

Fitzroy Crossing

POLICY BRIEF





Fitzroy Crossing Needs Assessment

In response to the record flooding that impacted the town of Fitzroy Crossing and surrounds in January 2023, local Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO) Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC), through its long-standing partnership with Royal Far West (RFW) known as "Marrura-U", invited UNICEF Australia to undertake a post-flood Needs Assessment with affected communities.

This policy brief will bring the evidence from the Needs Assessment together with UNICEF Australia's

expertise and the broader evidence base, and provide key recommendations for the improvement of disaster preparedness, response, recovery and resilience in Fitzroy Crossing. It will provide recommendations for state and federal disaster policies, funding and implementation especially when it comes to the needs of First Nations children.

Improved disaster response and recovery will help to better prepare for a future in which climate related disasters and extreme weather events will become more frequent, severe and intense.

Background – Children and Disasters

The evidence is clear. Children are both highly exposed to disasters in Australia and uniquely vulnerable to their impacts.

Given current greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) trajectories, children's exposure to shocks and hazards will become more prevalent in the futureⁱ.

Children are also uniquely vulnerable to disasters due to the stage of their physiological and cognitive development. Children are less able to withstand physical impacts of natural hazardsⁱⁱ. Children also experience trauma from disasters and lose access to learning and education, recreational spaces and health careⁱⁱⁱ.

First Nations children in particular are more likely to experience disasters^{iv}, and are more vulnerable to their impacts, as disasters deepen existing marginalisation^v. The Fitzroy Crossing Needs Assessment also demonstrates that First Nations children are at risk of experiencing disruption to connection to Country and traditional knowledge after disasters – a risk that will only be exacerbated by more frequent and intense disasters in the future.

Despite the impacts they face, the needs of all children are often overlooked, misunderstood or under-addressed in disaster preparedness, response and recovery. There are a range of reasons for this including:

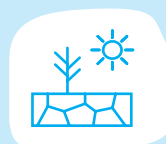
- Emergency relief efforts focus on saving lives, livestock and property which takes precedence over specialised support for children.
- Support for children is seen as a second order priority that can be addressed at a later stage.
- The assumption that addressing the needs of adult family members will ensure that children's needs are also met.

For First Nations children, the well documented impacts of colonisation and ongoing systemic barriers also determine how their needs are considered (or not considered) before and after disasters. For example, the historic lack of funding and complexities in delivering health care services in remote communities result in a focus on acute care needs rather than primary health care^{vi}. Disasters therefore disrupt the already limited primary health care for children, and can also disrupt the delivery of, and exacerbate the need for, acute care.

A baby born in Australia in 2020 is projected to experience:



4x
as many heatwaves



3x
as many droughts



1.5x
as many bushfires
and river floods

as those born in 1960

However, First Nations children are also part of communities that bring their own unique resilience when it comes to responding to and recovering from disasters: significant and effective First Nations leadership, the cultural responsiveness of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and 60,000 years of continuous knowledge and understanding of Country.

What did the Needs Assessment find?

Impacts on children, young people and families

The findings of the Needs Assessment were analysed using the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) framework, developed under the guidance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group. Professor Pat Dudgeon provided supervision and guidance to the Needs Assessment team during their analysis.



Connection to body and behaviours

- With disruptions to food supply, children experienced food insecurity, leading to poorer nutrition and increased hunger. Food prices were already high and rose following the flood.
- Increased threats to children's safety from the natural environment, including from animals, reptiles, insects and waterborne diseases.
- One child died from Murray Valley Encephalitis, a rare mosquito-borne disease, and others were evacuated by air for urgent medical care.
- Limited opportunities and spaces for children's play and social activity, impacting connection, the development of physical and social skills, and psychosocial wellbeing.
- The very remote location of Fitzroy Crossing and surrounding communities meant displacement of families delayed access to medical care. However, some families who relocated to Derby and Broome could access routine healthcare services that are not readily available in Fitzroy Crossing.



Connection to mind and emotions

- Children experienced fear and emotional distress, including when it rained after the flood.
- Children were displaced from their homes. Disruptions to day-to-day life led to behaviours indicating emotional challenges and developmental delay or regression.
- Children and families experienced cumulative grief from losing community members, homes, belongings and pets. This impacted parents' or carers' capacity to connect with their children.
- Teachers noticed more disruptive and challenging behaviour in their students, and increased disengagement in learning.
- Parents and caregivers felt the loss of property, the anxieties of displacement and were distressed by the collapse of the bridge, which disconnected them from the other side of town and surrounding communities.
- Educators were separated from their families and had to take on additional responsibilities following the flood.
- The community recognises the experience of the flood has compounded pre-existing trauma.



