

FACT SHEET/ Summary

“Generation Drought”: The NSW Youth Summit on Living with Drought report

“Generation Drought” is the official report from [The New South Wales Youth Summit on Living with Drought](#), held at Lake Macquarie in October 2019 with just under one hundred participant young people who travelled from drought-affected regions all over the state to discuss the issues and possible solutions to the ongoing drought that has ravaged their lives and our country.

The title of the report comes from the way one of the participants described herself and her peers.

Overwhelmingly, these young people aged between 14 and 24 years told the summit that they were sick of “talk” from decision-makers, principally successive governments and vested interests. They were tired of ideological policy and underinvestment in the problem and the regions. They do not want to hear any more polarised conversations about the environment. They want real conversations and they want our country, our politicians and our governments to work hard to achieve real solutions.

Their message is that, if we put all this aside, the ongoing problems associated with protracted drought are solvable. But such solutions require energy, investment and partnerships with communities.

Young people and children in Australia are a large and significant group in our community. They are stakeholders that, despite their size, are very often overlooked in decision-making, even when those decisions are about or directly affect them. As they say, they may not vote now, but they will soon!

As a nation, we simply can’t afford to leave such a huge stakeholder group out of public decision-making.

As our participants repeatedly reiterated on the issue of drought – many of them have never known anything else in their lives. They have been educated in drought. They have spent their lives learning about drought. They work – many taking on huge responsibilities from a very young age on agricultural properties and in farming communities – in drought. They care for family members, in both physical and mental health challenges, in drought. They have real, lived experience of drought.

So why do we repeatedly fail to listen to what they have to say?

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The drought continues in New South Wales

Drought has fallen out of the headlines, but it hasn't gone away. In fact, [the interim report from the NSW Parliament Inquiry into Support for Drought-affected Communities](#) noted that the drought is having a detrimental impact on mental health, which is being compounded by the recent bushfire season and coronavirus pandemic

Rainfall, despite a wet start to 2020 which has seen short term water deficiencies in eastern Australia alleviated, yet:

- in NSW areas such as Broken Hill and from Monaro to Bega, the drought continues full force, with no rainfall for 4 years now (in fact 90% NSW remains in drought).
- Darling Downs in Qld remains in drought
- much of WA
- the Murray-Darling basin has received rain, but storage levels remain low
- BOM and other scientific data indicate that Australia is experiencing widespread drying which is blurring the line between 'drought' and 'aridity'
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change forecasts longer, more frequent, more intense drought for southern Australia between now and 2100.

So, while for some people and communities, this is a 'reprieve' moment, the next moment is the beginning of the next drought or the return of this one. That means we need to be taking stock that we are 1) prepared for the next drought and 2) learning from what has just passed (and is still happening for a great many).

Relevance of releasing the "Generation Drought" report now

Since the NSW Youth Drought Summit was held, many Australians, including children and young people, have had to live through the worst bushfire season record, closely followed by a pandemic and the responses put in place to try to prevent its spread. Yet many of the issues addressed by this report are timely – they deal with resilience, with coping with disaster, with mental health and with community recovery. In essence, the things the young participants have imparted here, are transportable to their scenarios.

Essentially, this report is built around three themes:

- Preparedness (community & environmental programs and initiatives)
- Resilience (Mental health models)
- Recovery (integration of both).

Preparedness:

- First part of report looks at these sorts of solutions
- Community water solutions, technological and adaptation solutions, policy solutions
- Focus on the environment, equality of access, fairness.

Resilience:

- Mental health issues have been medicalised as a psychological model rather than being about psychosocial and community-based support – youth mental health approaches are in crisis all over the world
- The medicalised system is pay per use, so it encourages practitioners to keep the patient coming back, concentrating on how they feel all the time and telling them they are experiencing "trauma", an incorrectly used term
- In contrast, community-based support models build skills in patients so they can get through difficult situations, recognises experiences such as 'sadness' and 'grief' as normal, and something you come out of – it is part of building true resilience
- Correctly dealing with mental health offers transportable solutions and skills to other challenging situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The summit was designed and planned through a collaboration of expert practitioners and young people. The report describes the process of design, major considerations and the methodology.

This fact sheet is intended to be a quick summary of the findings and recommendations, and discussion, contained in the main report.

BACKDROP OF THE SUMMIT (Chapter 1 of “Generation Drought”): Existing barriers to good drought policy

Clarity of direction: The majority of stakeholders, including young people, tend to believe that, while short term financial measures do provide much-needed relief for farmers and communities, it doesn’t solve the greater problem. That is, the need for long term planning (including climate change adaptation), government coordination (e.g., around water management, including the Murray-Darlin Basin) and sustainable community resilience (supported by the 2009 Productivity Commission report on drought support and the 2019 Auditor General’s Report).

- Given that the severe impact of drought and climate change on agriculture and regional communities is national in scope, it follows that there should be leadership at the national level to consider and address these issues in an ongoing and flexible way.
- “How do we manage ‘drought’ rather than just manage in times of drought?” This is a profoundly important policy question.
- On the last decade of drought policy: “no new ideas, just a revolving door of reviews, funding announcements and (political) appointments.”

Leadership and planning: Successive governments and both major parties have previously stressed that drought is neither a crisis nor a natural disaster because it is gradual and creeping in its manifestation, is part of our usual climate cycle and has no clear termination point.

