



Flood Response and Recovery in Fitzroy Crossing

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Acknowledgements:

We pay our respects to the traditional custodians across the Fitzroy Valley and acknowledge Elders past and present, as well as the children who will become the leaders of tomorrow. Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre, Royal Far West and UNICEF Australia would like to acknowledge and thank the Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Walmajarri and Wangkatjungka people for taking the time to share their knowledge and experiences.

Disclaimer:

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Cover image: Children from Fitzroy Crossing using art to share their experiences of the floods with early childhood educator Baya Gawiy.

Image credit: © Elise Fenn - MWRC

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FOREWORD BY EMILY CARTER AM

CEO MARNINWARNTIKURA WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE



The floods are still really present for me, as I, like many others in my community who were displaced by this massive weather event, lost my home and most of my family's belongings. We as a community are used to the river rising, sometimes breaking its banks, but never what we experienced in January 2023. It was really unimaginable and we continue to experience the effects as we rebuild our lives and make plans for the future. The challenges we faced in our community before the floods only got worse.

We constantly see floods, bushfires and other natural disasters on the news but this time it was us. As politicians and government officials visited Fitzroy Crossing I kept saying to them "you can't forget us when we are no longer on the news". But as we see different people experiencing such extreme weather events across the country and the globe, and we hear the reports of the 'biggest flood in 100 years' and a 'disaster never seen before,' we are reminded that this is what we are getting used to. Environmental emergencies are far too often disrupting lives and continue to do so long after the news cycle is over.

Some months after the floods, once we sorted our immediate needs, we worked

with UNICEF Australia and Royal Far West (RFW) to capture the voices of children and their families. We were careful not to re-traumatise anyone - many of us have been re-traumatized by the process of explaining our stories - so we quietly and sensitively tapped into their stories to build the picture to understand what's needed now and into the future. We wanted to understand what worked for children and families, what they need to rebuild their lives, how we can support recovery and healing and what is needed in the event of another environmental disaster. This report is informed by these stories and deepens our understanding of different peoples' lived experience.

Strangely, as the floodwaters subsided, some hope was building as we came together as community leaders and spoke of 'Building Back Better'. Even Government was using those words, and the slogan allowed us to focus on some good that could come out of such a traumatic weather event that damaged so much. The floods and the destruction to roads, communities and people's homes and lives shone a light on the underinvestment in our communities, and the lack of infrastructure to support an adequate response in emergencies.

The evacuation centre used during the floods was an old recreation hall that should have been pulled down years ago. Families went from house to house looking for shelter, and you couldn't turn away family who had nowhere else to go even though living conditions were becoming unmanageable. Food insecurity also worsened as we rationed food and had to provide a feed to more and more people.

This was not just through the flood period but continues to impact us, our families and communities more than a year on.

This report is designed to give meaning to our experiences and give governments insights into what's needed for communities like ours in emergencies like these. One thing I will say is the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations response is often unrecognised. We have intimate knowledge of our communities, have people on the ground, and many people reaching out to us seeking assistance. We respond to what's needed and don't wait for Government responses, though to build back better we need to inform the solutions.

Marninwarantikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC) has a reputation for building the evidence and this work with UNICEF Australia and RFW is an effort to bring together perspectives often not taken into account. This work raises the voices of children and considers how they experience events like the floods and ongoing challenges created by intense weather events like we had in Fitzroy. We are moving beyond the broken bridge to the opportunity to get it right and build better homes, and lives for the next generations.



The floods caused the collapse of the Fitzroy River Bridge, which was unusable for close to a year and cut off the only access and transport route to surrounding communities.

Image credit: © Marninwarantikura Women's Resource Centre

FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR ELIZABETH ELLIOTT AM FAHMS FRSN

Climate change is changing children's lives. In Australia, extreme climate events are increasing in frequency and severity and our most vulnerable populations – those living in remote settings or poverty, victims of historic trauma and children – are disproportionately affected.

This was borne out in early 2023, when ferocious floodwaters from Martuwarra (the Fitzroy River) wreaked havoc on the lives of the people of the Fitzroy Valley and the infrastructure that supports them. The flood, the 'worst ever' in Western Australia, was ruthless; inundating homes and businesses not previously impacted by annual flooding.

The collapse of the Fitzroy Bridge was emblematic of the destructive power of the flood and its devastation on Fitzroy Crossing and surrounding communities. It literally severed the Great Northern Highway, isolating Fitzroy Crossing from Darwin and Broome, and it cut Fitzroy Crossing town in half.

The flood separated families and prevented access to food and medicines, healthcare and education. Children were left homeless, hungry, frightened and traumatised. In a world turned upside down

they'd lost their homes, pets, toys, access to education and preventative medicine, and any semblance of normality.

Many were evacuated to Broome or Derby and returned to houses overtaken by mould and infested with spiders and snakes. Some were housed in tiny mobile homes – Humanihuts – cramped, noisy, devoid of privacy and unsuitable for children's play.

Children became moody and struggled to concentrate when they returned to school. Life as they had known it had changed. Even when the raging waters settled, the river, contaminated with sewage, carcasses and snags, prevented fishing and swimming. Gastro, skin sores and mosquito-borne diseases abounded. Picnic spots and culturally significant sites had disappeared. Animals traditionally hunted had drowned.

We know that some children who experience significant life trauma – including a major flood – may develop post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. In young children there may be regression of skills – loss of speech, wetting the bed or separation anxiety. In older children PTSD can manifest as flashbacks (reliving

the event), nightmares, anxiety and depression, withdrawal and irritability, even mutism. Symptoms may be triggered when they are reminded of the event, for example by heavy rain, and can persist for years. Some children cope by denying the event ever occurred, while others are hypervigilant, on constant look out for threats. All will require careful management, at the appropriate time, from skilled health professionals. UNICEF Australia and Deloitte Access Economics (2024) also demonstrated that children affected by major climate events are more likely to drop out of school early and to experience psychological distress and future homelessness – and that the associated economic costs are enormous.

But what of the future? There will be more cyclones, floods and fires. We lack, and must advocate for, well-funded, coordinated community-led disaster recovery programs that prioritise children and vulnerable communities like those in the Fitzroy Valley.

The Walmajarri, Bunuba, Gooniyandi and Wangkatjungka people of the Fitzroy Valley are proud, resourceful, resilient and aspirational, with strong links to family and traditional cultures. They form a tight knit community with shared historic trauma and disadvantage. They have fought bravely against alcohol harms, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and suicide in their community, and have proven that they can be the architects of their own futures. Their voices, and those of their children, must be heard as we develop strategies to mitigate the harms of future climate-related disasters.

Elizabeth Elliott AM FAHMS FRSN

Professor of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of Sydney and Consultant Paediatrician, Sydney Children's Hospitals Network

Director, Royal Far West Board

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Image credit: © Marninwantikura Women's Resource Centre

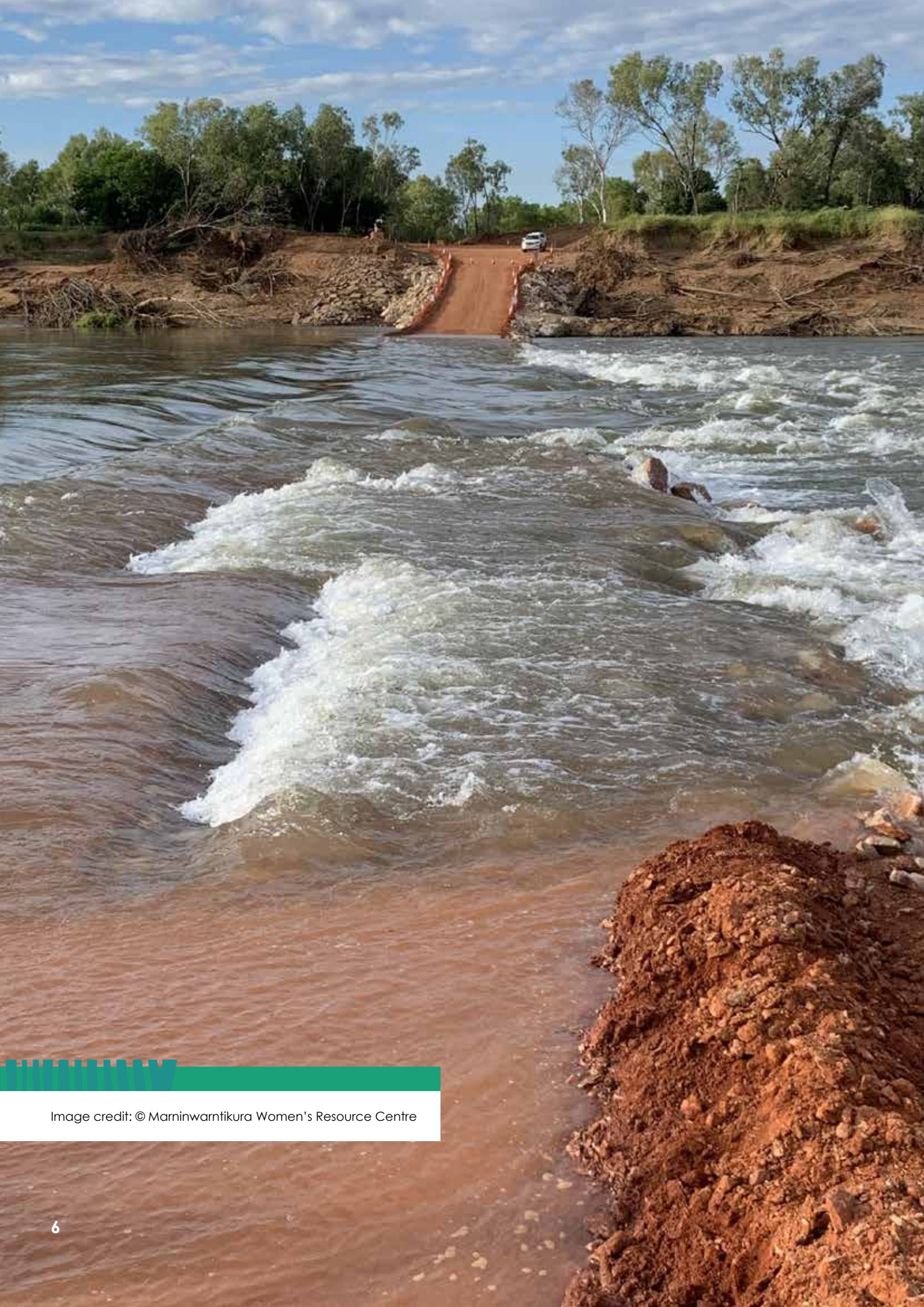


Image credit: © Marninwantikura Women's Resource Centre

“

***The flood was traumatic
for some families... For
some of those kids, the
floods were just another
coat of paint on the wall.”***

Aboriginal community member

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent decades, human-induced global warming (now described as 'global boiling') has taken place at an unprecedented rate, increasing the frequency and severity of extreme climate-related disasters such as bushfires, droughts, heatwaves and floods. Children are physically and psychologically more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change than adults, however these vulnerabilities and their impacts are often overlooked in decision-making, policies, and investments. Climate change threatens children's health, education, development and even their survival, and their invisibility in decision-making on climate, environmental and disaster risk reduction worsens the impacts on their lives.

Recent research from UNICEF Australia and Deloitte Access Economics (2024) shows that in Australia, children from low socio-economic backgrounds, children living in rural and remote communities and First Nations children are more likely to be impacted by disasters. More than 1.4 million or one in six children and young people in Australia now experience a climate disaster or extreme weather event in an average year. That number, and the severity of the disasters, is on the rise.

Climate change, climate-related disasters and extreme weather events are increasingly likely to occur concurrently, creating a compounding set of impacts on human systems. This, combined with pre-existing social, economic, and political vulnerabilities, will generate more significant impacts, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In response to the unprecedented flooding that impacted Fitzroy Crossing town and

surrounding communities in January 2023, local Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO) Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC), through its long-standing partnership with specialist child development service Royal Far West (RFW) known as "Marurra-U", invited UNICEF Australia to undertake a post-flood Needs Assessment with affected communities. With a shared vision to improve the lives of children and families in the Fitzroy Valley, and in line with greater awareness and concern about the current and future impacts of climate change in Aboriginal communities, the three organisations partnered on the post-flood Needs Assessment.

This report details the findings of this Needs Assessment based on interviews with over 40 key informants, including members of the Fitzroy Valley community and service providers. The interviews were analysed using the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Framework (Gee et al., 2014) to understand the impacts of the flood on the social and



emotional wellbeing of children and families. Professor Pat Dudgeon, a Bardi woman from the Kimberley and co-author of this report, worked with her research team from the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia to provide expertise and guidance on using the SEWB framework and the interpretation of the data.

The social and emotional wellbeing needs of children were identified by their families, educators, ACCOs and support services.

The objectives of the Needs Assessment were:

OBJECTIVE 1

Understand the impact of the floods on the social and emotional wellbeing of children and their families, and the priorities for their recovery and healing.



OBJECTIVE 2

Consult with the Fitzroy Valley community and service providers to understand the wider impacts of the floods on the community (community findings).



OBJECTIVE 3

Collect and share the community's recommendations for emergency preparedness, response, recovery and long-term healing.

This Executive Summary outlines the findings of the Needs Assessment according to these three objectives.

THE COMPOUNDING IMPACTS OF DISASTERS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The Fitzroy Valley has experienced chronic

under investment and a lack of adequate basic services for many decades. Despite the community's resilience, this makes them more vulnerable to severe impacts from natural hazards such as floods, and makes recovery and effective preparation for the next hazard even harder.

This Needs Assessment highlights some of the ways in which pre-existing disadvantage in a community can worsen the impacts of a natural hazard, and reinforces the call for a specific, context-appropriate focus on children and young people in disaster risk management to account for the deep systemic drivers of disadvantage in their communities.

The Needs Assessment also focusses on gaining a deeper understanding of how children and families in very remote Aboriginal communities are uniquely affected by, and cope with, increasingly frequent and severe climate-related disasters. **It shines a light on the resilience of children, families and entire communities in the face of repeated and compounding challenges.**

In responding to climate-related disasters across Australia, UNICEF Australia and RFW have found the needs of children often remain invisible amidst the broader crisis response (RFW & UNICEF Australia, 2023). It is crucial to bring these needs to the forefront to ensure children's rights to safety, education, and psychological well-being are not overlooked. This Needs Assessment serves as a reminder that children's experiences and needs must be integral to any disaster response and recovery effort, as children are uniquely exposed and highly vulnerable members of the community.

OBJECTIVE 1

IMPACTS ON CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

These findings have been 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 means the 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 the Fitzroy Valley.

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' and carers' capacity to connect with their children.

.....

Teachers noticed more disruptive and challenging behaviour in their students, and increased disengagement in learning.

.....

Parents and carers 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.





The kids paint what they love, and what they miss on Country, for example, a tree that they used to swing from. Those places bring them peace and tranquility.”

**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, their wellbeing was impacted. The sharing of cultural knowledges and practices was also impacted.



Children experienced much higher levels of skin sores and gastrointestinal ailments, as they had little choice but to drink contaminated tap water. Routine health checks, immunisations and vaccinations were delayed.”



Some kids were cut off from their parents, and it was hard to know who was responsible for them.”