Connection to family, kinship and community

- Children were separated from their families when the Fitzroy River Bridge was destroyed, and some couldn't make contact via phone or internet.
- Families forced to relocate were separated from each other. With a history of children being forcibly removed due to government policy, separation from family exacerbates pre-existing trauma for many Aboriginal people.



Connection to Country, land and culture

- Significant damage to Country impacted the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and community members.
- It was unsafe to engage in some cultural practices, including hunting, fishing or sourcing seasonal bush foods. With children unable to engage in cultural practices and get out on Country, this impacted their wellbeing, and had impacts on the continuity of cultural knowledges and practice.

Wider impacts of the floods on children and the community

1

Aboriginal children and families in Fitzroy Crossing have significant pre-existing unmet social and emotional wellbeing needs.

- Chronic homelessness, overcrowding and poor living conditions
- Limited access to appropriate and consistent child health services
- Challenges to service delivery including staff numbers and high staff turnover which impacted response and recovery

2

As a result of the flood and the emergency response, children and families have experienced cumulative, compounding factors that have impacted their social and emotional wellbeing.

- Children experienced fear and emotional distress
- Cumulative grief, including from the loss of community members, homes and belongings and isolation from family
- Displacement and disruptions to routines
- Increased food insecurity leading to poor nutrition and hunger
- Threats to physical safety including from mould, animals and waterborne disease
- Delays in access to medical care
- Children's access to play and social activity
- Destruction of land, flora and fauna impacting essential activities and cultural practice

3

The official emergency response effort had some positive characteristics, but also fell short of community expectations in many ways.

- Some culturally appropriate emergency response practices were noted by the community
- Families and communities valued evacuating together, where this was possible
- Challenges navigating pre-existing service systems remained
- Emergency responders did not have existing knowledge and relationships with community
- ACCOs played important roles in recovery but were not recognised as equal partners or adequately resourced
- Visits from politicians did not always translate into better coordination or recovery support

4

Community resilience and leadership made a significant difference to the efficacy of the flood response and recovery.

- Role of community in immediate response, saving lives, pets and property
- ACCOs and community leaders played a critical role in the response
- ACCOs and community leaders supported children's social and emotional wellbeing
- Community leaders shared knowledge of Country to hunt and fish for food, where safe
- Aboriginal Medical Services in Broome and Derby supported relocated communities

Communities in Fitzroy Crossing are some of the most disadvantaged in Australia and are equally resilient in the face of the repeated shocks, disruptions and tragedies they have experienced over many years. The impact of this flood cannot be understood in isolation of this context. Understanding and responding to the complex relationships between colonialism, pre-existing disadvantage and disaster preparedness, response and recovery is critical. It requires deep and ongoing listening, research and decision makers who are willing to adopt and invest in innovative, long-term solutions that are defined and driven by the community.

UNICEF Australia's Recommendations

The Needs Assessment demonstrates the critical need to place children and their families at the centre of disaster preparedness, response, recovery and long-term resilience building. Putting children at the centre means prioritising:

- Clear and consistent disaster policy and protocols which embed children's rights and ensure dedicated resources
- Community-led disaster preparedness and response that is enabled by long term, sustainable funding
- Social and emotional wellbeing for children and their families through investment in culturally appropriate social services
- Climate resilient housing, infrastructure and food systems



Recommendation ①

A national framework for children and young people in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

Australia urgently needs a national framework to provide consistent support to children and young people in the lead up to and, aftermath of, disasters. The creation of such a framework would fill an important gap in Australia's policymaking architecture when it comes to children in disasters: Australia currently lacks a national framework and strategy for child and youth focused disaster recovery and resilience-building.

Such a framework would underpin common principles, standards and action plans to identify and address the most pressing short and long-term needs of all children and young people across mental health, physical health, education, social protection, homelessness and other key domains of wellbeing and rights.

Left unaddressed, the impacts of disasters on children and young people can have medium and long-term consequences for children's life outcomes, future employment, productivity and national debt levels. Recent research undertaken by UNICEF Australia and Deloitte Access Economics estimated that the impact of disasters on children and young people cost the economy an average of \$3.1 billion per year^{vii}.

