, policies, and laws pertaining to disaster response, recovery, and resilience-building, with potentially serious consequences for children themselves, their families, their communities, and the country over the long-run.

1. Child-sensitivity in Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements

Children are highly exposed to disasters in Australia. A 2020 survey of children and young people in Australia found that 90% had experienced at least one natural hazard event in the preceding three years.ⁱ 63% of respondents had experienced extreme heat or heatwaves; more than half (51%) had experienced bushfires; two in five (42%) had experienced severe storms; and one in three (34%) had experienced floods.ⁱⁱ Given current greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) trajectories, exposure to these shocks and hazards will become even more prevalent. Recent climate modelling shows that a baby born in Australia in 2020 will experience four times as many heatwaves; three times as many droughts; and 1.5 times as bushfires and river floods than those born in 1960 under emissions trajectories at the time.ⁱⁱⁱ A 2022 UNICEF research report has found that, under current emissions trajectories, every child in Australia could be subject to more than 4.5 heatwaves a year, and up to 2.2 million Australian children could be living in areas where heatwaves will last longer than 4.7 days.^{iv}

Children are also uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of disasters in Australia. This is because children are at the early stage of physiological and cognitive development, and therefore less equipped to deal with the direct and indirect impacts of disasters than adults.^v Children are more likely to be physically harmed in a disaster than adults because their organs, muscles, and brains are less developed.^{vi} Children also experience trauma and shock from the disaster, or from secondary consequences such as the loss of a home and displacement. Common behaviours are losses of concentration, disturbed sleep, nightmares, anxiety, low mood, depression, difficulty managing emotions, and behavioural regression in younger children, including thumb sucking and bed wetting.^{vii} Infants are particularly vulnerable to all of these impacts, and to the impacts of disasters on their mothers.

Even though these impacts are known, the needs and priorities of children – including infants - are often invisible or misunderstood in disaster response, recovery, and preparedness, both at individual and community levels. There are a range of reasons for this, including that lives, livestock, property, infrastructure, and material needs at the community level take precedence over specialised support for children and other vulnerable cohorts; the idea that issues such as recreation and lost learning are second order priorities; and the assumption that ensuring the safety, wellbeing, and recovery of adults and carers will guarantee the same for dependent children when we know this is not the case.

Neglecting the specific needs of children in response, recovery, and preparedness in funding arrangements has medium- and long-term consequences. Children who experience disasters are particularly susceptible to mental health issues, which in turn can cascade into lower educational attainment, and affect wellbeing and employment outcomes well into adulthood.^{viii} Research on the 2009 'Black Saturday' bushfires shows that impacted communities were reporting symptoms of psychological distress and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) three to four years after exposure.^{ix} For children and young people, these mental health issues had lasting impacts on progress in literacy and numeracy, which translated to lower academic scores up to the end of high school.^x These impacts are particularly detrimental to individuals and communities already grappling with pre-existing disadvantages, but also to employment, productivity, and national debt in the long run. In addition to spending significant amounts of money on overall disaster response,

recovery, and preparedness, Governments end up inheriting a weaker economy in the long-run because they haven't employed a child-sensitivity lens in prior disasters.

Employing a child-sensitive approach to Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements involves meeting four key criteria, as determined by UNICEF in 2022 in relation to climate change more broadly.^{xi} These criteria can be deployed in the disaster context too, such that funding arrangements should be:

- **Holistic and multisectoral:** addresses specific risks and vulnerabilities of children and young people by including commitments in child-critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and nutrition/food security.
- **References:** includes explicit and meaningful references to children and young people, including those who are disadvantaged and marginalized.
- **Rights-based:** considers children and young people as rights holders and includes meaningful references to children's rights or intergenerational equity.
- **Inclusive:** identifies inclusiveness and the recognition of children and young people as important stakeholders for climate action.

These criteria can be applied in different ways to existing funding arrangements. An example of child sensitivity within Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements is the Additional Payment for Children within the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment (AGDRP), which was introduced during the 2019 – 2020 bushfires. The Additional Payment for Children is worth \$400 per eligible dependent child, and as of May 2020, had been provided 84,403 times at a cost of \$33.8 million. Although the Payment criteria does not specify how the money should be used, it is implicitly a recognition that families with children face additional, specific costs in an emergency.