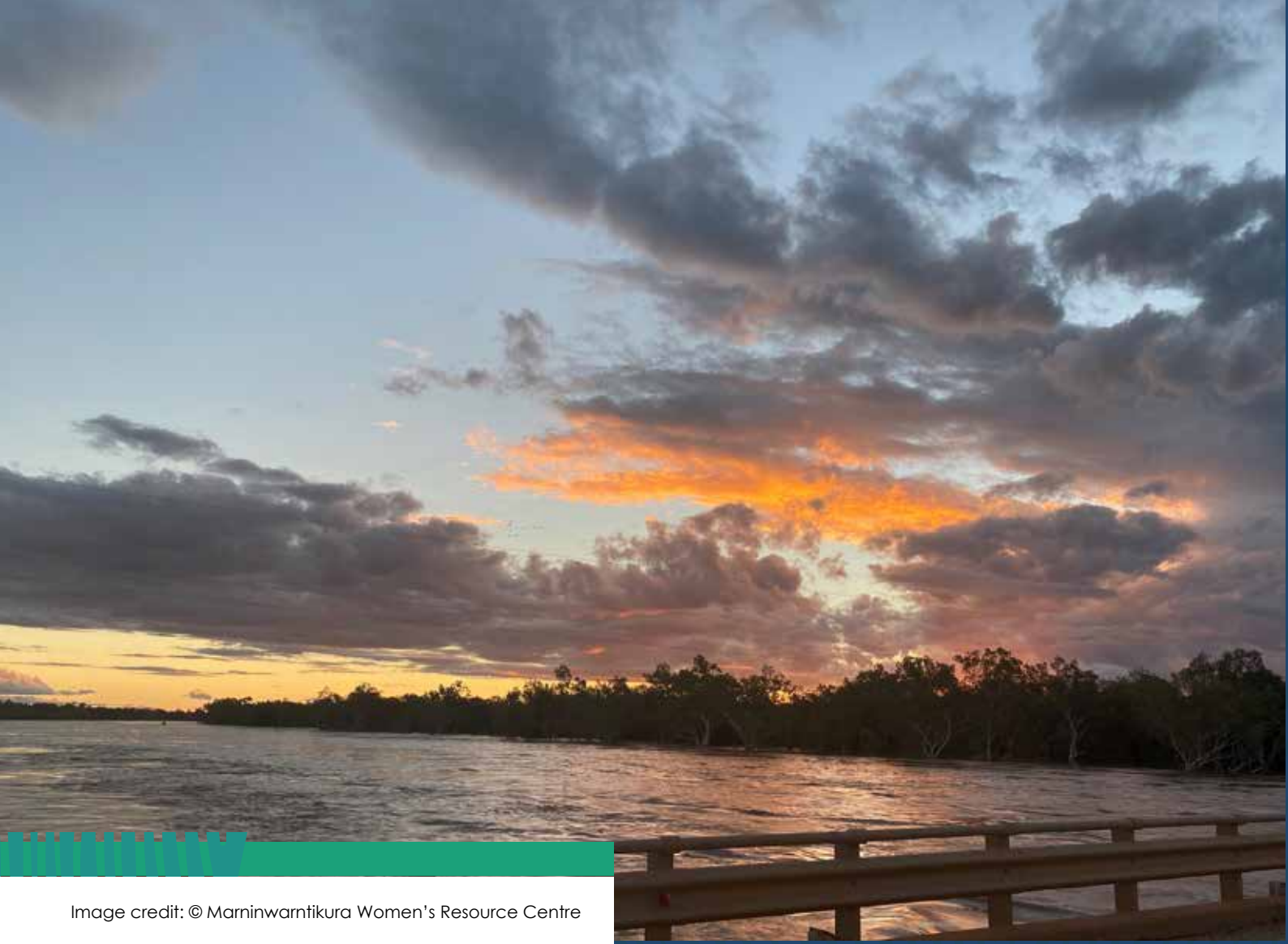


Image credit: © Marninwarrtikura Women's Resource Centre

OBJECTIVE 2

WIDER IMPACTS OF THE FLOODS ON CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES (COMMUNITY FINDINGS)¹

Communities in the Fitzroy Valley 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.

Consultations with more than 30 community members or service providers as part of this Needs Assessment deepened the understanding of the longstanding, pre-existing needs of the community, and the compounding impacts of the floods. These consultations shone a light on the community's experience of, and involvement in, the flood response and recovery effort.

¹ Full list of Community Findings can be found on page 26.

KEY FINDINGS

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 remaining together when it 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

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN THE FITZROY VALLEY HAVE SIGNIFICANT PRE-EXISTING UNMET SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING NEEDS.

Interviews revealed the community's experience of colonisation, systemic racism and pre-existing deprivations.

- 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

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 people

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.

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



WIDER IMPACTS OF THE FLOODS ON CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES

“

***Seeing that bridge up
one minute, and then
gone the next day
was just shocking
and traumatising.”***

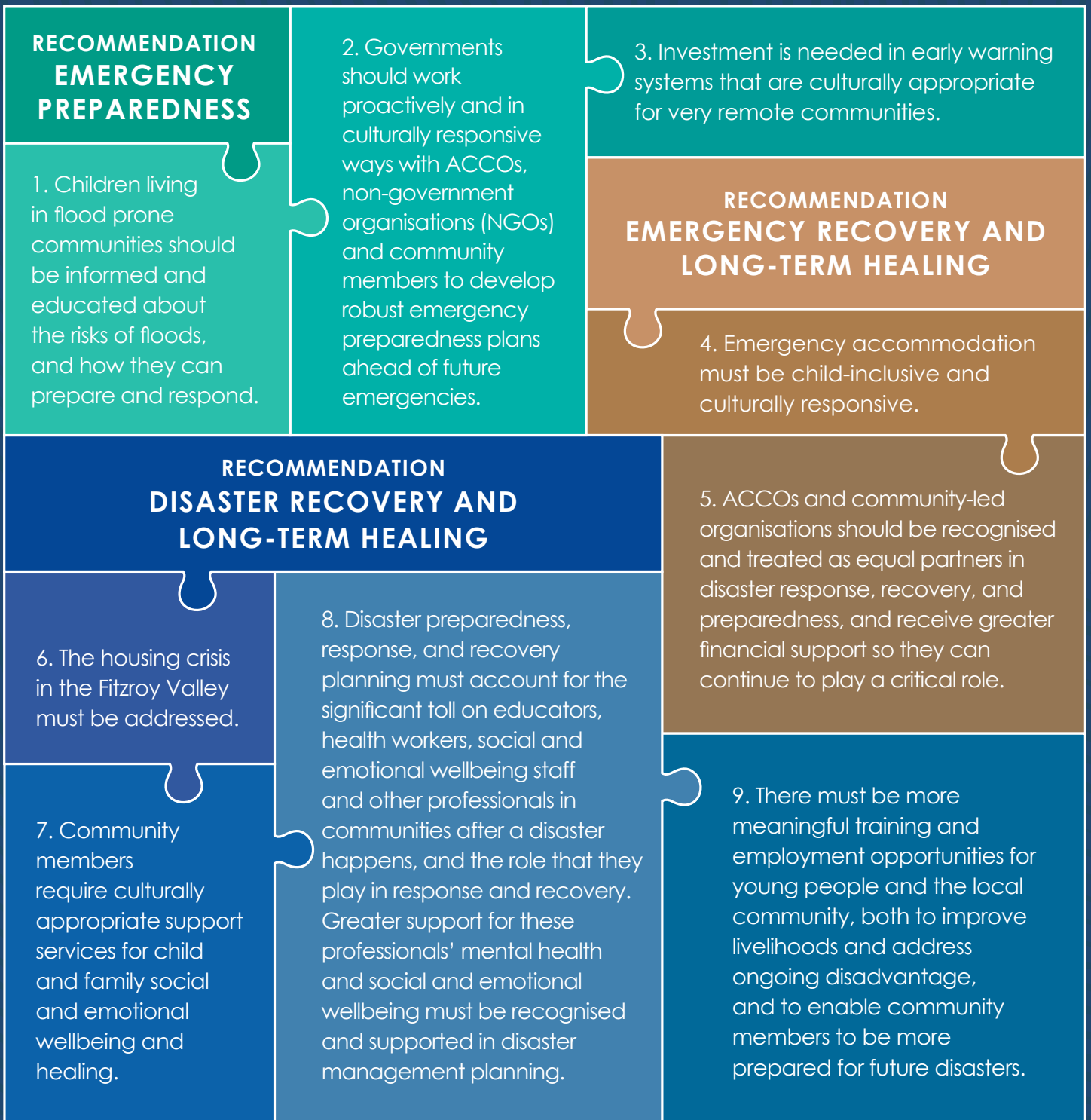
Aboriginal community member

OBJECTIVE 3

COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS²

Key Aboriginal informants from the community identified recommendations for improving disaster response, recovery, and preparedness policies and practices.

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.



INTRODUCTION

In January 2023, Western Australia (WA) was hit by the worst flood in a century. The remote town of Fitzroy Crossing and the surrounding region were devastated by this disaster. The flood affected 38,632 people across four local government areas and caused extensive damage to infrastructure, the environment and communities. More than 240 properties were damaged and over 1,500 people, including children, were displaced from their homes (Department of Fire and Emergency Services, 2023). This disaster was deeply distressing for the impacted communities, including those who lost their livelihoods, homes, livestock or were separated from their families.

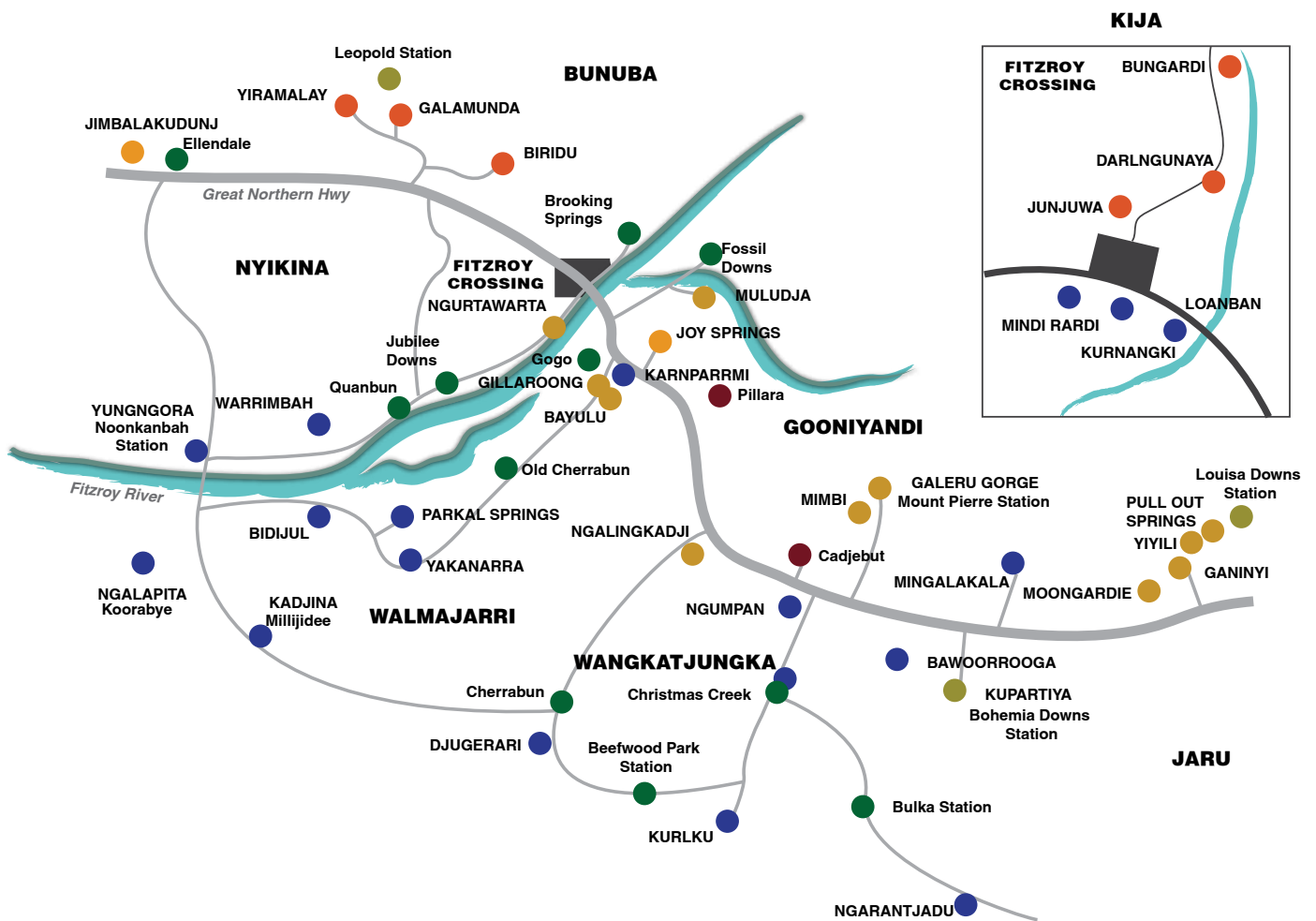
ABOUT FITZROY CROSSING

The town of Fitzroy Crossing is part of the Shire of Derby-West Kimberley and is located 396 kilometres east of Broome and 2,524 kilometres northeast of Perth. According to the 2022 Census, the town itself is home to 1,022 people including 251 children and adolescents* (aged 0-19 years inclusive) (ABS, 2022), however the community estimates the population and number of children living in the town to be much higher than this. Fitzroy Crossing acts as a service town and community hub for the Fitzroy Valley; an area estimated to be made up of 43 very remote communities of varying sizes with a total approximate

population of 2,700 to 3,000 people (Morphy, 2010). The township is located on the Fitzroy River, known as Martuwarra, which is 114 metres above sea level and is surrounded by floodplains. Martuwarra is a significant cultural and spiritual site for surrounding Aboriginal communities to gather, connect, fish, swim and teach language to their children.

Fitzroy Crossing is located on the land of Bunuba people (Morphy, 2010). There are five main Aboriginal language groups that live in and around the town, namely the Bunuba, Gooniyandi, Nyikina, Walmajarri and Wangkatjungka peoples. According to Census data, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up approximately 60% of the town's population (ABS 2022). However, this number is likely to underestimate the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the community, and is significantly higher than the national average of 3.2% (ABS, 2022).

The town lies just west of the Fitzroy Crossing Bridge, which is part of the Great Northern Highway. The bridge connects one side of the Fitzroy Crossing community to the other, and the town to the East Kimberley and the Northern Territory (NT). The Great Northern Highway is part of Highway 1 which circumnavigates the continent and connects the south and the north to the rest of the nation.



The Fitzroy Valley area experiences a dry and wet season each year, oscillating between tropical monsoon and a semi-arid climate. Most of the rainfall occurs between December and March, which are also the hotter months. The average maximum temperature is just under 41 degrees Celsius in November, with temperatures reaching as high as 47 degrees Celsius in December (Bureau of Meteorology, 2024). The annual wet season brings heavy rainfall, which has caused Martuwarra to flood including in 1983, 1986, 2002, and 2023. Service, supply chain, and mobility disruptions are common in the Fitzroy Valley during the wet season, however the scale of these floods meant the volume of water and levels of inundation were significantly greater than ever before.



Image credit: © Maminwantikura Women's Resource Centre

THE FLOOD

“After New Years, on January 2nd, grandmother woke us up at six am saying that water was coming up from the creek, straight onto the roads. The water was rising at that time. We had to start packing and putting all the lounges and fridges on the top of the tables. It took us to lunch time, and the water was still rising at that point... My house is on the ground floor. We then had to move a bit higher to my sister’s house. Her house is down the road. We had to drive the Pajero through the water to my sister’s place. My grandfather and uncle had a boat. The next morning, we were sleeping on the lounge and my partner put his hand off the lounge and there was water there... We had to put my two-year-old daughter in the boat and take her to the next house. My daughter was still asleep.”

Aboriginal community member

Fitzroy Crossing experienced record-breaking flooding in early January 2023 due to ex-tropical Cyclone Ellie, which crossed into the Kimberley, WA from the NT on December 29, 2022. Martuwarra, the Fitzroy River, reached its highest level on record at 15.81 metres on January 4, 2023. The flood inundated 9,620 square kilometers of land and caused significant flooding in Fitzroy Crossing and surrounding Aboriginal communities (NEMA, 2023),

including Bungardi, Darlgunya, Junjuwa, Loanbun, and Muludja. This water peak exceeded the previous record by close to two metres (NEMA, 2023).

The floods caused the collapse of the Fitzroy River Bridge, which was unusable for close to a year and cut off the only access and transport route to surrounding communities. The event also destroyed the road to Broome, making access to supplies and services very difficult to navigate for some time.

The flood affected parts of town not previously impacted by flooding, caused more damage, and receded more slowly. As a result, the emergency response efforts were more complex than usual, involving military aircraft, helicopters and sea barges to move people, food, water, and medicine in and out of affected communities. With homes destroyed, significant infrastructure damaged and the community unable to access critical services, they faced immense challenges in the aftermath. The event has been described as the worst ever flood in WA (Ho et al., 2023).



TIMELINE OF THE FLOODS AND RESPONSE

- 21 DECEMBER 2022** ● Ex-Tropical Cyclone Ellie (ETC Ellie) forms as a Tropical Low
- 21 – 22 DECEMBER 2022** ● ETC Ellie intensifies into Category 1 Tropical Cyclone Ellie, making landfall at 11 PM on 22 December south-west of Darwin
- 23 DECEMBER 2022** ● System de-intensifies below tropical cyclone level
- 26 DECEMBER 2022** ● ETC Ellie changes course towards the Kimberley Region, crossing into WA on 29 December
- 26 DECEMBER 2022 – 4 JANUARY 2023** ● ETC Ellie moves back and forth over the Kimberley Region, producing consistently heavy rainfall over the catchment area causing flooding
- 02 JANUARY 2023** ● Rescues and evacuations from within Fitzroy Crossing begin
- 03 JANUARY 2023** ● Fitzroy River reaches 15.02 metres, and Fitzroy Bridge sustains significant damage, isolating communities east of the river
- 04 JANUARY 2023** ● Fitzroy River reaches a record high of 15.81 metres
- 14 MARCH 2023** ● Access across the river is partially restored through barges
- 10 DECEMBER 2023** ● Fitzroy Bridge is fully rebuilt and operational





Image credit: © Marninwantikura Women's Resource Centre



FITZROY CROSSING AND THE FLOOD

OFFICIAL DATA AND STATISTICS

FITZROY CROSSING

PERTH 2524 KM

BROOME 396 KM



THE FITZROY BRIDGE WAS UNUSABLE FOR ALMOST 1 YEAR

It physically divided the community in two and disrupted the movement of supplies.