A national framework focused on supporting children and young people would ensure the specific and unique needs of children and young people are considered in disaster preparedness, response and long-term resilience, and therefore enable faster recovery and build psychosocial, cultural and economic resilience, minimising long term costs to individuals, to society and to the economy.

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) is well placed to lead the development of such a framework, which should begin with the publication of a discussion paper and public consultation process, involving children and young people who have been affected by disasters in Australia, including those from First Nations and marginalised migrant communities.

The creation and implementation of the framework should also be guided by an expert advisory group of specialist agencies, including NEMA, relevant Federal Government departments, state authorities, local council representatives, members of the Federal Government's Youth Steering Committee, non government organisation (NGO) and academic experts, and children and young people themselves. This should be developed alongside, and intersect with, First Nations disaster governance frameworks.

Detailed recommendations:

1.1 Develop a national framework for child and youth-focused disaster resilience and recovery that can be adapted for different natural hazards and operationalised at all levels of government.

1.2 Dedicated funding should be allocated to meeting the needs of children affected by disasters and a mechanism developed to steer the rapid and well-coordinated deployment of funds to specialist child focused service providers in accordance with identified needs.



Recommendation ②

Embed and centre the needs of children and their families as part of disaster preparedness response, recovery and long-term resilience policies and planning

The Needs Assessment demonstrated several positive aspects of disaster response in Fitzroy Crossing that can be strengthened in the future. The National Indigenous Australians Agency was spoken of as a strong collaborator, particularly through its responsiveness in terms of additional funding for ACCOs to address the SEWB needs of children, and informants appreciated the work of the WA Department of Fire and Emergency Services with community navigators.

However, the Needs Assessment demonstrated some key areas of improvement, particularly in meeting the needs of children and their families in the community. For example, there was a lack of consistent health care services for children in the aftermath of the flood. Some were able to access health care once evacuated to major hubs like Broome. However, others faced increased exposure and vulnerability to health threats due to their age. There was also a lack of social and emotional wellbeing and trauma support for children following the flood, exacerbating pre-existing and unmet health and wellbeing needs. Disaster payments were difficult to access, with informants reporting a high burden of proof and high degree of control in how funds were spent, which had a flow on effect on children's basic needs.

Detailed recommendations

2.1 Sustained and long-term funding to meet the social and emotional wellbeing needs of children in Fitzroy Crossing – needs that existed before the flood and were subsequently compounded by the trauma of the flood. Long-term grants should be made available to ACCOs to allow for services to be holistic and locally informed.

2.2 Further resourcing is required to meet the ongoing health care needs of children and their families in Fitzroy Crossing. Six months after the floods the Bayulu Clinic was opened, however there is still a need for a comprehensive review of child health services, including their cultural appropriateness, service gaps including Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Liaison Officers, training needs, and coordination, to inform further planning to meet the health needs of children in the community.^{xi}

Implications for national and state disaster policy

- The National Climate Risk Assessment and the National Natural Hazards Disaster Risk Profile should both include a specific section on children and young people's exposure and vulnerability to disasters. We recommend UNICEF's global Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI)-Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) methodology is adapted for use in the Australian context.
 - In addition, explore ways these national assessments can identify communities most at risk, and prioritise those communities for co-designed place-based assessments and profiles, informed by First Nations knowledge of Country.
- State and Federal Governments should ensure that children's needs are considered in disaster recovery and resilience, through a child sensitive build back approach, that prioritises long term (5-10 years) quality and culturally appropriate health and wellbeing programs available in ACCOs, allied health settings, schools, early learning centres and community hubs to enable psychosocial recovery and build social and emotional resilience ahead of the next disaster.
- Ensure that needs assessment and disaster response frameworks developed by state and territory and local governments consider:
 - The unique health risks that children face due to their heightened vulnerability post disaster, and the importance of health continuity in disaster response settings to meet children's needs, particularly in remote communities that are reliant on visiting health services.
 - Opportunities to address the mental health impacts of disasters for children, through culturally appropriate social and emotional wellbeing support and child friendly spaces as part of disaster response.
 - Cultural appropriateness and child sensitivity of temporary accommodation and evacuation facilities
- The Federal Government should look to improve flexibility of disaster payments and reduce the burden of proof for remote communities. Disaster payment amounts should be aligned to need, inflation and other factors that impact vulnerability and resilience to disasters, for example remoteness, with members of those communities receiving a higher amount. Disaster payments should also be child-sensitive.