Child-sensitivity can be employed in larger, longer-term arrangements such as the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, and the Disaster Ready Fund. Grants could include objectives that address response, recovery, or resilience building in child-critical sectors or which address specific needs. Governments could also allocate a certain number of grants, or a certain proportion of funding towards child-sensitive projects as a pilot. UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to discuss and advise on potential models.

Recommendation 1: Consult with experts and develop a model to employ a child-sensitivity lens within Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements.

2. Strengthening children's resilience through a 'build-back-better' approach to recovery funding.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 calls for communities, businesses, and governments to adopt a 'build-back-better' approach in disasters. Build-back-better refers to the use of the recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction phases after a disaster to increase the resilience of nations and communities through integrating disaster risk reduction measures into the restoration of physical infrastructure, societal systems, livelihoods, economies, and the environment.^{xii} Adopting such an approach through clear and effective increases community capacity to absorb and adapt to disasters in the future and reduces both response and recovery costs.

A child-sensitive approach to building back better considers the specific impacts of disasters on children and prioritises investments in disaster-resilient physical and social infrastructure that is critical to reduce impacts in the future. Figure 1 highlights the key impacts of the floods in Northern New South Wales (NSW) and South East Queensland (QLD) on children under 12 years of age.^{xiii} The scale of the early 2022 floods in Northern New South Wales (NSW) and Southeast Queensland was unprecedented and catastrophic: 84 LGAs declared 'disaster' zones, and impacting more than 15,000 homes, and over 944 education facilities, leaving an estimated 4,000 children in NSW alone requiring intensive support.^{xiv}



Figure 1: The impacts of the 2022 Northern NSW and SouthEast Queensland floods on children under 12 years of age. Source: UNICEF Australia

A child-sensitive approach to building back better in such a scenario would inevitably involve prioritising investments in, for example:

- Long-term (5 – 10 years) quality health and wellbeing programs available in allied health settings, schools, early learning centres, and community hubs to enable psychosocial recovery and build social and emotional resilience ahead of the next flood.
- Internet connectivity to ensure minimal disruption to children’s health and education in future disasters.
- Flood resistant playgrounds, recreational spaces, early learning centres, school buildings, and housing to minimise disruptions to play, education, and safe living in future disasters.

A fundamental aspect of building back better is consulting and co-designing interventions with the local community where possible. As we know, community-led recoveries often begin before the Government can access and engage on the ground, and it is locals who have the best knowledge of what is required for a ‘build-back-better’ recovery. Good consultation and co-design come from investing in teams of skilled, proximate teams of professionals who build an understand the local context and can build effective relationships with community members prior to the next disaster.

Case Study: Addressing children’s mental wellbeing and resilience through the Bushfire Recovery Program

In the aftermath of the 2019-2020 bushfires, UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West consulted with affected communities. The consultations revealed that response and recovery efforts did not adequately consider the unique experiences, needs, and voices of children and young people affected by the bushfires.

Following further consultation Royal Far West, in partnership with UNICEF Australia, developed the Bushfire Recovery Program. The program was designed to support the wellbeing of children (age 0 – 12) impacted by the bushfires, reduce the likelihood of long-term adverse effects, and build resilience in the face of future bushfires.

The Bushfire Recovery Program brought together social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech pathologists to work with directly with children and key adults around them, to both understand the children’s needs, and design offer support options that would enable recovery and resilience-building of children in the community. For example, children’s groups provided safe spaces for children to understand their experiences in the bushfires, to recognize that their reactions were normal, to develop coping skills, building problem solving and decision-making capacity, and restore self-confidence. Similarly, parents and carers were given information and strategies through which they could identify emotional and behavioral signs or red flags that might require additional support.