11 SCHOOLS

679 STUDENTS AND 76 EDUCATORS WERE IMPACTED IN THE LOCAL AREA



1,022

PEOPLE LIVE IN FITZROY CROSSING*



251 CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS (AGES 0-19)

ALMOST 60%

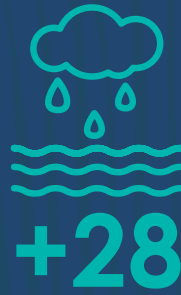
OF THE POPULATION ARE ABORIGINAL AND/OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE**

IMPACTS ACROSS THE KIMBERLEY REGION



251
CALLS
FOR HELP

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FIRE
AND EMERGENCY SERVICES



ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

impacted by damaged
in-roads, restricting delivery
of food and supplies

1,500
PEOPLE
DISPLACED



38,632
PEOPLE
IMPACTED



200
PEOPLE
EVACUATED
From affected areas.



240+
PROPERTIES
DAMAGED



9,620

Square kilometers
of land inundated
by the floods



UP TO
25

SMALL TO
MEDIUM-SIZED
BUSINESSES WERE
SIGNIFICANTLY
IMPACTED



Local
Government
Areas
impacted

Sources: Department of Fire and Emergency Services, 2023 | Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2023 | ABS, 2021

* The community estimates the number of children living in Fitzroy Crossing is much higher than this. These population figures also don't include the surrounding 45 communities in the Fitzroy Valley, many of which were also impacted by the flood and rely on Fitzroy Crossing as a hub for goods and services.

** The percentage of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in Fitzroy Crossing is likely to be much higher than this.

Image credit: © Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In response to this unprecedented flooding, Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC), a local Aboriginal community-controlled organisation (ACCO), and its partner Royal Far West (RFW), invited UNICEF Australia to undertake a post-flood Needs Assessment in Fitzroy Crossing. The objective of the Needs Assessment was to understand the social, emotional and wellbeing needs of children through the knowledge and lived experience of their families and community, and interviews with service providers working in the region.

Aboriginal people in the Fitzroy Valley have a long history of coming together, bringing in external expertise to identify what they need and want, and communicating this to governments and other stakeholders. MWRC and other local ACCOs have been instrumental in forging services that reflect what works for local people. This Needs Assessment aims to identify priorities for recovery and healing as expressed by the community, educators, service providers and Elders.

The Needs Assessment was carried out between August and September 2023, seven months after the flood. A total of 32 community members were interviewed, most of whom were Aboriginal people (60 per cent). In addition, 14 key informants who support the community but do not live there were interviewed, including clinical practitioners, health workers and government agency representatives. While children are the focus of this Needs Assessment, and their voices

should be considered in disaster planning and recovery, children were not interviewed to ensure they were not inadvertently harmed or re-traumatised. Instead, the team liaised with key adults in the child's life, including parents, caregivers, family members and educators.

This report outlines the Needs Assessment's findings on the impact of the January 2023 flood on children and their families in Fitzroy Crossing and surrounds. The Needs Assessment and reports have not focused on the broader impacts of the floods in the Northern Territory (NT) and other areas of WA.

Successive Australian Commonwealth and State and Territory governments have identified the unique needs and challenges that remote communities in Australia face by virtue of their remoteness. For example, it is identified that "remote communities experience unique, additional barriers to food security by virtue of their geographic isolation and lower-on-average incomes compared to urban or regional centres." (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2023). These are challenges that were exacerbated for impacted communities after the flood in 2023.

WHO WE ARE:

Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre (MWRC) is a hub of inspiration that provides Fitzroy Valley women and their families a place for positive change.



UNICEF Australia, MWRC, RFW and University of Sydney teams during the Needs Assessment in August/September 2023.

Image credit: © UNICEF Australia/2023/O'Dell

MWRC's vision is to work in partnership with Aboriginal families and communities to strengthen systems and sustain purposeful, engaged and healthy lives. MWRC delivers innovative programs that meet the needs of women and children throughout their lives - from quality early years education and care (ECEC); trauma-informed approaches to addressing alcohol-related harms; building knowledge and capacity through social and emotional wellbeing services; and providing wrap-around legal and non-legal supports. This includes a shelter for women and children with lived experience of family and domestic violence, and a therapeutic social enterprise (Marnin studio) where women can connect and create. MWRC is building the evidence, from leading research and creating solutions to complex community challenges.

Established in 1924, **Royal Far West (RFW)** is dedicated to children's health and wellbeing in rural and remote communities, and is one of Australia's most enduring and respected charities. RFW's multidisciplinary team provides health, education and disability services for country children aged up to 12 years, supporting their developmental and mental health so they can reach their potential.

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.

The Marrura-U Partnership

Since 2016, MWRC and RFW have worked in partnership (the Marurra-U partnership) to deliver trauma-informed developmental paediatric allied health services to children, families and schools in the Fitzroy Valley. Marurra-U is a Bunuba word meaning 'to embrace with love and care' and the vision of the partnership is that all children and families in the Fitzroy Valley are thriving and have access to a connected system of supports and health services. By working together with a culture of two way learning, the partnership has created impact through new knowledge for the partners and their respective communities.

WIDER IMPACTS OF THE FLOOD ON CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES

KEY COMMUNITY FINDINGS

IMPACT 1 - ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN THE FITZROY VALLEY HAVE SIGNIFICANT PRE-EXISTING UNMET SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING NEEDS

Longstanding, complex and interrelated factors have led to pre-existing vulnerabilities and significant unmet health, social and emotional needs of children in the Fitzroy Valley. The effects of policies of colonisation, pervasive racism and discrimination, the forced removal and relocation of Aboriginal children from their families and cultures, mistreatment, and the associated intergenerational trauma for entire communities have been well documented (Darwin et al., 2023; Truong & Moore, 2023). These challenges, combined with a chronic lack of access to appropriate services, continue to have significant effects on the lives of Aboriginal people and the social-economic wellbeing of families and communities in the flood-affected region (Dossetor et al., 2019).

Interviews undertaken in this Needs Assessment revealed the impacts that colonisation and systemic racism have had in the Fitzroy Valley, and highlighted the need for systemic change. Informants spoke about multiple displacements from their

traditional lands; experiences of violence, harassment and other forms of mistreatment; and historical systemic neglect in the community. The impact of this flood cannot be understood in isolation of this context.

The community's experience of colonisation, systemic racism and pre-existing deprivations came to the fore in informant's comments about intergenerational trauma, which is reinforced and exacerbated by disasters. As one expert informant noted:

"Owing to the history of dispossession and the prevalence of intergenerational trauma, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and poverty, this community is starting at a much higher level of stress than most. Stress levels then go higher when there are 'events' such as suicides, accidents, and floods."



In 2022, **60% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people** had experienced at least one form of racial prejudice in the previous six months.

In a survey of over 8,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, **58.5% were exposed to discrimination**; more common amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander **women, young people and those living in remote areas.**

“People were living in very difficult circumstances. Five-year-olds growing up in situations of intergenerational trauma, missing formative years of schooling, exposure to drug and alcohol usage around them. This is what trauma looks like.”

Needs Assessment informant

One key manifestation of systemic racism is the continuation of a paternalistic, and ultimately, disempowering approach towards Aboriginal communities. Key informants spoke of paternalistic or disempowering approaches to the flood response, with community members being “‘hand-fed’ everything without the autonomy and resources to make decisions,” and of being neglected or forgotten altogether. One community leader spoke about seeking resources from the authorities to rebuild parts of her house that were damaged in the flood. Instead of being given the money to rebuild, the relevant department informed her that they would buy the materials and manage the process on her behalf. Another informant

said, “people get used to waiting and not receiving anything.” A third informant noted, “I do think they felt as if they had been forgotten, that there was not a swift enough response, that they were invisible.”

Systemic racism is also seen in the longstanding underinvestment in basic and fundamental services in the Fitzroy Valley over decades, leading to poorer outcomes for the community. One informant said “there has been a systemic underinvestment in key infrastructure within the Fitzroy Valley from both Federal and State Governments”. This has resulted in unsafe and unsustainable housing, a lack of public transport, and a lack of specialist health services in-community, which has had direct and indirect effects on the community’s resilience and ability to respond effectively to disasters like the flood. Also, as the Fitzroy Bridge is the only major bridge connecting the eastern and western sides of the Kimberley, its collapse separated communities and significantly impacted connectivity, access to services and transport of vital resources such as food.

THE IMPACT OF COLONISATION ON SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

The transgenerational negative consequences of colonisation (Dudgeon et al., 2014) include:

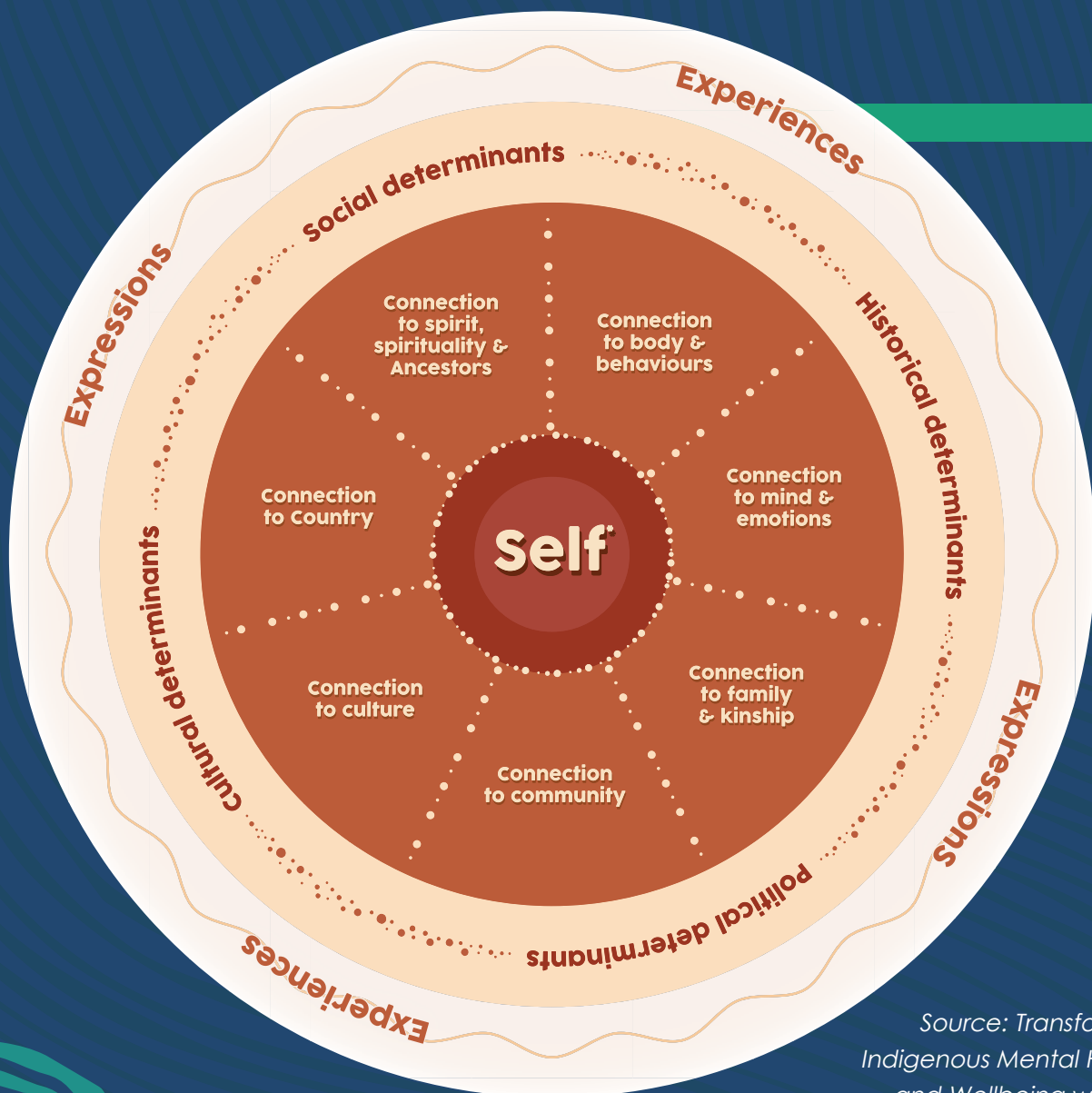
- The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families into missions, reserves, or other institutions.
- The displacement of entire families from land and Country.
- The many means of culturally and racially assimilating Aboriginal children and families into 'the White world', thus wiping out notions of self-identity, values, culture, and ways of living.
- The deeply embedded forms of individual, cultural, and institutionalised racism that result in continuous misconceptions of Aboriginal people; self-reported experiences of exclusion, or overt discrimination across health, education, employment and welfare domains; and discriminatory practices, policies, and laws.

As Dudgeon et al (2014) note, centuries of "colonial exploitation and a prolonged systematic attempt to destroy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culture... [coupled with] racism at individual and institutional levels cause and continue to reproduce the impoverishment and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians today."

Key markers of entrenched disadvantage correlate with aspects of social and emotional wellbeing. For example:

- 41% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains, compared with 20% for non-indigenous children (AIHW, 2022).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have higher rates of disability than non-Indigenous people across all age groups, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0 to 14 years are more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to have a disability (16.3% compared with 7.7%) (ABS 2018 & ABS 2021).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged under 15 years are 3.4 times more likely to be deaf (ABS, 2017).
- There is a gap in achievement rates between Year 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students for reading (77% and 96%, respectively) and numeracy (81% and 97%, respectively) (NAPLAN, 2018).
- Rates of homelessness are higher amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children compared with non-Indigenous children (3.3% or 7,200 and 0.3% or 10,900, respectively) (AIHW, 2022).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 10.9 times more likely to enter out-of-home care and 26 times more likely to enter youth detention, compared with non-Indigenous children (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020).

Health and mental health outcomes are worse in Indigenous than non-Indigenous children, yet services are inadequate, and, particularly in remote settings, often non-existent (Dossetor et al., 2023). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often have a lower baseline level of wellbeing, precisely because of the impacts colonialism has had on their lives, kin, countries, and ways of life for centuries. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also experience socio-economic disadvantage across all major indicators (Human Rights Commission, 2007). Socio-economic status is strongly linked to poor health and social and emotional wellbeing, including for children (HRC, 2007 and AIHW, 2022). A flood such as that in Fitzroy Crossing in January 2023 is an additional shock and disruption to social and emotional wellbeing with long lasting impacts.



Source: Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing website www.timhwb.org.au

Pre-flood unmet social and economic wellbeing needs:

Housing

Chronic homelessness, overcrowding and inadequate living conditions have been longstanding problems in the Fitzroy Valley. Informants noted that this is because there is not enough housing stock in the community, and new stock is not built often enough. This is backed up by research. The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre at Curtin University conducted a study into housing in the Fitzroy Valley and all community representatives (n=10) consulted said that overcrowding is a major issue (Dockery & Sykes, 2022). More generally, overcrowding is significantly higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote, socio-economically disadvantaged regions such as Fitzroy Crossing.

"We have a massive homelessness problem here, [even] pre-flood. We have

staff here who have been couch-surfing with their children for years before the flood. I have not heard of people who were homeless pre-flood being given Humanihuts."


"Before the floods, the Government had a five-year state government housing plan. I followed every media statement to see where the housing is being built. Not even one has been built in the whole of the West [Kimberley]. I have emailed different people in relevant departments, but I haven't heard anything." Informants stated that maintenance of public housing stock also rarely occurs in a timely fashion, leaving many dwellings uninhabitable.

"The living conditions in these dwellings were uninhabitable before the flood. There were cracks in windows in places where it gets to 46 degrees Celsius. A plumbing request [generally] takes six to nine months to be actioned."

The failure of the housing maintenance system in Fitzroy Crossing

“

We [an Aboriginal resource agency] have a multimillion-dollar contract with the Department of Housing. We inspect houses, set rent, and report maintenance [needs]. We send off a request, and there may be a response a few months later, perhaps from a tradesperson in Broome. They then do not ring us to ask about how the work can be most effectively completed. They just drive out and if nobody is at the house, they put a card somewhere which says they visited, and then drive all the way back to Broome. They get paid mileage and for the day. The community gets frustrated because they don't understand why things haven't been fixed."



There is an inadequate number of child health professionals and facilities for the population, especially in light of high rates of complex chronic disorders such as FASD, and high rates of emergency department use and hospitalisation in children, often for preventable conditions (Dossetor et al 2017, 2019, 2021). Many challenges exist to effective service delivery including high staff turnover, lack of available housing for employees, large geographical distances, a lack of public and private transport, and extreme climates (Dossetor et al, 2019 and 2023). From the key informant interviews we heard there have not been notable improvements since this time, and that service provisions have actually declined. Thus, the external conditions required to support the social and emotional wellbeing of children, families and communities have never existed in Fitzroy Valley.