Recommendation 3

Long term, sustainable funding to support community led, holistic disaster preparedness, response, recovery and resilience

The key strength in the Fitzroy Crossing disaster response was the role of Aboriginal community leaders and ACCOs. The Needs Assessment found that community resilience and Aboriginal leadership made a significant difference to the efficacy of the flood response and recovery. ACCOs played a critical role in emergency response and in providing key support to children and their families. For example, ACCOs used their connections with community, assets and resources to attend to the most urgent needs of impacted people and provided specialist skills and programs in early childhood development, health and wellbeing, education, and employment^{viii}.

As such, the Needs Assessment affirmed the need to further involve, empower and situate decision making with First Nations community leaders and ACCOs as a key part of disaster preparedness and response. This is aligned to existing literature with Keating et al (2022)^x calling to move away from a deficit model in disaster preparedness and response, to a 'strengths-based framing of the role of communities', calling for First Nations communities to be involved 'as leaders in planning and decision making towards disaster resilience.'^x

As per Recommendation 1, a National Framework will also strengthen accountability to children before and after disasters, ensuring their needs are met.

Detailed recommendations:

3.1 Future disaster preparedness and planning in Fitzroy Crossing could consider strengthened disaster governance structures that consider all aspects of long-term and culturally appropriate disaster preparedness, response and resilience, including housing, food security, health, and the social and emotional wellbeing of children. Strengthened governance models should be inclusive, diverse and representative, and include broad and consistent community engagement.

3.2 First Nations community members should be recruited, trained and included into the official emergency response.

3.3 As part of national disaster planning, the Western Australian (WA) Government alongside the Shire of Derby/West Kimberley should consider funding a process for co-designing early warning systems and preparedness in Fitzroy Crossing and the surrounding region. This funding should be available to ACCOs and should support a system that draws upon First Nations knowledge of Country and ways of knowing, being and doing, and is disseminated in language and through a variety of mediums. A successful pilot model could then be expanded to other locations as relevant, either through WA or Australian Government support.

3.4 Through a future grant opportunity, the Australian Government should consider expanding the Rangers Program to embed disaster preparedness and response activities, recognising the unique knowledge of Country of First Nations Rangers. This could include the design and delivery of culturally appropriate disaster response education for children.

Implications for national and state disaster policy

- A targeted coordination and funding mechanism is required to meet the needs of children before, during and after disasters.
- State and Federal Governments resource ACCOs in remote communities for the critical role they play in disaster preparedness, response and recovery and ACCOs should have a voice in helping to determine the priorities and funding amounts required, including by undertaking rapid needs assessments to inform disaster response and consider children's needs. Sharing data and expertise should also be supported between communities. ACCOs should be supported to fill this role through long-term, sustainable grants. Reporting for these grants should be streamlined so as to not overburden ACCOs for this additional work.

Recommendation 4

Holistic and long-term disaster resilience that ensures climate resilient housing, health and food systems

The Needs Assessment demonstrated that there are interrelated and significant pre-existing unmet basic needs in Fitzroy Crossing that impact upon children and their families' resilience to disasters. Historic neglect and systemic underinvestment in the community meant that children and their families were and continue to be more vulnerable to disasters. These unmet needs include:

- **Housing:** there is insufficient housing for community needs, and existing overcrowding was exacerbated by the floods.
- **Food insecurity:** existing food insecurity was exacerbated by the floods. Parts of the community were cut off from food supplies in the town due to the collapse of the Fitzroy Bridge, with children and their families not having enough to eat in the weeks and months after the floods.
- **Children's social and emotional wellbeing and physical health needs:** as a result of longstanding underinvestment and inadequate access to services, First Nations children living in Fitzroy Crossing are experiencing some of the highest levels of disadvantage and vulnerability in Australia across key domains of wellbeing, with social determinants of ill health such as poverty, developmental vulnerabilities, and overcrowded housing contributing to poor social and emotional wellbeing^{xii}.

These preexisting vulnerabilities do not exist in isolation, but rather intersect and subsequently compounded the impacts of the flood on children and their families. Future disaster preparedness, response, recovery and long-term resilience must therefore be understood in this context, and disaster risk reduction strategies must both recognise the need to eliminate, reduce or mitigate hazards and exposure to hazards in remote First Nations communities, but also reduce vulnerability and increase community resilience^{xiii}.