The Program supported approximately 3,000 children in more than 35 bushfire-affected communities in New South Wales (NSW) and continues to be delivered across seven Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the state, as a recovery and resilience-building mechanism. It also been adapted for use in 30 severely affected schools in the aftermath of the 2022 Northern NSW and Southeast Queensland floods.

Recommendation 2: Embed key principles of child-sensitivity in a more proactive ‘build-back-better’ approach to Commonwealth recovery funding.

3. Funding disaster education as a means of building longer-term resilience.

Children and young people want to be better equipped to respond to more frequent and intense disasters. The 2020 *Our World Our Say* report found that 88% of children and young people in Australia feel that they should be learning more about natural hazards.^{xv} Although most respondents are taught about how and why these hazards occur, they are not taught about how to respond, and felt “unprepared, under-educated, concerned, and increasingly scared by the prospect of a disaster.”^{xvi}

Disaster education involves teaching green skills, emotional and psychosocial resilience-building activities, and basic emergency preparedness skills to children and young people before a disaster strikes. Disaster education in early learning centres, schools, and extracurricular settings builds capacity to understand and cope with the next disaster. It enables increased awareness of the nature of hazards, higher levels of planning and preparedness, and increased knowledge about what to do when a disaster takes place, and lower levels of anxiety about disasters.^{xvii} It also helps transform children and young people from passive victims of disasters to active and effective responders. All of this potentially reducing costs to the individual, family, and community in the long run, and also reduces disaster response and recovery costs for governments.

Australia has made significant progress on disaster education in recent years. The importance of educating children and young people about disasters is acknowledged in the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (2011) and recognised as a priority by the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2009). Australia’s National Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Framework 2018 recognised the importance of formal and informal education to increase awareness of the impacts of disasters.^{xviii} Nonetheless, the Federal Government should systematise and make long-term investments in disaster education across early learning, school, and extracurricular settings.

Recommendation 3: Build the knowledge, capacity, and practical resilience of children and young people to survive and thrive in response to worsening climate change impacts by:

- **Developing a national Disaster Education strategy that sets out principles, content, messages, and activities for practical knowledge and can be mainstreamed into curriculums;**
- **Elevating practical disaster education within primary and secondary education curriculums, early learning centres, and extracurricular settings, complemented by preservice training and regular professional development for educators.**

4. Deploying risk-informed, place-based disaster funding arrangements.

Developing a clearer and more nuanced picture of disaster risk in Australia will help the Commonwealth Government design more tailored, targeted, and effective disaster funding arrangements. In short, it will improve evidence-based decision-making on disaster funding. UNICEF Australia welcomes the Australian Government's investment in a National Climate Risk Assessment to be delivered by the Australian Climate Service (ACS) and the Department of Climate Change Energy, Environment, and Water (DCCEEW). The Assessment should include a focus on children – including infants - and young people. There are several ways in which child-sensitivity can be incorporated into climate and disaster risk assessments in Australia. UNICEF can assist in this regard as a UNICEF global Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI) was developed in 2021.

For background, building on the framework and method of the global CCRI, UNICEF and USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) launched a partnership to develop a Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI)-Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM).^{xix} The CCRI-DRM builds country-specific subnational risk assessment models and an interactive geospatial platform to depict exposure and vulnerability to multiple hazards, shocks, and stresses. Measurement of vulnerability also incorporates economic, political, and social characteristics that reflect readiness to withstand the impacts of these hazards, shocks, and stresses.^{xx}

Recommendation 4: Commit to developing a child-sensitive national climate and disaster risk assessment in Australia.

Currently Commonwealth disaster funding arrangements are largely based on proactive, open grant-rounds or responsive arrangements, some of which are triggered by disaster declarations. Developing the capability for child-sensitive disaster risk modelling will also enable the Commonwealth to consider specific, proactive, place-based approaches to disaster funding arrangements where required. A place-based approach recognises that there are some places in Australia that experience entrenched disadvantage for a range of context-specific reasons, and that are also more prone to disasters. This combination of exposure and vulnerability portends towards much more severe impacts in these geographies and higher response and recovery costs.