Health

There has been a significant lack of access to appropriate and consistent child health services in the Fitzroy Valley for many years. For example, Fitzroy Crossing families do not have an Aboriginal Medical Service or General Practitioner and primary health care is only provided at the Fitzroy Crossing Hospital. Specialist care and diagnostic testing is even more difficult to access.

“We [her daughter] come to Broome every three months to see a specialist to check her lungs because it [wet cough] is an ongoing health problem for her. They need something like BRAMS [Broome Aboriginal Medical Service] with the specialist in Fitzroy Crossing.” Aboriginal community member.

“If a family happens to have their own house, the next most common need is psychological services for parents and guardians. There is a revolving door of therapists and counsellors.

81% of children/young people had mental health illness – rarely about depression and anxiety, and often much more complex [mental health illnesses]. [Some] counsellors and art therapists quit after six weeks. They are not trained to deal with the complexities of the challenges.”

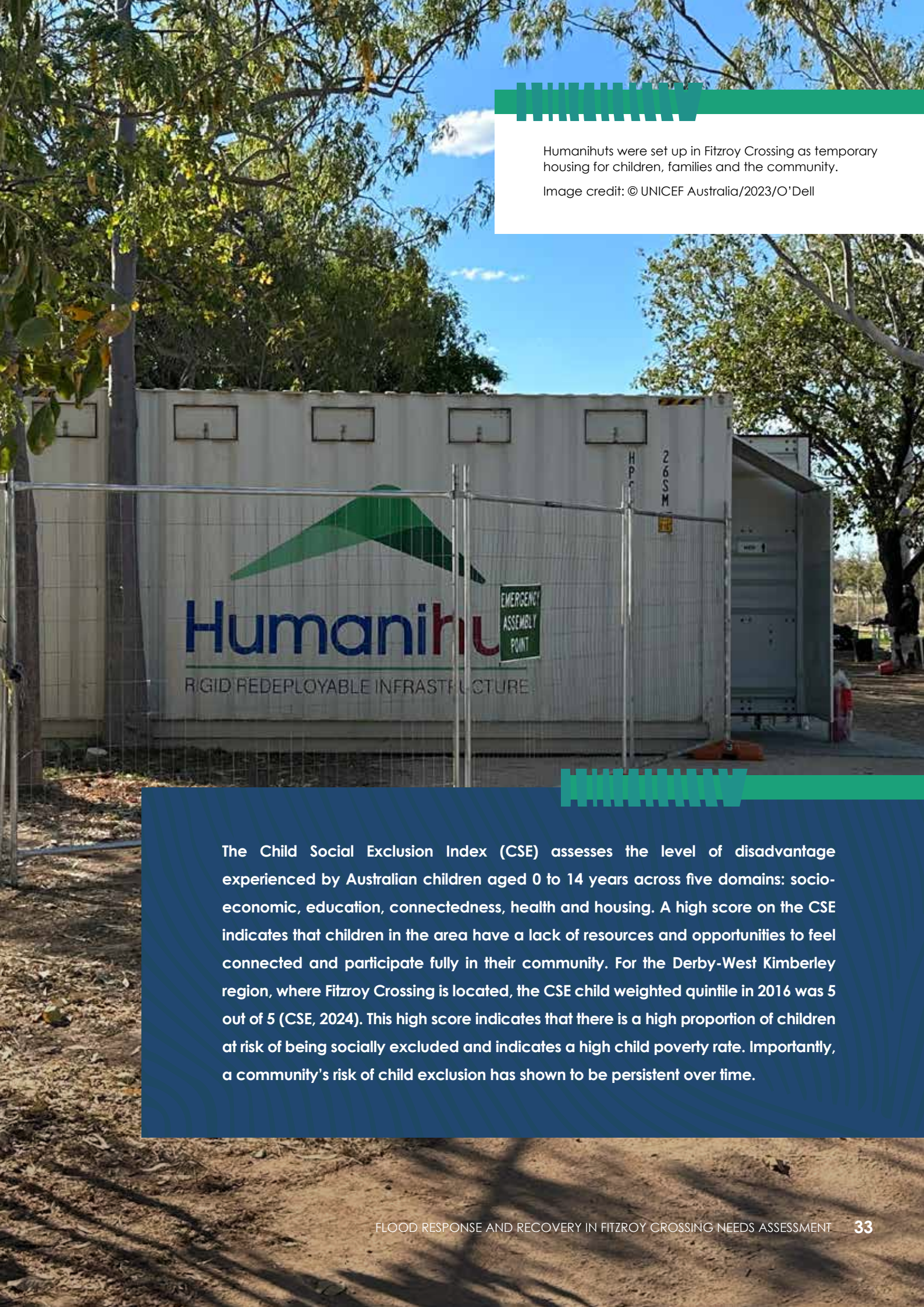
Despite strong community advocacy, many children experience potentially preventable and treatable health conditions that can have a serious negative impact on their long-term health and development. These include skin and throat infections that can lead to rheumatic heart disease, ear infections (e.g. Otitis Media) that can lead to hearing loss, eye infections e.g, trachoma that can impair vision, and poor maternal, infant and child nutrition (Sang et al, 2024). In the absence of adequate primary care, many of these children use the emergency department or are hospitalised for potentially preventable conditions (Dossetor et al, 2017 & Dossetor et al, 2021).

The 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 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 Australia wide, 22% of whom were vulnerable in one domain and 11.4% in two or more domains (AEDC, 2021).

The prevalence of FASD in the Fitzroy Valley is amongst the highest in the world (19%) as identified by the Lilliwán project, and most of these children have had early life trauma (Fitzpatrick et al, 2012, 2015, 2017,2017a). Children with FASD may have birth defects and experience a range of health, developmental, learning, behavioural, social, emotional and sensory processing difficulties. The Lilliwán study found that 55% of primary school-aged children in the Fitzroy Valley had high levels of prenatal alcohol exposure (PAE) (Fitzpatrick et al. 2015a). Children with PAE, FASD and exposure to early life trauma can have poor educational, health and mental health outcomes and increased risk of substance misuse and contact with the justice system (Popova et al, 2023).

As a result of longstanding underinvestment and inadequate access to services, Aboriginal children living in the Fitzroy Valley are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in Australia across key domains of wellbeing. Social determinants of ill-health like poverty, unemployment, developmental vulnerabilities and poor education outcomes, extreme heat, overcrowded housing and poor living environments all contribute to poor social and emotional wellbeing.





Humanihuts were set up in Fitzroy Crossing as temporary housing for children, families and the community.

Image credit: © UNICEF Australia/2023/O'Dell

The Child Social Exclusion Index (CSE) assesses the level of disadvantage experienced by Australian children aged 0 to 14 years across five domains: socio-economic, education, connectedness, health and housing. A high score on the CSE indicates that children in the area have a lack of resources and opportunities to feel connected and participate fully in their community. For the Derby-West Kimberley region, where Fitzroy Crossing is located, the CSE child weighted quintile in 2016 was 5 out of 5 (CSE, 2024). This high score indicates that there is a high proportion of children at risk of being socially excluded and indicates a high child poverty rate. Importantly, a community's risk of child exclusion has shown to be persistent over time.

DISASTER RESILIENCE

Using the Australian Disaster Resilience Index (ADRI), the Derby-West Kimberley region had a score of 0.1501, indicating a low capacity for disaster resilience. Some of the contributing factors include constraints with economic capital, planning and the built environment, emergency services, information access and governance, and leadership, as well as the underlying historical and political factors outlined above. However, there are some moderate disaster resilience strengths in this region which include social character, community capital and social and community engagement.

IMPACT 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.

Using the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) framework to understand the flood's impacts, it is evident that children have been negatively affected by the flood and the ensuing emergency response in multiple domains. This section outlines the negative impacts on children's social and emotional wellbeing identified in the Needs Assessment, in line with the SEWB framework. Professor Pat Dudgeon provided supervision to the UNICEF Australia research team in their use of the SEWB framework.

1. Connection to Mind and Emotions.

There is recognition within the community that the experience of the flood added another layer to pre-existing trauma.

"The flood was traumatic for some families. I suspect that some of those kids are so traumatised... that their receptors are so numb to the fact that they are traumatised. For some of those kids, the floods were just another coat of paint on the wall." Aboriginal community member.

"The Fitzroy Valley has a high percentage of children and young people who have a background of trauma. This is a highly traumatised population anyway. We are dealing with a very different population to other white, middle-class communities. So, the impacts in our communities are different. They are in a constant state of grief. There are always significant critical incidents, and a lot of families live in poverty. There are lots of adverse childhood experiences."

“The little ones are existing in so much trauma. Then we have a funeral for a deaf student, a year ago. Funerals are delayed because of the cost. We haven’t officially said goodbye. Another young person took their life in Broome, two died in the flood waters, [a] Yakanarra young girl died of a mosquito [bite], another funeral for a man who died. [All] that heartache in the space of 10 months. Compounding grief. Kids are on the edge all the time.”

Children:

Children experienced fear and emotional distress in relation to the direct experience of rainfall, rising waters, and flooding.

“The children found rain really triggering. Like most crises everyone focuses on the adults. It was not addressed that this is an immense trauma for everyone, not enough support in this space. I would have expected many more professionals in dealing with grief, loss and trauma, and being there for people.”

“My grandson who was four was shaking. He saw the water bubbling and raging, and thought he was going to drown and die.” Aboriginal community member.

“My little gang don’t talk about the floods. They are frightened to talk about it. It was 11 PM on New Years eve when we saw the flood coming [and] many of us were asleep. We also found out because the animals were making noises and trying to come into the house.” Aboriginal community member.

Children and families experienced cumulative grief from the passing of community members, and from the loss of their homes, food security, belongings, toys and pets in the initial aftermath of the floods.

“Children were using this space to paint themes of food, the weather and pet deaths. Pet death was more present for children than adults. This loss may have exacerbated already high levels of grief



We had six children living in town, and five of them lost their houses. One of the little boys lived in a worker’s yard by the river. They were told the levy wouldn’t break and they would be fine and then it did [break], so [the boy’s] mum had to swim out of the flood with a three-year-old on her back... We have had a few children that got stuck out of town for months. [It had] a big impact on them because they had to stay out of community. Two didn’t make it back until March because they had no houses to come back to. So much disruption... One little girl who lost her house in the flood, she moved into town with a family that had four children. Toilet training went out the window, and any routine diminished. She only got a house in about August. It was so disruptive for her and her behaviours [showed her distress]. The child had never had to fight for attention before, there were behaviour challenges.”

and loss that Aboriginal children are often exposed to.”

“Persistent themes in children’s artworks contained stories related to food, grief [for] pets and weather/flooding. From the therapeutic engagements and stories generally shared, including informal chat, food shortages, uncertainty and displacement had caused distress as well as [the] mass loss of dogs. This appeared to be more present for children than adults.”

“The floods were a traumatic experience for some of our children and families. The children not being able to go to their houses. You don’t have toys anymore and you have lost your things and have to live with different people now. One boy got flown out [of town] because mum was working on the response. He got airlifted - he was separated from mum.”

Children whose homes became uninhabitable had to move to other parts of Fitzroy Crossing or leave the town altogether. Disruptions to living environments and to routines precipitated behavioural, emotional, and developmental regression.

“That family had to live in Derby. They had a young daughter only one year old. She seems very quiet and saw a delay in her walking. This child had lots of change and it was very scary. Children have to adapt to living in a hostel.” Aboriginal community member

“I think it is the displacement that is the issue, children a lot more clingy to their parents. We had a long break but the separation anxiety was a bit bigger just

not having the stability of where they are living. Helicopter sounds was a big one. We have seen some sleep disturbances, regression in routines.”

“We were trying to get her to sleep in her own room before the floods, and now that has totally stopped. She wants to always sleep in my room. [She] used to be happy to catch the bus home from school, and now is not.”

Educators witnessed escalations in disruptive and challenging behaviours and disengagement, which they attribute to increased overcrowding in homes in the post-flood period.

“Children have less space and privacy than they would usually have. If you have 19 people now living in a three-bedroom house, it is really problematic for the children.”

“Putting routines and schedules [for students] is hard due to households with lots of people in them. It’s very difficult to put in structure [in place] due to this. We need more playgroups and increased access to early education, but access to housing is a barrier [to that].” Aboriginal community member.

“Grannies [grandchildren] living on the hard floor in high density overcrowded environments, trying to go to school and do homework.”

Parents and community members:

Children, parents and caregivers felt fearful, emotionally distressed and overwhelmed following the collapse of the Fitzroy Bridge. The Bridge is the only means of crossing the Fitzroy River and



Image credit: © Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre

travelling from East to West Kimberley and from one side of town to the other. Families felt a sense of loss at seeing the Bridge destroyed, knowing that they would be cut off from the other side of the town, and from friends and family.

"It was too much for me to drive over and see the bridge. I don't know why we get so attached to these things. Humans are so insignificant compared to nature, and that is confronting."

Parents were fearful of being cut-off from the limited pre-existing essential services in the community, including healthcare.

"A young mum's first child - A baby of six months with nasal congestion. [She said] 'Where do I go if [my] baby gets sick overnight'... People were afraid." Aboriginal community member speaking about not being able to access hospital.

Parents and other adults carried the trauma of losing property and other possessions, and the anxieties of displacement.

"My grandmother was heartbroken when we came from Derby and saw all of our stuff lost. There was mould and mud, and nothing else. We were able to take some [of our] photos, but not much else." Aboriginal community member.

"We were stressed and dealing with the trauma. The [day-to-day] things that were there before were still there, like doing the dishes. [Now] I have to entertain [a child]. I felt guilty how much time she was on the phone. Then we found some friends for her."

Parents and other adult community members experienced anticipatory anxiety about the upcoming wet season and being cut-off from family, community, and essential services. In part, this is because community members do not have a plan or know how to prepare for future shocks and hazards.

"I think there will be a lot of anxiety about access to the other side of the river. We have six weeks or two months to make sure we are prepared for the wet season. We won't be able to get across the bridge. They don't seem like they have a good plan of how they are going to continue working on the bridge. The recent flood in June/ July stopped the works - it stopped our programs. We have to think about getting supplies to staff on the other side of the river if we have them. It could be five to six months. Do we leave a car on the other side in case there is a barge, [to get us across] but the car might get stolen or torched."

Educators:

The Needs Assessment asked educators specific questions about the impact of the flood on their work and lives. While these were impacts shared by educators, they are likely also indicative of the effects of the flood on other community-based professionals such as health workers, social and emotional wellbeing staff.

Educators were displaced and separated from their families, causing stress, anxiety, and fatigue.

"There was a lot of stress placed on teaching staff. If schools were on the

other side of the bridge, the teachers had to move to the Lodge during the week, and then go back home during the weekends. That displacement caused stress and a level of negativity."

Educators took on additional responsibilities in the aftermath of the flood. This meant they had less time for self-care and processing the impacts of the floods for themselves, which contributed to stress and burnout.

"I don't think the staff and educators or community have had a chance to unpack the floods and how crazy the flood response was. People are saying 'only 20 houses were flooded' [this number was in fact much higher] but it's so annoying, [even] if you didn't lose anything you were still impacted hugely."

"The Education Department chose to open the school doors and think of the situation as business-as-usual. The approach was [for teachers not to] talk about trauma to trigger them [students]. 'We are not going to talk about it, just open the doors, and the kids will get on with it.'"

"A few of the principals had to focus on getting fuel and getting food for the communities. It meant they could not do their core business of running the school. That impacted their wellbeing. This was particularly [the case] in school where there was no Deputy Principal. When the Principal was out doing the bus runs, it impacted on the everyday running of the school. That was really difficult."

2. Connection to Body and Behaviours

The flood threatened children's physical safety and the remoteness of the community and inappropriate temporary housing solutions meant that access to care and recovery was delayed.

Children experienced unprecedented food insecurity in the weeks and months after the flood, leading to poor nutrition and hunger. Some communities were cut off from fresh food deliveries, and inconsistent supplies of food in the Valley meant that larger groups of people were forced to share smaller amounts of food. What little food was available was increasingly expensive.

"There were families and children who were going without food for days. They were starving." Aboriginal community member.

"Most people don't have too much food at home usually. Then they lost everything, they had nothing. Trucks were cut-off. But no one really knew. [People visited] food banks, everyone wanted to get as much as possible because they didn't know how long it [a shortage of food supplies] would go for. People had to go to the collection point every day. They would give you a meal that would barely feed the household. The need for food packages meant all the stock of the supermarkets had run out – there was no tea, steaks, pasta, rice and potatoes. Some people would get frozen packs but not everyone had ovens or microwaves and so these food items were unsuitable. People also received food that was culturally inappropriate, such as hummus."