This should be underpinned by child rights principles, recognising the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental and social development

With disaster recovery still ongoing in Fitzroy Crossing, there is an opportunity to 'build back better', to strengthen community resilience to future disasters. Governments should also prioritize resilience building through more enhanced risk modelling, adequate budgeting and cross-sector planning, as well as developing climate resilient housing, food supply chains and infrastructure for Fitzroy Crossing.

Detailed recommendations

4.1 Climate resilient infrastructure: Noting the success of rebuilding the Fitzroy Crossing bridge, both Federal and WA state governments should consider the additional climate resilient infrastructure needs of the community. This infrastructure should look to reduce the likelihood of key transportation routes being cut off due to disasters and thereby leaving parts of the community isolated. Infrastructure projects should also continue to include and expand opportunities to train and employ local community members.

4.2 Climate Resilient Food Systems: As part of the National Strategy into Food Security, consider options for a place-based food security strategy and resourcing for Fitzroy Crossing that considers the distinct needs of the community raised in the Needs Assessment, including options for stockpiling food prior to the wet season and drawing on traditional food practices and knowledge.

4.3 Climate Resilient and Culturally

Appropriate Housing: The WA Government has undertaken housing assessments in Fitzroy Crossing after the flood, for both new housing stock and maintenance needs due to the impact of the floods. However, given the lack of housing stock and overcrowding in Fitzroy Crossing was exacerbated by the flood:

- a. The WA Government should consider increasing funding to Fitzroy Crossing to increase the housing stock in the community.
- b. The Australian Government to consider climate resilient housing grants for remote communities that have been impacted by disasters, including but not limited to Fitzroy Crossing.

Implications for national and state disaster policy

Children have the right to be protected from the harmful impacts of disasters, which threaten their survival, development and wellbeing. Children also have the right to participate in disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery activities, and to have their views and needs considered. We would encourage the Australian Government to:

- Embed child sensitivity in the next National Adaptation Plan.
- Consider how it can support secure, climate resilient housing in remote communities as a critical part of national adaptation planning, through the National Adaptation Plan.

- Ensure that its National Housing and Homelessness Plan includes and addresses the needs of remote communities. This should include funding for Western Australia and other states/territories beyond the Northern Territory to accelerate the building of new remote housing, targeted at reducing the worst overcrowding and increasing the supply of housing in remote communities.
- Support climate resilience of remote Aboriginal communities in the face of the climate crisis by prioritised for funding through the implementation of the National Health and Climate Strategy.



Cultural loss and damage

First Nations people have a deep, ongoing and reciprocal relationship with Country. The Needs Assessment demonstrated that the disruption of connection due to disasters will become more frequent and more intense due to climate change. In Fitzroy Crossing, cultural practices were disrupted due to the flood, with people experiencing loss from having to evacuate from Country with no sense of when they could return. This impact needs to be recognised in holistic social and wellbeing support for children and their families, however it also needs to influence the ways that state and federal governments engage with First Nations communities on how they want their traditional knowledge to be protected and preserved in the face of climate change.

Further research

The needs assessment spoke to the different roles and the impact on teachers, health workers, social and emotional wellbeing staff and other professionals in community in the face of disasters. These professionals took on additional roles to support children and their families, often at the expense of their own mental health and wellbeing. Not only does their mental health and wellbeing need to be considered in disaster response, but a systematic review of the types of roles these professionals take on in disaster settings could be undertaken, to better understand how they can be supported in the future.



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- ^x Ibid.
- ^{xi} Dossetor, P.J., Thorburn, K., Oscar, J. et al. Review of Aboriginal child health services in remote Western Australia identifies challenges and informs solutions. *BMC Health Serv Res* 19, 758 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-019-4605-0>
- ^{xii} For example, the 2021 Australian Early Development Census, a national measure of children's development prior to school entry, shows that 53.3% of children in the Fitzroy Valley were vulnerable in one domain and 32.3% in two or more domains. Overall, this level of vulnerability and risk is significantly higher than for children Australian wide, 22% of whom were vulnerable in one domain and 11.4% in two or more domains - Australian Early Development Census. (2022) Data Explorer. Australian Government Department of Education. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data-explorer/>
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- ^{xiv} Article 27, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>

About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF Australia is working to create an Australia where every child is healthy, educated, protected, respected and involved in planning for their future. We support the inclusion of children and young people's perspectives and voices in policymaking; produce evidence and research to make the case for strategic policy reform; and engage in advocacy at all levels of government