This reality, as already been recognised to an extent through recent Federal Budget allocations to address entrenched place-based disadvantage, necessitates larger, longer-term, more proactive, and more flexible funding partnerships between Federal, State and Territory, and Local Governments to address added complexity of disaster response in these communities. Such an approach can be trialled as part of existing investments in the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative, which currently includes place-based partnerships with 10 communities, and State and Territory governments, and also aims to enhance shared decision-making and local solutions in six of these communities.^{xxi}

Recommendation 5: Pilot a proactive, place-based disaster funding plan in one of the ten communities included with the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative.

ⁱ World Vision et al (2021), Our World Our Say: National survey of children and young people on climate and disaster risk, <[youth-survey-report_2020-08-12_v1-2.pdf \(worldvision.com.au\)](#)>

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Save The Children (2022), "Born into the climate crisis: why we must act now to secure children's rights", <[STC-CC-Full-Report_FINAL_220921_no-map.pdf.aspx \(savethechildren.org.au\)](#)>

^{iv} UNICEF Australia (2022), The Coldest Year of the Rest of their Lives: Protecting Children from the Escalating Impacts of Heatwaves, <[UNICEF-coldest-year-heatwaves-and-children-EN.pdf](#)>

^v UNICEF East Asia Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) (2023), "Over The Tipping Point: How multiple, overlapping climate and environmental shocks and hazards on children in the East Asia and Pacific region are eroding their coping strategies, exacerbating inequality, and forever changing their futures", <[Over the tipping point report.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#)>, Pg. 23.

^{vi} Center for Disease Control (CDC), "How are children different from adults?", <[How are Children Different from Adults? | CDC](#)>

^{vii} UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West (2020), "After the Disaster: Recovery For Australia's Children", <[UNICEF Australia Publications](#)> Pg 13.

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- viii See spotlight case study for more detail For background, see: Gibbs, L; Nursey, J; Cook, J; Ireton, G; Alkemade, N; Roberts, M; Gallagher, C; Bryant, R; Block, K; Molyneaux, R; Forbes, D: "Delayed Disaster Impacts on Academic Performance Of Primary School Children," *Child Development*, Vol 100: No 0, Pg. 1 – 11; McFarlane A; Van Hooff; M, "Impact of childhood exposure to a natural disaster on adult mental health: 20-year longitudinal follow-up study," *British Journal of Psychiatry* (2009) Vol 195; Pg. 142 – 148; See also [Long-term-mental-health-trajectories-after-disasters-and-pan_2022_Clinical-P.pdf](#), Pg. 2.
- ix Lisa Gibbs et al, (2021) "10 Years Beyond Bushfire Report," <[BB-10-years-report_spread.pdf \(unimelb.edu.au\)](#)> Pg. 11
- x *Ibid.*, Pg. 17.
- xi UNICEF (2021), "Making climate and environment policies for and with children and young people: a discussion paper on child sensitivity and 2020-2021 nationally determined contributions (NDCs)," <[Making Climate and Environment Policies for and with Children and Young People | UNICEF](#)>
- xii UNDRR, Build Back Better definition, <[Build back better | UNDRR](#)>
- xiii UNICEF Australia (2022), "Flood Response and Recovery: Children's Needs Assessment," <[UNICEF Australia Publications](#)> Pg. 12 – 13.
- xiv *Ibid.*, Pg. 8.
- xv World Vision, "Our World Our Say."
- xvi *Ibid.*
- xvii Australian Institute For Disaster Resilience (AIDR) (2021), "AIDR's submission to the 2021 Australian Curriculum Review", <[AIDR's submission for 2021 Curriculum Review](#)> Pg. 3.
- xviii Department of Home Affairs (DHA) (2018), "National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (NDRRF), <[National Disaster Risk Reduction \(homeaffairs.gov.au\)](#)>
- xix UNICEF (2022), "Children's Climate Risk Index-Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) subnational assessment initiative, <[The CLAC PACK \(unicef.org\)](#)>
- xx *Ibid.*
- xxi Department of Social Services, "Entrenched disadvantage package," <[Entrenched disadvantage package | Department of Social Services, Australian Government \(dss.gov.au\)](#)>