“When we first moved [to Derby], we had to ring around. No one was there to ask us what we needed. There was also not enough food in Derby because the road was blocked off. The barge was coming in, but meat and bread were low. They were also rationing food in Coles and Woolies. If you had big mobs of people you were shopping for, you couldn't get enough. We were using [personal] Centrelink income to pay for these supplies.” Aboriginal community member

Children were increasingly exposed to physical health threats, including snakes, spiders, mould, and mosquito and waterborne diseases. Children could not get access to routine treatments. One child died from a rare mosquito-borne disease called Murray Valley Encephalitis after the flood. Others had to be flown out of the Valley to receive treatment for various health ailments.

“People were getting flown out of the Valley because of snake bites. The rains caused the grass to grow very long, but there were not enough gardeners to mow them. As a result, there were snakes in the grass. The Army had strict rules around what they could and could not do [and could not mow the grass].”

“Children were playing in the river. Sewage and rubbish was flowing into the river unchecked, and animal carcasses were also floating down the river with increasing regularity. All of this resulted in sores, cuts, and infections, which had to be treated with bush medicine and antibiotics.” Aboriginal community member.

“Children experienced much higher levels of skin sores and gastrointestinal ailments,

as they had little choice but to drink contaminated tap water. Routine health checks, immunisations and vaccinations were delayed.” Aboriginal community member.

Children lacked opportunities and spaces for play and social activity, impacting connection, the development of physical and social skills, and psychosocial wellbeing. Without play and social activities, children and young people miss out on opportunities for movement and connection, which are essential for both stress release and healing. This can increase the prevalence of challenging behaviors.

“Then the kids were literally in the hotel rooms all day watching TV. There were no activities, events, and other things for the kids to do. When there were meetings about the flood and returning to community, there were some activities.” Aboriginal community member.

“My little gang were bored and started fighting with each other. My children stay inside the house all the time, both before and after the flood.” Aboriginal community member.

The flood offered unexpected silver linings for some children and families. As a result of displacement after the flood, some families were able to access routine healthcare services in Derby and Broome. These were services that they did not have access to, or did not have regular access to, in the Fitzroy Valley.

“Straight after the floods, BRAMS was already getting calls in community to support those in Broome. When they come back [those that were evacuated

to Broome and Derby], they will have no one there to follow up with them [on primary healthcare].”

“Aboriginal medical services in Broome and Derby pivoted and helped everyone with medical services and health checks. There were a number of people with chronic diseases that had not accessed a doctor in five years. There is a push to set up an Aboriginal medical service here.”

Damage to the Bridge and main highway in and out of Fitzroy Crossing, enabled the existing community-initiated alcohol restrictions and subsequent additional restrictions (see Part 4) to be implemented and inhibited the flow of alcohol into the community. This contributed to the temporary reduction of alcohol fueled domestic violence in the town. This had flow-on consequences for health and wellbeing, including by freeing up beds in domestic violence services for a limited number of displaced community members with children.

“Because there was no access, there was no alcohol and no drugs getting into the community which was a positive. Everyone stayed put as well. We had pretty good attendance for term one because there was nowhere to go.”

“We [the MWRC Women’s Shelter] saw a decrease in domestic violence after the flood. Referrals to the shelter dropped, and there were no presentations either to the hospital or the police... This also allowed us to negotiate with the Department to accommodate people who had been displaced by the flood. We were able to help at least three families long term in this way.”

3. Connection to Family and Kinship

Children became separated from their parents because the bridge was destroyed. They were stuck on the other side of the river and had no fuel or access to boats. Others were unable to communicate with family because they did not have phone credit or access to the internet. Separation from family can exacerbate pre-existing trauma for Aboriginal people.

“Some kids were cut off from their parents, and it was hard to know who was responsible for them. Some kids were out at Noonkanbah and the parents were here in [Fitzroy Crossing], and it was hard to manage their behaviours.”
Aboriginal community member.

“Children are also talking about not being able to go to the other side [of town] to see family. The bridge is part of our lives, and we need it to see family... [A child] says, ‘I am not from here - my Mum is on the other side’. I was [also] worried about the old people being able to access medicines and food.”
Aboriginal community member.

Some families were evacuated and relocated together, whereas others were separated. The lack of consistency was challenging, and those who were separated for any period of time experienced anxiety, and stress.

“Many families were reuniting for the first time in April after several months of disconnection and this felt significant.”

“People have lost what Country was before, everything has changed so much and been damaged. We don’t



have spots to just go sit by the river. Being stuck in Broome, people just want to come back [to Country]. Those that were away on holidays wanted to get back to support families that were here... Everyone [is] sitting in Broome and feeling survivors' guilt for not being here. Some of my families will never get back to those communities and are now living in town with thousands of others, with no space."

4. Connection to Country, Land, and Culture

The loss of access to country and the destruction of significant cultural sites had a significant impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of community members, including trauma, especially for children.

Children and families had to contend with the wholesale destruction of land, flora

and fauna in the flood-affected areas. The riverbeds eroded, vegetation was destroyed, and animal carcasses abounded. The flood also made it unsanitary and unsafe to use the land for hunting, fishing, and other essential activities.

"There were dead animals everywhere - cows, pigs, dogs, kangaroos, snakes, cats. [The] smell. It was not safe to fish or hunt and eat it." Aboriginal community member.

"There were hectares of land dumped in the river up the gorge. There was so much sewerage going in the river. We can't eat the fish. They are so central to everyone's life, for food and for social activity."

The deluge itself and the residual wetness meant that children and families could not hunt, fish, light fires, camp, or eat bush food, with short and long-term impacts on wellbeing and learning.



Image credit: © Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre

"The flood disrupted hunting. We still cannot light fires because the wood is so wet. All the animals have also died, and so it is difficult to hunt. The flood has also disrupted fishing because there are so many more toxins in the water."
Aboriginal community member.

"Those who have been displaced cannot camp, cannot fish, cannot hunt. These are things that they are good at, that they are familiar with, and that serve important functions in their daily lives. Without them, health and wellbeing is likely to decline."

The river holds both practical and spiritual/cultural significance to local Aboriginal communities. Loss of access to the river and other special or significant sites had profound impacts on the Aboriginal communities in the Valley.

"Looking at the river is a huge part of

everyone's life here. It is why the town is built out around the river. It is a big source of food for many people. When you come back from holidays you go look at the river. But now you are checking the river, is it ok? I spoke with some kids at the shelter about the river, and [they said] 'we have to check the river.'"

"There is trauma around losing access to space on local Country. People have lost access to those sacred places. The old crossing where children and young people would swim, fish, hunt, and gather is now a causeway. The meaning and use of space has changed. The Danggu Gorge Park is now closed, and there is pain around not being able to access it."

"Spiritually, taking away their [Aboriginal people's] homes takes away their

identity too. In order to help them regain that, they need to be on Country. They thrive on that, it makes them feel strong inside and they need to go back... living culturally appropriate lives. The children in those [evacuated] communities were out hunting, fishing... It was about going back to old sources of living, surviving and thriving... The kids paint what they love, and what they miss on country, for example, a tree that they used to swing

from. Those places bring them peace and tranquility." Aboriginal community member.

Funerals and Sorry Business have been delayed and some families were unable to attend funerals in the East Kimberley which were very important to them. This included the funeral of a young person who drowned in the river.

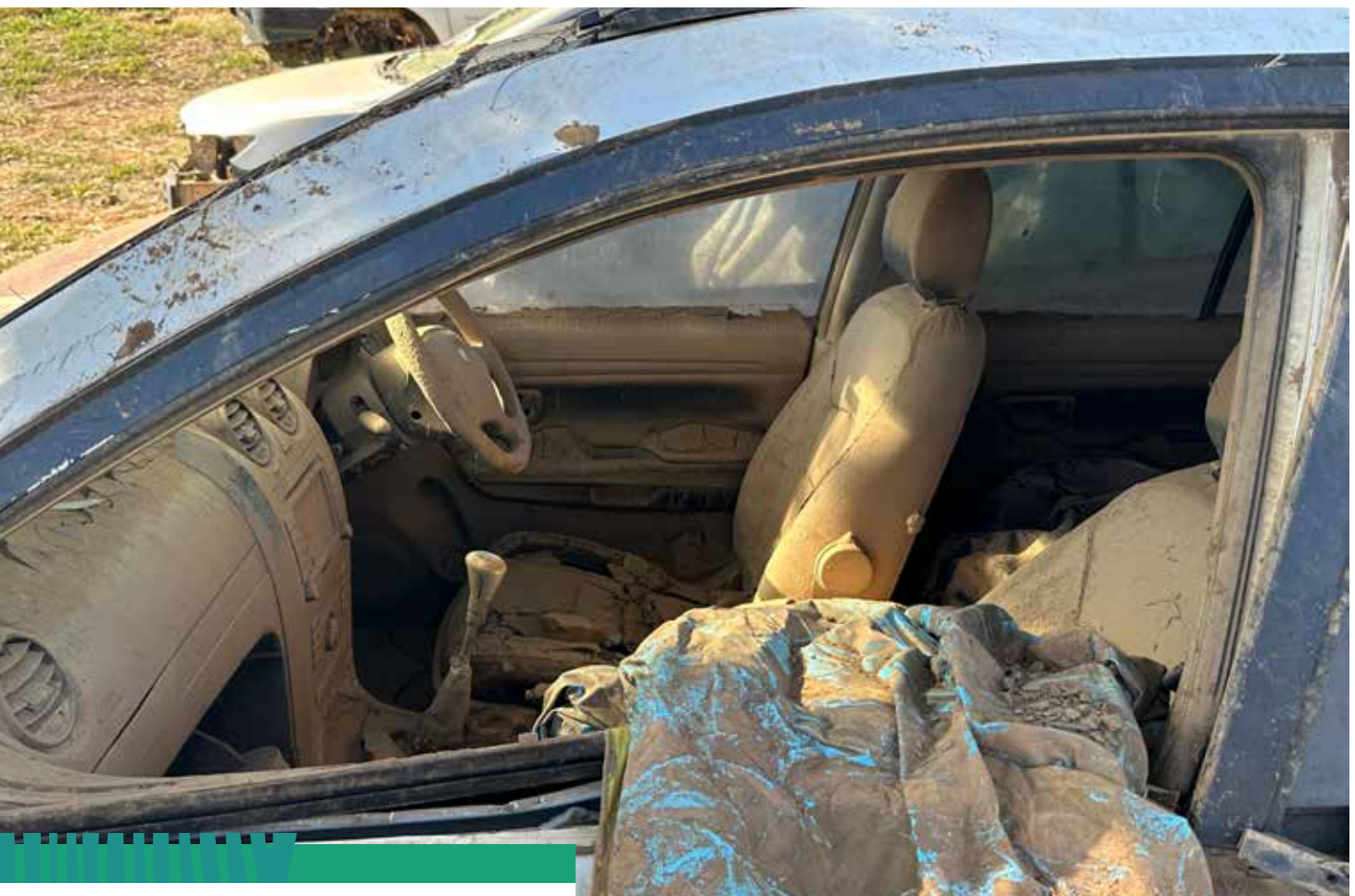


Image credit: © UNICEF Australia/2023/O'Dell

IMPACT 3 - THE OFFICIAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE EFFORT HAD SOME POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS, BUT ALSO FELL SHORT OF COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS IN MANY WAYS.

1. Cultural appropriateness of disaster response:

Community members identified several positive, culturally appropriate emergency response practices. For example, some people shared that the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) worked closely with community navigators in the aftermath of the flood and provided information in-language through local leaders and interpreters. Similarly, the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) were repeatedly cited by informants as strong collaborators.

"DFES were great. They did not do anything without community navigators who would provide cultural advice and warnings. [They were] flexible and accommodating."

"NIAA approached the existing SEWB funding service led by (Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service) and rapidly got out [sufficient resources] so we could charter flights and get places in a really fast and flexible way which allowed us to get it to BRAMS and DAHS [the Derby Aboriginal Health Service], including brokerage funds. NIAA did this in a rapid and amazing way, it was so helpful."

"I came back in April [2023] during a time that the Department of Communities had contracted [name deleted] to support Social and Emotional Wellbeing for families that came back from Derby. Community members were settling into

“

The sewage started to come through the taps. It caused an elderly lady to get sick. They refused to give her \$1,000. They wanted her to prove that she was in hospital."

Aboriginal community member.

Humani-huts. We supported with clothing donations, spaces to talk and then art making for children and women to yarn."

In the aftermath of the flood, there were moments of culturally appropriate, child-friendly, connection with authorities, and within the community, however they were too infrequent.

"In January [2023], there was a community gathering, smoking ceremony, barbeque, and opportunity for children to explore the helicopters [and other flood rescue equipment]. It was put on by the community, the army, and DFES. [It was a child-friendly event]. We set up two big mats with play dough and sticks. I don't

“

It was in the aftermath of the flood that governments started to refer to it as a one-in-100-year event, suggesting it was a freak event, unlikely to happen again for years to come. It ignores the impacts of climate change on weather patterns, and the likelihood of more frequent and severe flooding events in coming years, and therefore seeks to absolve governments of their responsibility for much greater investments in preparedness and resilience-building.”

often see children in silence at community gatherings, but all of these children from age two to twelve were on the mats working with their hands... There was a yearning for play and creative expression... We were able to work with the children to create a spontaneous collective sense of community in that moment.”

“While people had more pressing concerns, art making was mostly welcomed by those at the evacuation centre and community event. It provided opportunities for grounding, connection, reflection, and playfulness – all essential in this time of crisis.”

Families and community members valued

efforts to ensure that they were not separated in the evacuation centre, the temporary accommodation in Broome and Derby, and the Humanihuts in Fitzroy Crossing. Some respondents mentioned the importance of being placed alongside their family members and friends from the same language group or remote community in the Humanihuts. These efforts were seen by some people as evidence of some cultural responsiveness in the emergency response phase.

“We were taken to the Recreation Hall [at first]. We are now at the Caravan Park. It is small and noisy. The family sits down and has a drink on its own. Thankfully everyone from Darlungunya is together. We are calm and it is safe. The kids have space to run around and we have firewood.” Aboriginal community member.

“After the emergency phase, we were evacuated to Derby. We all went together. I told them we did not want to get separated. We feel alright when we are together.” Aboriginal community member.

Community members had mixed reviews about the cultural appropriateness, safety and livability of the temporary accommodation options offered. They also had strong views about navigating pre-existing service systems that were not culturally appropriate, which created barriers to accessing supports.

“There were four communities in one place [emergency housing], there was no air con, just bunk beds and ceiling fans. We did not have any privacy in the [Recreation] Hall. The old people and babies need to rest, but it's very hard when it is so cramped. People did not want to leave Fitzroy [Crossing].

They were asking whether there are vacant houses, but there was nothing.” Aboriginal community member.

“The Humanihuts are very small and noisy. People are living in very close proximity, and not on their own Country. It is heartbreaking that they are so close to Country [but still displaced from their homes].” Aboriginal community member.

“I refused to live in the Humanihuts. It is not safe for my children, it is too open. My sister was in one, and my niece could not wait to get out of there. It is very noisy, she felt uncomfortable most the time because when she stepped out of her room there is no privacy, and a lot of men are there. She didn't feel safe just stepping out of her bedroom.” Aboriginal community member.

“[Things like] completing forms can be really hard for someone.”

“When you ask young people what they need – it's always a simple thing like a bank card or needing to go eight times to Centrelink to access it.

“Hospital is a very intimidating place to go.”

2. Relationships and trust

Responsibility

Community members felt that appearances by politicians on the ground, and expressions of support did not always translate into positive outcomes, and that there was a tendency to deflect responsibility.

“Political leaders were visible in the community after the flood, but this did not translate into the required response

on the ground from the community's perspective. Part of the discussion within the community has been about how to use the emergency response for opportunistic investment, but really we need government to get in there and do these things systematically, without the community having to think in this way.”

“In general, the Federal Government says that they have already given enough money to the states. The states say they do not get enough, or that some local leaders have not given permission for [things like] new housing or that they want a lot of money for new housing to actually be built. It is not good enough for them to say that there is nothing we can do about these problems in the community. This reads like a shirking of responsibility.”

Relationships and knowledge

Community members noted that a lack of sufficiently strong pre-existing relationships and knowledge of the community impacted the effectiveness of the emergency flood response.

“The [government] departments in question simply do not have relationships with the community. They are not in the community regularly, and when they are, they are fly-in-fly-out for short periods of time. Personnel keep changing as well, which is not a strong basis for an effective, cooperative emergency response. They were called the ‘purple shirts.’”

“The Departments were really on the back foot and struggling to comprehend what they were dealing with. They didn't cope in the end. They were putting

people on planes and not recording the names of who was flying out. I was trying to find my brother or sister, but they simply did not have that information recorded."

"I used to ring them [the government] up and give them information. I would say we have got half a day of food left in the supermarket. Then they would get the army helicopter in. The food brought in would feed the community but not feed the store."

This lack of relationships and knowledge contributed to a disconnect between the emergency response priorities of the community and the authorities. It also reinforced a lack of trust in the official emergency response, building on a general and more entrenched mistrust in government amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

"We are not sure why the evacuation centre was chosen for crisis accommodation, as it was hot and humid. The schools would have been air conditioned, more comfortable, and allowed family groups to take individual classrooms. The Department said 'no' to the use of schools, and the rationale I heard was that the school was not suitable for children."

"The government brought food, which was alright. I don't know if they gave them to the right people." Aboriginal community member.

"Then we would ring the incident center to ask for food for other communities, and they would suggest that these communities should already have had food. It was so hard to get a collective hand on who needs what."

"Emergency services had a big boat but didn't put it into the water as they said the water was running too fast. But local people had their boats in to help others." Aboriginal community member.

"One of the things I heard a lot was that nothing was happening in terms of the disaster response. People get used to waiting, and not receiving anything. People realised that they didn't necessarily want the Humanihuts, but they were sort of at the mercy of the government."

"DFES had no proper information and the information and knowledge that local people had was often overlooked. I offered multiple times for [my organisation] that consists of local people that work in trauma-informed care and emergency accommodation to support, but the response was 'no, we are fine.' Not a lot of trust and recognition of local people."

"There were young people around and keen to assist with blowing or clearing the causeway. They weren't embraced by the authorities."

"There is a low level of trust and buy-in to government response. ACCOs and community had to step in to support response. They [government] did not know how many people were in the Valley. They said 'there's only twelve families remaining in Fitzroy, and they are here by choice'. [We] had to pull out our own data which said that the number of people was much higher."

There was a strong sense from ACCOs that they were relied upon to fill crucial gaps

in the emergency response without being treated as equal partners.

"During COVID-19, governments treated Aboriginal organisations as the authorities. The threat [of COVID] was clear. They could not get into the community and they had to connect with communities and organisations. After the flood, [we were] unrecognised conduits for information to the Government... They would ask us for advice or information and then make decisions about what to do without informing us."

"There was a lot of demand on ACCOs without any additional support. They used our rooms, electricity, and resources. To this day we have not had discretionary funding. Money we outlaid and spent accommodating staff in Broome or out of town, [paying for] extra casual hours, and continuing to pay our normal workforce. It is also labour intensive for our organisation to keep doing EOLs, tenders, and business cases [to apply for support]."

A consortium of ACCOs and service providers came together to urgently deliver social and emotional wellbeing support and services to the local community. This consortium worked together to advocate for increased funding and support for service delivery. There were significant delays in funding reaching these services, as well as administrative burdens which included regular reporting and strict compliance. ACCOs said this took them away from delivering services on the ground.

"Our sector rapidly responded to the community's needs. BRAMS, DAHS,

Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service (KAMS), Headspace - we all had staff deployed to check in with people in Broome and Derby where people had been evacuated to and Marnin (MWRC) would come in a liaison with our staff as well as doing our own work. We have good relationships that are very supportive... NIAA approached the existing SEWB funded services (KAMS) and rapidly got out (sufficient money) so we could charter flights and places in a really fast way and flexible way, which allowed us to get it to BRAMS and DAHS, including brokerage funds. NIAA did this in a rapid and amazing way, it was so helpful."

"At the end of January, [we were] approached by WA Department of Communities with a flood funding contract to deliver a mental health response. We as a collective group of ACCOs, we proposed [they] fund SEWB, an Aboriginal model of mental health. [It] took a while for Dept of Communities to understand and agree. The contract was only approved a few months ago. [There have been] huge delays, administrative burdens and lots of issues... There has been a lot of pressure and [the contract] doesn't align to capacity building in ACCO sector, align to the principles of Closing the Gap and let us to do the work that is needed. Layers and layers of contractual compliance pressure that isn't usually there [in other contracts]. For example, we need [to do] a ministerial briefing at a days notice, weekly reporting to DFES lead [and] to six ministers... monthly financials. [They also] wanted to pay us post us doing the work."



Image credit: © Marninwantikura Women's Resource Centre

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When I first went back it didn't feel the same, the smell was horrible, and it didn't feel right. There is a lot of sorrow there. It is not the same. The flood changed the river and people. The flood wiped out all the trees, so it is very different. It looks very open now without the trees, and it has totally changed the river. Some of us lost our homes. Everything I worked for, for my children, is all gone. There were two lives lost and I was thankful I had my children with me. I think about how powerful this flood was and what it did, it was not like anything else we had experienced before. Every other flood we would get back on with things. Everyone is a bit on edge now, we don't want to go too far from home and may get stuck on the other side of the river. People are feeling anxiety about another flood and cautious about how big the next flood will be.”

An Aboriginal mother's experience of returning to Country.

3. Communication and effectiveness of emergency response activities.

Community members said that there was limited or inappropriate communication of flood warnings, despite official accounts to the contrary.

“Preparation should have been put in place much earlier. There should have been a plan. A lot of people in the community did not know what to do. There was no plan and no communication that we were able to find early on.”
Aboriginal community member.

“There were no warning [signals] or messages. There was no State Emergency Service (SES), and we had to get ourselves out. There was no time and no warning.”
Aboriginal community member.

“People did not get emergency warning messages – nothing on their phone. Normally there would be the gauges but the flood was so strong that it moved them. There was an unprecedented amount of water, and no warning.”

“[Post the initial impact], the local Aboriginal community radio station translated information into community languages. It sent daily updates in partnership with DFES out on Facebook, radio, also translating these into local languages. It provided updates on things like changing river, sewage and road conditions.”

“Everyone was expecting it to be a big flood, but nobody took it seriously enough. All the signs [were] there, older people were talking about it. The river rose in the first week of December and then

went down again. On 2 January [2023], the river rose again, but we didn't know where it was going to get up to. People didn't want to get evacuated until they were walking around in waist deep water that continued to rise another metre. When it was dark, people started to panic. But by this point, we couldn't get to people because the river was so high. People wanted to get dropped off at another house in the middle of the river. Maybe the warnings were not framed in a way that they could understand [the gravity of the situation], but the warnings were there.”

Government officials did not always speak to people with knowledge or speak to community members in a consistent or coordinated fashion. Government did not get a clear or complete picture of what was happening and what was required on the ground, and community members were often left without adequate or clear information.

“Communication with the right people was a big issue at the time. There were people who knew what was happening but were not giving the proper forums to share the information. These people on the ground could have been relied on and provided so much information but they [the authorities] didn't enable this. We could have shared what this community needed at the time.”

“We [ACCO staff] were screaming to different departments to stop sending workforces in and to stop draining the resources, but they did not necessarily listen to us.”

“Communication was the biggest issue

of everything. The lack of information was disappointing. I was frustrated for a long time. I had so much intel from the meetings and DFES, but it wasn't being communicated. There was no representation from housing department to give people info to people that lost everything."

"Meetings they held down in the Rec [Recreation] Hall in the aftermath of the flood was one source of information for people living there. But we [ACCOs] weren't necessarily getting that information. Everything was word of mouth. Having said that, DFES had social media posts, sometimes in language for people."

"Communication is a very hard thing anyway. If people were getting on a plane to come back here, they would get a call [to notify them of the flight]. People weren't getting those calls because they did not have credit, [or] because their phones were not working. As a result, they would miss flights and remain displaced."

"There was a lack of coordination and collaboration in the response. There were three to four [government] working groups per week, including agencies such as DFES, Justice, Communities, Social Services, Housing, and the Australian Defence Force (ADF). There was also a State Emergency Coordination Working Group. The lack of information about repatriations was worrying. There were questions about going into temporary housing for undefined periods of time, which meant that no one could make informed choices."

Community members felt the effectiveness of the official response fell short in different ways, including in the provision of food and water, shelter, and phone credit.

"There was a huge initial wave of military helicopters bringing in food, fuel, supplies, and people. It looked very dramatic but felt underwhelming. Many of the priorities were not accounted for. Houses were not cleaned out, and lawns weren't mowed. The difference in priorities and productivity between the government and the community was noticeable."

"They [a not-for-profit organisation] stuffed up their priorities at times, bringing in dog food at one stage, rather than human food." Aboriginal community member.

"People who were displaced were bunked [up] in hotels. In the Rec Hall, there were bunk beds which were not ideal. There were air mattresses which were not ideal. We weren't very prepared. Preparation should have been put in place much earlier. There should have been a plan. A lot of people in the community did not know what to do. There was no plan and no communication that we were able to find early on." Aboriginal community member.

"There is a massive expectation on people to stay with families. People were just dropped off in town to stay with family, but they [the houses] were already so overcrowded. We don't think of them as homeless, [but] they don't have stable housing. It's not ok."

"We lost power and plumbing. My situation was that I couldn't get services to my house because of the plumbing."

The floods clogged up the plumbing. It was her nephew that fixed it, not the plumber." Aboriginal community member.

"After people were evacuated, there were questions about how the meals would be paid for. I don't think people felt good. The Department did not want to pay for an additional few weeks."

"The Purple shirts [departmental personnel] said once we get accommodation, you will get money and you can buy your furniture and you don't have to pay for freight - it will be covered by the Department. But once we purchased the furniture, we had to figure out how to get it back to Fitzroy Crossing, and the freight wasn't covered."

"It was like the blind leading the blind. Nobody sat with us to sort out the logistics issues. We were isolated for three months minimum, and it wasn't until the second month that we started to get drips of food in planes. They were bringing 700 kilograms of food on planes by then." Aboriginal leader.

"No communication in first five days - we heard nothing. We could watch it on the news. We didn't know when food was coming or if the water was safe to drink. We had no communication from anybody. DFES then started having community meetings, people were getting angry on the first day and asking hard questions. No-one turned up on

the second day from DFES. [There were] about 100 people down there [from the community']. No-one fronted up to the community meeting." ACCO worker.

"It has not been easy to access support if you've been impacted. Especially here, trying to navigate myGov and forms. The flood hub was there, but a lot of people don't want to ask for help so won't access it. Especially those that have been airlifted out... A lot of community people [also] would not have internet and phone to find bank records. Telstra had said they were doing free calls and texts but none of us got access to them." ACCO worker.

4. Recovery and preparedness

Some community members expressed concern that they were not adequately involved in recovery and preparedness planning in the months post the flood, whereas others noted unprecedented inclusion.

"There is a lot more activity and people involved [in emergency preparedness] but a fear that it won't produce outcomes. What is the direction and where are we heading? What is going to make the difference? There's a lot of hope. The Shire is much more engaged. So many meetings. More than 20 hours per week. There is good intent but there needs to be leadership from the community and people." Aboriginal community member.

"There are a number of post-flood committees that have been set up to manage recovery - Communities, Child Protection, and Other Departments.



It happens on the ground level and at the Director-General level as well. Emergency Services chairs one, and other Departments chair others. From the Department of Education perspective, we have school representation on our communities. I would assume that there would have to be. The lack of community representation on these [committees] needs to be addressed. I don't know to what level the Aboriginal community is being consulted."

"I have not been involved in any planning. We are assuming that if it floods again, we will stock enough food in the supermarket to last us for two months. We are carrying the capital cost of storing those levels of food. We have brought our own boat because Emergency Services don't have a boat in Fitzroy. We have set up a temporary store at the Lodge so that people on the east could access food there. We need a decent boat to move people back and forth across the river." Aboriginal community member.

There have been unique economic opportunities attached to the rebuilding of infrastructure in the Fitzroy Valley.

"There have been new employment opportunities pertaining to the [reconstruction of the] Bridge. The Bridge Alliance is doing some work to connect young people with the construction industry. There are lots of employees, and many others are asking how they can contribute."

"There has been a lot of opportunities for Bunuba community members and people coming back into town for work.

The younger men are more interested in getting jobs because everyone else is now getting jobs, and the social meaning of having a job has changed... There is a cohort of people with experience and expertise and language skills who find it easy to obtain these jobs. There are others who find it much harder because of lack of experience and expertise, and perhaps not wanting to do something in a Western way. Doing something in a Western way is doing something individually - doing something for a white person. [Its] rocking up every day at a particular time and having to just deal with all the barriers [family disturbances, lack of sleep etc]."

"The Bridge [reconstruction] work takes workers from us [other small industry in the Valley]. But the workers want to make more money, and that is fair. It will be interesting to see how this evolves over time."





Fitzroy Crossing's MWRC with UNICEF Australia's Adrienne O'Dell.
Image credit: © UNICEF Australia/2023/O'Dell

IMPACT 4 - COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND LEADERSHIP MADE A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE TO THE EFFICACY OF THE FLOOD RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

"Stories I heard emphasised the real collaborative spirit of the community facing crisis. There was allyship between people that were in the community at the time of the floods. [They] came together. People worked outside their usual roles and supported each other."

"From our [the community's] perspective, this is a community that floods. The concept of the 'wet' is longstanding. There is preparedness, as seen in houses built on stilts and on mounds." Aboriginal community member.

Aboriginal communities across the Fitzroy Valley showed significant leadership in the aftermath of the flood. Community members saved lives, pets, and property; provided food, shelter, and other essentials to those who had lost their homes or were particularly marginalised; acted as critical conduits between authorities and affected community members; and advocated to governments for additional support in several ways.

Aboriginal leaders showed extraordinary resilience, often dealing with their own losses, whilst also supporting the rest of

the community to deal with the impacts of the flood. Some leaders lived in temporary accommodation, whilst marshalling their organisations to lead the community response. Others took extraordinary business decisions to dedicate significant and often disproportionate resources towards emergency response. During the emergency response and recovery phase, community members enabled healing and recovery in ways that were culturally appropriate and effective. This included advocating strongly for community members – including children and young people – to remain on Country.

ACCOs in Fitzroy Crossing and across the Kimberley also played key roles in the emergency response and recovery phases. These ACCOs led aspects of the response and recovery with limited resources, a trend that existed well before the flood.

1. Connection to Body and Behaviours:

Communities with limited access to food used their knowledge of Country and traditional skills to hunt and fish. Community members brought to bear intimate knowledge of Country in order to hunt and fish in safe places, avoiding sections of the river that were contaminated after the flood.

“There was no food at the store, all families were having to helicopter over to the west side... Our families are pretty resourceful in terms of hunting. The children were a lot hungrier at school, there was none [no food]. DFES only dropped food in twice in a two-month period. We were struggling to get food across the river too. We had

to go to great lengths to continue the nutrition program often using our skills, and that of the community's.”

After the flood, the WA Country Health Service (WACHS) opened the Bayulu Clinic in a very remote community outside of Fitzroy Crossing to provide basic community health services in the area. It was led by Aboriginal staff and was well received by the community. The opening and funding of the service was a positive, unintended consequence of the flood and its compounding impacts on the community.

“When we first started there were 20 to 30 people waiting. We had to triage them and used local language to help with triaging. We saw 27 patients in the first three hours, and dealt with a range of issues including septicemia, congestion, and more.”





Children were supported to use pictures and other media to share their experiences of the floods to help aid recovery.
Image credit: © Elise Fenn - MWRC

BAYA GAWIY EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING UNIT



The Baya Gawiy early childhood educators supported children aged two and a half to five years old to voice their experiences of the flood so they could process and make sense of these experiences and feelings.

“We do work a lot with inquiry-based learning. We put up provocations and consider what the children have to say about them. I put pictures on the wall about the flood. These were pictures that locals shared online. I made displays. There are pictures of animals and the bridge being broken. The children would be stimulated by these photos and then share,” said one Baya Gawiy early childhood educator.

The children spoke a lot about the animals after the flood too. Seeing them in the water “was a shock” as was the bridge breaking. For example, one of the educators was talking with child who shared that their dad was on the other side of the bridge and couldn’t drive across it because there were crocodiles and other animals on the bridge, not because the bridge was broken. Some other children said the bridge broke because a crocodile snapped it, using imagined talk. Another child talked about how they used to drive across the bridge but were not able to do this anymore. “The kids know that something happened [to the bridge] and that it is the way of getting to the other side. Children [are] talking about not being able to go to the other side to see family. Driving on the bridge [before the flood was] a good thing because they [would] stop and see the

view. They know this is gone, and therefore [they] are uncertain,” said an early childhood educator.

The educators supported the children’s processing of the loss of the bridge and other challenges around the flood using pictures and other media, like clay, to facilitate this. The children problem-solved how the bridge might get fixed and the educators typed up and printed out the children’s ideas about how to fix the bridge and added them to the picture display. They created a bridge using clay, then broke it, and the children worked together to fix it again. A picture of how the new bridge looks is up on the walls of the centre.

Providing a space for children to share their experiences of disasters, and the emotions that are brought up by these experiences, in an age-appropriate way is important for their recovery. Giving children the opportunity to understand the events themselves and process the associated emotions can bring them back to a state of calm, provide a sense of hope, and reduce the likelihood of long-term adverse outcomes. Baya Gawiy uses a two-way learning model that combines cultural knowledge with Western knowledge systems, because the children are walking in two worlds. The curriculum is based on seasons, and rather than dates marking seasons, they look for signs that speak to the change of the seasons.

These floods were talked about as being part of the wet season and as put by the centre gardener, “the rain is waking up the grass.”



Image credit: © Elise Fenn - MWRC

“Stories I heard emphasised the real collaborative spirit of the community facing crisis. There was allyship between people that were in the community at the time of the floods.”

Aboriginal medical services based in bigger townships provided significant medical care for Aboriginal people from the Fitzroy Valley. Some of this medical care had not been available, or easily accessible, to people living in the Fitzroy Valley.

“Aboriginal medical services in Broome and Derby pivoted and helped everyone with medical services and routine health checks, which had not happened for years. There were a number of people with chronic diseases that had not seen a doctor in five years. There is now a strong push to set up an Aboriginal medical service here [Fitzroy Crossing].”

Aboriginal-led businesses and community leaders took the decision to impose conditions on the access to alcohol in the aftermath of the flood. One business, which owned the local pub, disposed of significant amounts of alcohol as a safety precaution. This decision had positive impacts on flood recovery.

“One of the biggest decisions we made at Leedal was to destroy all of the alcohol in the Crossing Inn during the floods... We have also made it harder for people to drink at the Lodge. We have restricted hours of drinking there. We have had Directors of other Corporations complaining about this decision... It made a huge difference.”

“The number of DV [domestic violence] cases went down in the community because alcohol was [limited]. That was a big thing... They were fishing and kicking the football with their kids, which is not something you see often in the community.”



“We went from 50 [hospital] presentations a night to fifty presentations for two weeks. But then alcohol restrictions [were loosened].”

2. Connection to Mind and Emotions

Despite the significant challenges operating psychosocial, therapeutic, and educational services following the flood, ACCOs and community leaders found ways to help children process their emotions and engage in healthy, healing activities.

“Most primary schools did not speak to children directly about their feelings and experiences of the flood. However, we had a yarning circle in each class, helping to build comfort zones [after the flood]. We dealt with the behaviour that comes up and made the school as good as it can be. We have to be here for the children.”

“MWRC worked with a grandmother and children to draw flood stories and develop narratives to reframe their trauma in terms of strengths. There is power in them having space to share their stories.”

3. Investment is needed in early warning systems that are appropriate for very remote communities

Community members showed extraordinary courage and resilience in confronting the reality of the flood and the damage it caused, whilst also stepping up to assist others in need. Community members rescued and helped evacuate each other,

and provided shelter to those whose homes were damaged or destroyed.

“People are going to extraordinary lengths to respond to this flood. There were families with little dinghies taking kids across the river to go shopping. They were about 20 centimeters off the water. The current in the river was dangerous. I am surprised that none of those boats tipped over.” Aboriginal community member.

“Regardless of what happens, we share and care. We’ve been cooking food for community members and sharing with them. Some people have not been able to go back to their communities. Thankfully, children were not separated from their families. Someone was always there to look after them. Everyone came together.” Aboriginal community member.

“Stories I heard emphasised the real collaborative spirit of the community facing crisis. There was allyship between people that were in the community at the time of the floods. [They] came together. People worked outside their usual roles and supported each other. “

“Luckily I had a place in town where the family could stay. I was starting to worry about my grannies [grandkids]. My home was open to multiple families because the [Recreation] Hall was too small for the numbers. Over a hundred families, including young children, in close proximity.”

“We had a three-bedroom unit, and there were eight people living in it for four months. We thought it would be a couple of weeks, but it was four months.

Luckily, we all got along, but it is a lot to have people living on top of each other with toddlers and teenagers."

Aboriginal community leaders showed significant leadership in responding to the flood, despite their own personal losses and trauma.

"There are a few 'oracles of care' in the community who are women – they are the matriarchs and backbones of community, especially in times of need. If their lives are disrupted, then it creates challenges for the rest of the community. They can't provide caring roles, safe spaces, maternal care, advice and regulation for children, food, transport [there aren't many cars and licenses around], and advocacy with government agencies like DCP [Department of Child Protection], when they are dealing with a flood themselves. They moved into temporary accommodation and were trying to provide that care and support in those new spaces."

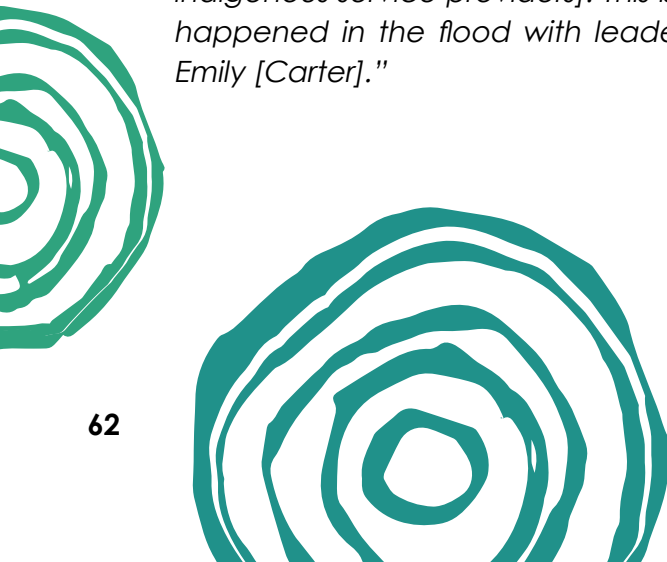
"When there is an event such as a suicide or flood, community leaders carry significant responsibility for supporting their community members, whilst also experiencing their own losses. This responsibility is rooted in culture, but also becomes an obligation in the absence of other first responders [e.g. non-indigenous service providers]. This is what happened in the flood with leaders like Emily [Carter]."

"The helicopters would bring in food, which would go to the flood hub, and then to the IGA and cafe. Both were on the western side of the river, and therefore those on the east had to take the barge or dinghies to access food... I [community leader] called around each community and asked them who was in need, and what they needed. I then gave those lists to the flood hub, and they would respond in kind, if they had capacity... At times, I did not have time to go to the flood hub, and so would just take stuff from my kitchen and distribute it. I'd see it as 'I don't need this amount.'" Aboriginal community member.

"Another leader whose home was completely flooded was working hard to provide and distribute information to community members in real-time, whilst also getting the story out to the media. She worked with the local Aboriginal community radio station to translate information into community languages, to send daily updates on river conditions, sewage, and road damage out on Facebook in partnership with the Department of Fire and Emergency Services."

"I'm here to help. I've been helping children for a long time. 32 children every day, me and my partner. It's the same [as] before the floods. I still live this every day. I also have four children of my own, and one grandchild." Aboriginal community member.

ACCOs played critical and major roles in the flood response, often over and above ongoing, regular work. They used connections with community, assets, and resources to attend to the most urgent needs. They provided information,



coordinated logistics, and brought specialist skills and programs in early childhood development, health and wellbeing, education, and employment to the fore.

“Marnin [MWRC] used their connections to get donations, supporting families with gift vouchers and other necessities. There was continued work of the [domestic violence] shelter which never shut down [despite a temporary drop in domestic violence presentations]. Staff showed up to be there for women who were experiencing violence on a skeleton staff [basis]. They did whatever was needed to be done to continue that service.”

“We had a lot of donations come in, and we were glad to then do packages. It was rewarding to see a lot of people come in and be assisted. The kids would come back and give us hugs. If you can do something for somebody without money, that is huge.”

“Marra Worra Worra played a big role in ensuring a level of food security during the flood response. The organisation and its volunteers picked up garden bags and distributed them, set up a food distribution site, and ran a bus service on the eastern side [of the river].”

“We [community leaders] were getting it [food] free from the IGA. [We were] storing it, and, in some cases, sourcing it. The food was paid for my Marra Worra Worra.”

“The health sector, including Aboriginal-led health organisations, rapidly responded to the health and wellbeing needs of the community as best as

possible. BRAMS, DAHS, KAMS, and Headspace all deployed staff to triage and support people evacuated to Broome and Derby, resulting in timely psychosocial and medical support, but also attention to health conditions that had been neglected in Fitzroy, due to the lack of regular, available support.”

Local Bunuba rangers rescued community members from the flood waters, sometimes risking their own lives in the process. Knowledge of Country, community, and language was crucial in this endeavor. The Rangers sometimes worked in partnership with the SES and DFES.

“The Bunuba Rangers were able to go out in boats at night and save people. They had knowledge of the community, and where to go... That could be why there were no deaths. They put their lives at risk to save others. They are very modest about this.”

“A community gathering event and smoking ceremony was held and was healing for the children and community to come together. The army brought helicopters for the children to play on too.”

If you would like any further information about the key informant interviews and their findings, please contact Toni Bennett, UNICEF Australia, at tbennett@unicef.org.au.



Image credit: © UNICEF Australia/2023/O'Dell



**PUBLIC VIEWING
AREA FOR
BRIDGE WORKS**



Image credit: © Marinwantiwara Women's Resource Centre

COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS



Key Aboriginal informants from the community identified recommendations for improving disaster response, recovery, and preparedness policies in a range of ways. These are outlined below.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

1. Children living in flood prone communities should be informed and educated about the risks of floods, and how they can prepare and respond.

Learning about the land, seasons, climate and associated weather patterns helps to strengthen relationship to Country and culture, as well as the ability to thrive in-place. Often this kind of learning happens within families and communities, however significant and ongoing disruptions or shocks to a community can impact the space and opportunity for these learnings to take place. Families should have the support and resources to carve out space, time and opportunities to pass on knowledge of land, weather, and seasons.

Cultural programs in schools should be recognised and sufficiently funded. For example, Aboriginal ranger programs delivered in schools could be supported to educate children about the land, climate

and preparedness. Programs should be developed and run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"We need to teach kids about the risks of living in a flood affected community - slipping in the mud, snakes etc. Children need information and advice." Aboriginal community member.

"We all need to be prepared for the next flood to get out quick and all be connected" Aboriginal community member.

"Kids need to be properly informed."

"We need places and spaces to speak to children about their needs. MWRC would need to do it."

2. Governments should work proactively and in culturally appropriate ways with ACCOs, NGOs, and community members to develop robust emergency preparedness plans ahead of future emergencies.

Preparation for future floods and other emergencies must consider the priorities of a community made up of multiple language groups and social structures, and the ACCOs who have safe and trusted relationships with community members. It is imperative to ensure diverse and inclusive representation from Aboriginal communities in the Fitzroy Valley at relevant planning and decision-making forums. Emergency preparedness plans also need to be communicated clearly, consistently and in-language, and should be sufficiently resourced. People living in situations of material disadvantage should be able to access and stockpile basic items, including fresh water, food, and fuel.

“Governments need to prepare better. They need to start to put evacuations into plans and start prioritising communities. Understanding who is going to be hit first and hardest and [then working to] find a solution before it gets too messy.”
Aboriginal community member.

“We need to teach and prepare everyone to stock up early. We need to think about sharing and caring, and supporting everyone in need.” Aboriginal community member.

“I want MWRC and others to be supported to have greater carriage of the response.” Aboriginal community member.

“We need necessities - water, torches, phones. [We] have to be able to contact

people to call for help or supplies. [We also need] food security plans. People don't have money to stockpile and get a weeks work of food. They shop on a daily basis - people don't have freezers. I have started putting canned food in my cupboard. But local people won't have that. We need to stock local stores that do exist. Bayulu people had to drive 2.5 hours to Halls Creek to get fuel. [The Fitzroy Valley] Lodge has fuel out there now.”

“More interagency networking with NGOs and government [is needed].”

“For the next wet season, all the agencies need to be more prepared - health, police, roads, DFES etc. I would like to see really clear plans that are well communicated to give people piece of mind and to mentally prepare. It is very uncertain what will happen if we need medication or the police [if there is another flood].”

“We need to see a community readiness plan; drills run by the Shire and DFES; workers going out to remote communities doing disaster preparedness work; and service plans that take into account more frequent and severe floods. We also need a situation in which everyone knows what the plan is [including] the roles. [We also need] clarity about population numbers [in the local area].”

“

Things must change or the fight will continue for my grandchildren.”

Aboriginal community leader

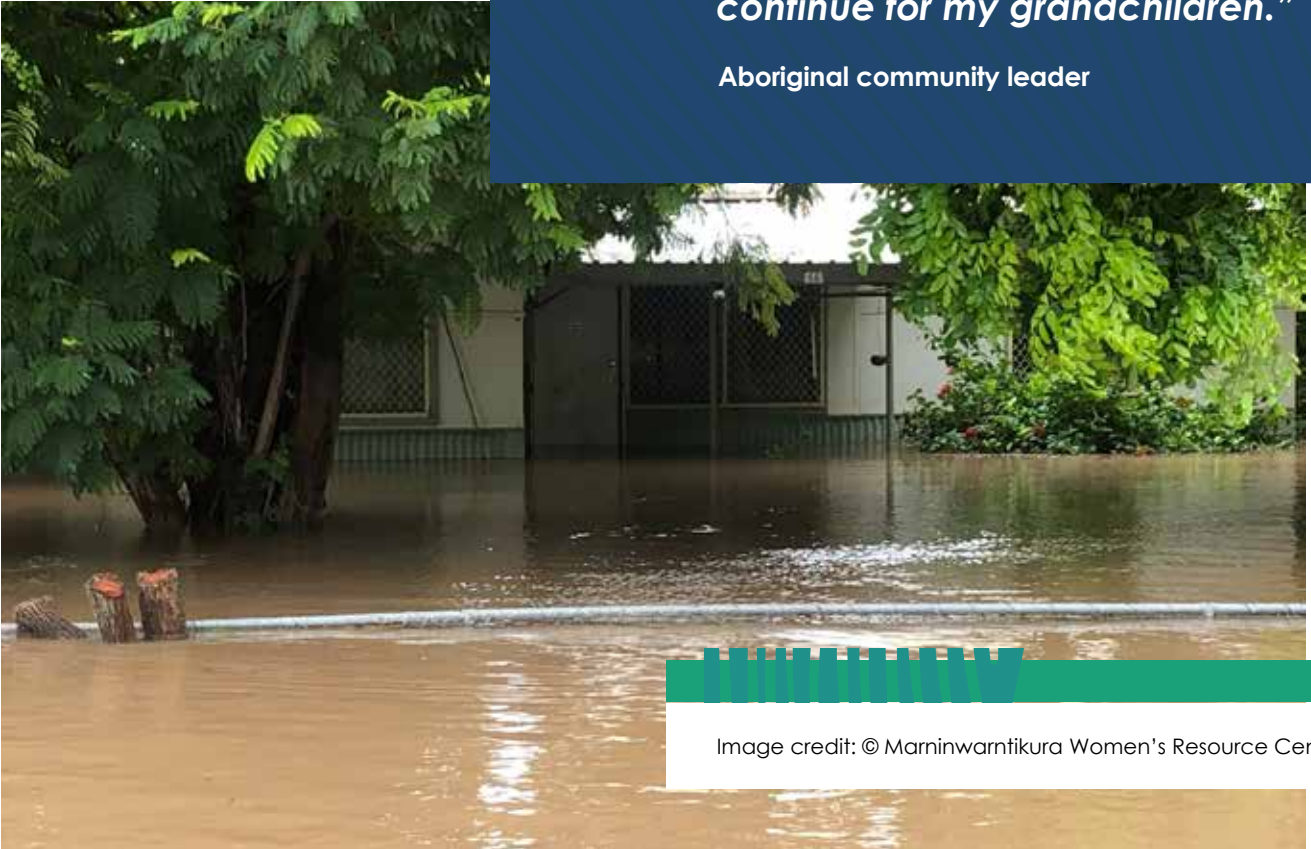


Image credit: © Marninwantikura Women's Resource Centre

3. Early warning systems need to be appropriate for these communities.

Community members should have access to context-appropriate early warning systems. These should include simultaneous and regular communication across different digital and face-to-face communication channels, including text messaging, social media content, billboards, leafleting and proactive engagement with community leaders.

“There was no warning to anyone about leaving in advance. We need more appropriate early warning systems.”
Aboriginal community member.

“Preparation should have been put in place much earlier. There should have been a plan. A lot of people in the community did not know what to do. There was no plan and no communication that we were able to find early on.” Aboriginal community member.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

4. Emergency accommodation must be child-inclusive and culturally appropriate.

Emergency housing should have child safe spaces, activities and specific support for children and their families. Children need privacy and safe places to sleep and play, and sharing a room with others is not appropriate. As with any service, when deciding on emergency and temporary housing solutions, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community should be consulted and provide guidance on how this housing can be made culturally appropriate and safe for children. This should happen in the preparedness phase.

"We will be living in a three bedroom donga for one to two years while our house is being rebuilt. I have six children that need to live in there. I don't think it is culturally appropriate for my son and daughter to share a room because they are teenagers. The teenagers have to have their own room. My son cannot share with sisters. I told them I don't want bunks because we have had a lot

of accidents." Aboriginal community member.

"I would like to be offered a donga that can be located anywhere like out bush on Country." Aboriginal community member.

"We need a purpose-built building with air conditioning."

"The evacuation centre is the standout – it is an open-air basketball court with no air con. A better solution could have been using Fitzroy Valley District High School for accommodation to give people privacy and air conditioning. [That would give] comfort from mosquitoes and the humidity."

"After the disaster, there needs to be child safe spaces so children can have age-appropriate playful activities that can help them ground, regulate [and] connect... It's important that this includes cultural safety."

5. ACCOs and community-led organisations should be recognised and treated as equal partners in disaster response, recovery, and preparedness, and receive greater financial support so they can continue to play a critical role.

ACCOs and community-led organisations are often the first responders in emergencies and support the long-term recovery of the community, well after external NGOs and emergency services leave. These organisations have the critical knowledge, expertise and relationships with community members that enable appropriate and effective preparedness, response, and

recovery. They are the communicators, the conduits, the facilitators, the long-term service providers, and a critical lifeline, especially in very remote communities like the Fitzroy Valley. These ACCOs and community-led organisations should be included in planning and decision-making forums, and adequate funding should be more easily accessible for these organisations.

"More support for the local resources, it seems to be universal. It's the on-ground mob it is the first responders, and they don't have the resources. Grass roots connections and actions. All those meetings with ministers and departments - maybe they were doing things, but the bureaucracy takes so long."

"We need co-design, funded collaboration, and co-delivery of programs. We [ACCOs]

have not had a single dollar in additional funding and have not been able to access grant systems. All the Aboriginal-led organisations should have got money for recovery."

"Between Marra Worra Worra and us (Leedal), we opened up the supermarket. We said that we would worry about how we pay for the food distributed after." Aboriginal Leader.

EMERGENCY RECOVERY AND LONG-TERM HEALING

6. The housing crisis in Fitzroy Crossing must be addressed.

Governments should build additional, durable, and culturally appropriate housing in the Fitzroy Valley. This housing should be resilient to floods, bushfires, and other natural hazards. Existing housing stock should be maintained more effectively, with easier and faster access to maintenance for residents.

"People need a safe space to call home. It is the first step in recovery and healing. How are you supposed to address the harder problems in what you are lacking if you don't have a safe place to stay. The number of homeless people is so high [and] it is not reported."

"We were not prepared for the big flood. Our houses need to be higher. They need to be on stilts." Aboriginal community member.

"We need to demolish, get rid of the mould, and then rebuild. People need to get back into their homes. We are in seven months on now, and it doesn't look like these ladies are going to be back in

their homes any time soon." Aboriginal community member.

"The community is used to waiting a long time for maintenance on housing to occur. [It can take] up to six months for simple repairs despite the fact that government are collecting rent for these properties. Local community must have a say in procurement and outside companies should be training someone locally as a requirement." Aboriginal community member.

"We need more playgroups and increased access to early education, but access to housing is a barrier."

"Nothing will work without housing, both for the community and for services. Psychological wellbeing cannot be addressed without addressing the housing crisis. There is no one size fits all approach."

"[We need] staff housing for core organisations so they can put people in the Valley [so they do not need to drive in and drive out]."



Poverty is climbing on top of poverty, and people cannot prepare [for emergencies] without support. You cannot prepare or stockpile for a flood if you live in poverty. Aboriginal communities are not just thinking about their own family, they have obligations to a lot of people. When you are a problem solver, everyone comes to you."

Aboriginal community member.

7. Community members require culturally appropriate support services to promote child and family social and emotional wellbeing and healing.

Parents and caregivers need culturally appropriate and tailored trauma-informed education and support, delivered by Aboriginal people, to assist children with healing and preparedness. There is a need for greater access to professionals, both within and outside school settings, who can provide child assessments and a connected system of supports to address health and social emotional wellbeing. These must be delivered in a culturally appropriate way and include safe spaces for children.

"We need more formal safe houses for children from different language groups. There are informal safehouses run by community leaders." Aboriginal community member.

"We need more parenting support. We need to sit with the children and ask them what they need, rather than sitting down as a whole community... I'll be happy when all the mothers and fathers can look after their kids. " Aboriginal community member.

"Fitzroy Crossing needs an Aboriginal Medical Service like in Broome." Aboriginal community member.

"Children need more activities like in Broome e.g. football, basketball, netball, and swimming. [This will help them] to be active and stay off the streets. We need a hub or safe place for children" Aboriginal community member.

"We need healing camps because they work really well and are run by people who are trained in culturally responsive trauma-informed care. It can't be a group of psychologists coming from a metropolitan centre. We need Aboriginal psychologists, and people who are trained in the community."

"There is the recognition that we need to take services to people. So, what we are trying to do are pop up clinics - immunisations on country, health on Country... [We] need a child health nurse to do a universal health check." Aboriginal community member.

"More services we can refer on for a healthy family unit... so they can be the best they can for their little ones."

"Mental health resources are so important - we [local school] struggle to get anyone out here normally."

"There is room for more community-based interventions that provide healing and relaxing spaces for children and adults. Services need to be holistic and locally informed. We can't separate a child from the family and community. Also, [we need] creative arts therapies and play therapy opportunities for children as they can be more age appropriate than talk therapy for children."

"[We need] services that are culturally safe and secure to encourage access, and that are connected to the community. Fitzroy Crossing is a unique place in terms of overlap of cultural authority and service provision. Service

“ We need to have a global look at Fitzroy Crossing and the community’s wellbeing. If you don’t connect with young people, they will burn the community down to feel the warmth.”

Aboriginal community member.

has to be done in a safe way that is not breaching cultural protocols."

"We need healing centres in the schools, with social workers and counsellors. People should be able to come there and sleep safely, shower, and change their clothes... In order to get children back into schools, we need to do more outreach programming. We need to look at new models involving social workers and youth workers."

8. Disaster preparedness, response and recovery planning must recognise and provide greater support to the mental health and wellbeing of educators, health workers, social and emotional wellbeing staff and other professionals in communities.

"As it was going on we were in survival mode. [I have] no idea how we did it. [There was] no other option. Now I think it has had a pretty big effect on all of us [educators] and [our] motivations - really low motivation and burn out among staff."

"Going into next year we are trying to plan. There are some worries about being displaced again at the start of the year or end of 2023 because of the floods."

Educators, school staff, health and mental health staff and other professionals are

often required to work well beyond their normal scope in emergencies to support the basic needs and social and emotional wellbeing of children and communities. As a result, professionals' own self-care can be de-prioritised, which can lead to burn out. Peak organisations should conduct a systematic review of the kinds of additional roles that these professionals undertake in post-disaster contexts, the kinds of additional training and support they require, and a consideration of whether new and additional roles are required, including in early learning and

school settings to support children's social and emotional wellbeing.

"When we had our review, I suggested to keep the school closed for a day or two for staff mental health and wellbeing. It was not good... I don't think the staff and educators, or community, have had a

chance to unpack the floods and how crazy the flood response was."

We need to reduce staff anxiety. We are doing surveys with the school staff about what they might need – physically, financially, emotionally, psychologically."

9. There must be more meaningful training and employment opportunities for young people and the local community, both to improve livelihoods and address ongoing disadvantage, and to enable community members to be more prepared for future disasters.

Meaningful and stable employment can provide local people with a sense of self-worth and improve their access to basic needs (including stable and hygienic housing, income, and food and supplies). This will strengthen the social and emotional wellbeing of individuals, and their family and community in turn.

"We need more skilled builders. We need more tradesmen. We have lots of

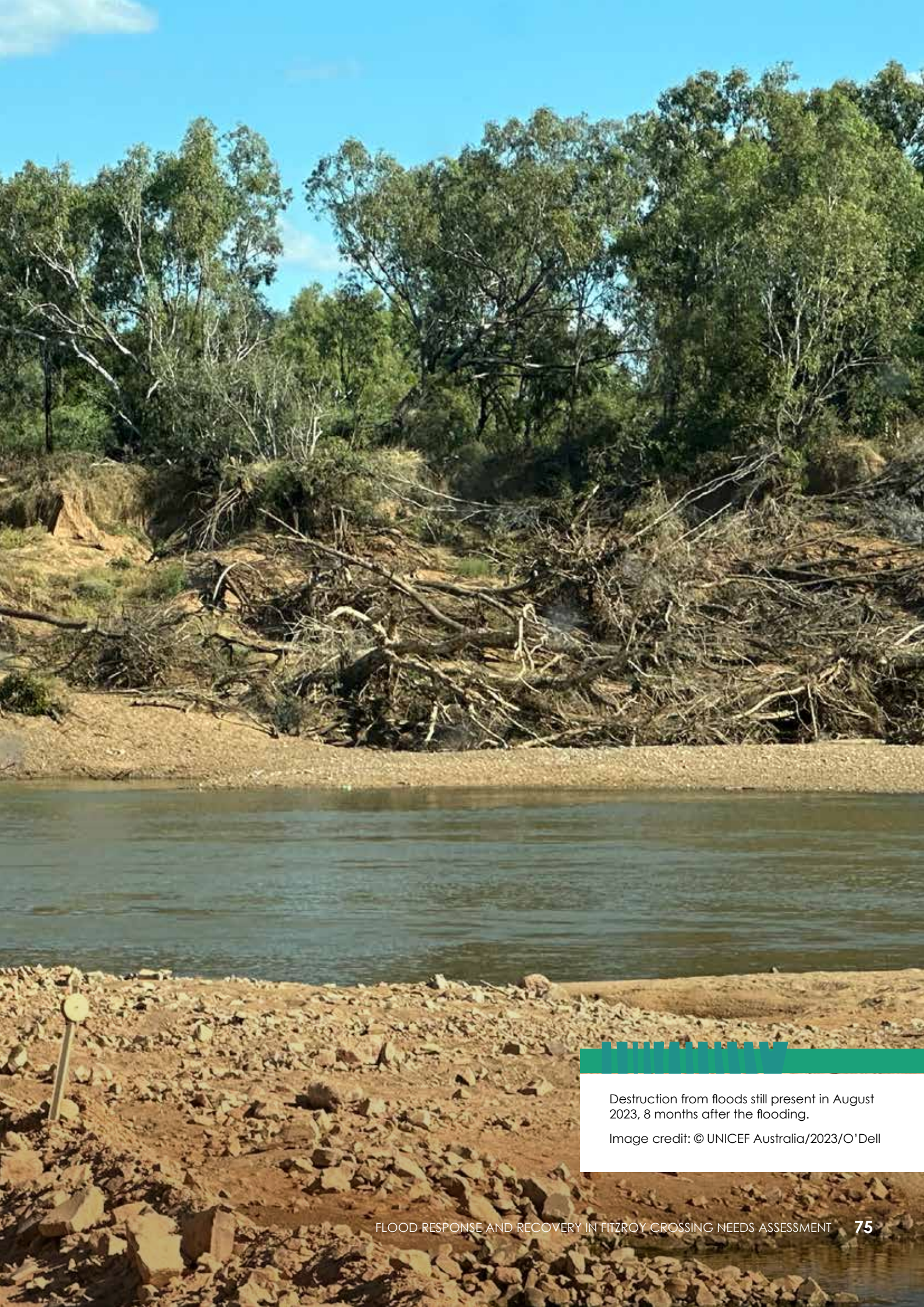
men in the community willing to put their hands to use. They will step up, including through the Bridge Alliance." Aboriginal community member.

"I want to make sure I can employ and pay young people. There aren't many people in the community who are ready to go and stay in the workforce. " Aboriginal community member.



Going into next year we are trying to plan, there are some worries about being displaced again at the start of the year or end of 2023 because of the floods."

Educator.



Destruction from floods still present in August 2023, 8 months after the flooding.

Image credit: © UNICEF Australia/2023/O'Dell

OUR APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

OUR APPROACH

UNICEF Australia and RFW visited flood-affected communities in Fitzroy Valley between August and September 2023; seven months after the flood, and at a time when MWRC determined it to be appropriate for external organisations to visit. This Needs Assessment represents a snapshot in time of the experiences and needs of some children, parents and caregivers, community members and educators affected by the early 2023 flood. The assessment team was guided by MWRC and other community leaders on potential participants, interview style and context, and culturally appropriate, safe environments where interviews could be conducted.

The assessment team interviewed 32 people from the community, of which most were Aboriginal people (60%) aged 21 to 70 years old. At least 75% of people were employed and most key informants were female (83%). An additional 14 informants who support the community but do not live there were interviewed, including clinical practitioners, health workers, researchers and representatives of government agencies.

To ensure a representative sample from the

communities and support professionals, we spoke with the following key informants:

- Aboriginal community leaders.
- Parents and caregivers.
- Community members.
- School principals and educators from Baya Gawiy Early Childhood Learning Unit (part of MWRC), Bayulu Remote Community School, Fitzroy Valley District High School, Kulkarriya Community School, and Yiyili Aboriginal Community School.
- Representatives from ACCOs and ACCHOs, including the KAMS, Leedal, Marra Worra Worra Aboriginal Corporation and leaders from MWRC, including the CEO, the Strategic Lead, the Strengthening Families Team, and managers of the women's shelter and women's groups.
- State and local government officials and workers involved in emergency management including the Department of Communities Western Australia, the Department of Education Western Australia, DFES, NEMA, NIAA and Western Australia Country Health Service (WACHS).



TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE KEY INFORMANTS WHO WERE INTERVIEWED:

KEY INFORMANT	TOTAL (% IDENTIFYING AS ABORIGINAL)	FEMALE	MALE
Aboriginal Community Leaders	3 (100%)	1	2
Parent or caregiver in the community	14 (93%)	14	0
Educator	8 (12.5%)	7	1
Local ACCO staff	4 (0%)	2	2
Clinical Practitioner or Health Worker not based in Fitzroy Valley	6 (0%)	6	0
Government worker in community	3 (66.67%)	2	1
Government official or worker not based in Fitzroy Valley	8 (0%)	6	2
Key informants from outside community	14 (0%)	12	2
Community members total	32 (59%)	26 (81%)	6 (19%)
Key informants total	46 (41.3%)	38 (83%)	8 (17%)

Before undertaking each interview, the Needs Assessment team discussed the assessment with the key informant and collected voluntary informed consent. Staff and partners complied with comprehensive Child Safeguarding and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSPSEA) policies and practices, with a risk mitigation plan that was aligned with UNICEF's global standards.

The team transcribed interviews but did not record them as many key informants did not wish to be recorded. The team then coded the interviews using the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander SEWB framework. Key themes identified in the

coding were reviewed, and feedback was provided by experts from the School of Indigenous Studies from University of Western Australia.

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT TOOL

A Needs Assessment tool was used to support the systematic collection, organisation and analysis of primary and secondary data collected during the Needs Assessment. This tool used a UNICEF Australia methodology as a basis, which drew on UNICEF and the United Nations' experience responding

to emergencies around the world for 70 years, and is underpinned by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Multi-Sector Initial Rapid Assessment Analytical Framework. The tool was tailored for the purpose of this study and was informed by the community through the input of MWRC, with Royal Far West providing specialist, clinical advice.

Given the large Aboriginal community in the Fitzroy Valley, the methodology was further adapted, drawing on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander framework of SEWB as a way of understanding the impacts of the flood on health and wellbeing of communities, as well as the expertise of Aboriginal academics and leaders. The SEWB framework understands health and wellbeing in an interconnected manner that embraces social, emotional, physical, cultural and spiritual dimensions of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

SEWB ADAPTION TO THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been custodians of land and countries for millennia, as the oldest continuous culture on earth. The deep resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including to systemic and political challenges, is tied to a strong connection to culture, kinship, and Country.

The SEWB framework shows the many interconnected and overlapping domains that contribute to the social and emotional

wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Social and emotional wellbeing is shaped by connections to body, mind, emotions, family, kinship, community, culture, land and spirituality in the present day. Strengthening or healing these connections can lead to stronger social and economic wellbeing. Social and emotional wellbeing approaches to healing have also been beneficial in addressing trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

If connections to body, mind, emotions, family, kinship, community, culture, land and spirituality are disrupted, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person is likely to experience lower social and economic wellbeing. Historical, political, social and cultural determinants and contexts also shape the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, owing in large part to the uniquely destructive impacts of colonisation over time.

The SEWB framework was developed under the guidance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group. The framework is based on the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2004–09, which was established by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations in the late 1970s. It was endorsed by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council in February 2017 and is included in the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and

Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023. Professor Pat Dudgeon, who provided expertise guidance on this Needs Assessment, was the co-chair of the National Ministerial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Advisory Group which has been pivotal in developing the SEWB framework and policies to improve the mental health and wellbeing of Indigenous Australians.

This SEWB framework cannot account for the significant cultural and linguistic diversity that exists in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and how social and emotional wellbeing is understood. It aims to capture the shared experiences and commonalities that exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. A limitation of the Needs Assessment approach is that the SEWB framework was used to analyse all the key informant interviews rather than those only completed by Aboriginal peoples. This enabled us to group the key themes and findings for each domain. To clarify where something has been said by an Aboriginal interviewee, we have noted this next to any quotes or direct evidence.



Image credit: © Marninwantikura Women's Resource Centre

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This Needs Assessment would not have been possible without the contributions and engagement of the Fitzroy Valley community and local organisations. We would like to acknowledge and thank all the parents, caregivers and community members for their time and generous contribution to this report.

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