- The issue of water management is central to the question of federalism, government coordination and drought response.
- Young people want decision-makers to classify drought as national disaster or emergency
 - Because it is gradual and creeping in its manifestation, successive governments and both major parties have stressed that drought is neither natural disaster or crisis
 - March 2019, UN Office of Disaster Risk Reduction called for countries to step up efforts to reduce impacts of drought; Sendai Framework on DRR and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change both include slow onset disasters in their scope
- While drought may not always lead to disaster (as we traditionally understand it), its effects can intensify and result in chronic consequences where it interacts with existing and entrenched community vulnerability and a lack of preparedness.
- One of the most profoundly important and least recognised stakeholder groups are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and traditional owners whose right to water is not properly protected in law or policy.

We share an international experience: Australia is not alone in the pressing need to reconceptualise drought and its unique challenges.

- World Bank 2017 *Unchartered Waters* report describes drought as “misery in slow motion”.
- Since the 1970s the global land mass affected by drought has doubled
- In coming decades, the world will be defined by water insecurity and associated issues – such as food insecurity, mass displacement, disease, stunting, and resource-related violence and conflict.
- There is a global need to adopt a more proactive and robust position.

What does Australia need?: It is critical that Australia ensures we have effective frameworks and tools to practically operationalise drought risk reduction, response and recovery.

- While governments cannot make it rain, they can better position and prepare us for drought and dryness and a changing climate.

YOUNG PEOPLE’S CONTEXT (Chapter 6): The summit participants’ views and experience living with drought

- 1) Some participants have spent the majority of their lives living through drought;
- 2) for some communities, there has been little recovery time since the end of the Millennium Drought;
- 3) inadequate progress was made between 2010 and the onset of the current state-wide (NSW) drought.

Mental health approaches

Young people consider that frequent reference to mental health or mental ill-health is not always helpful. They view strength-based approaches as more helpful and something they therefore respond to well.

- A number of young people suggested a greater focus on life skills to build resilience, communication skills, decision-making and problem solving, assertiveness and self-control, among other things.
- Some models of therapy operate like a mechanical metaphor – a series of steps focussing on naming and fixing the problem, then sending it away (like a broken vehicle), rather than seeing the whole picture for the young person.
- Young people want services that focus on prevention and that look toward the future, rather than just focussing on crises and emergencies or providing short term, ‘band-aid’ solution.

Having the same person visit regularly allows young people to get to know them. ‘Drop run solution’, ‘helicoptering’ and ‘fly in/ fly out’ approaches are seen as deterrents for young people, who need consistency and approachability... [not having] to start all over again with a new counsellor.

- ...using ‘everyday language’ or being ‘plain spoken’, rather than using therapeutic jargon.
- It is critical that young people define their own experiences and problems in their own words – it demonstrates the ways they develop meaning.
- Irony that the most in need of support and the least likely to get it due to their remoteness.

Projects need to be community-based and sustainable in order to be seen as reliable and trustworthy.

- More peer-to-peer activities – i.e., spend time with peers and away from work and stress – peer to peer/ group-based/ collective support models and activities (including online support forums) were seen as important and underutilised... particularly with Aboriginal young people.
- lack of recreational opportunity presents additional risks of contributing to mental ill-health and/or engaging in risky behaviour.

Consult with young people on their design, possibly including their families.

- There’s a significant lack of awareness among young people of the services available in their communities
- A lack of consultation with young people in designing services had a significant impact on perceptions of their appropriateness – perception of lacking relevance is a significant barrier.

Role of schools and universities

Schools in drought-affected areas have an incredibly important role to play in coping with drought. Not only for students but also for families and the wider community. (eg Trundle Central West provided shower blocks, washing machines, after hours water, uplifting garden, community activities e.g., wellness hubs).

Schools need peer-to-peer and other mental health support as staff are unable to attend training

- School counsellors viewed as important, but their close relationship proximity (e.g., relation, friend) to student is often a barrier.
- Boarding students experienced isolation from their community, as well as general stress and anxiety about the cost to their parents.

Greater transitional support is needed for regional students who go away to university, particularly in the capital cities (financial, practical eg understanding public transport, educational, eg feeling inferior to city counterparts, emotional eg isolation loneliness and guilt.

- Transitioning back to their communities – lack of employment, generational divide.

Water, natural resource managements

Genuine anxiety & concern

- Desire to see governments at all levels planning for long term solutions and responses to drought and resource management.
 - Why isn’t there a national inquiry?

- How river systems are managed, water recycling options, infrastructure and pipelines, managing dams and water storage, mining and its natural resource consumption, economic impacts.
- A strong need for governments to be more transparent.

Aboriginal communities have a strong cultural connection to water – dried riverbeds have strong negative impact – need to be part of the discussion – water-borne diseases & safe drinking water for people and animals - & for life-saving medical support such as dialysis.

RECOMMENDATIONS from the summit: for policy approaches to drought response and service provision (Chapter 7)

Over-arching POLICY GUIDANCE in relation to identity, remoteness, place-based disadvantage and community resilience among drought-affected young people and their communities

The following guiding concepts coalesced from summit discussions:

- 1. An over-arching national agenda or framework for young people to address chronic regional and remote disadvantage
- 2. Need whole of government models and standards for youth participation
- 3. Invest in education, wellbeing and protection of young people in regional and remote Australia for prosperity
- 4. Establish holistic programs for young people in drought-affected communities on life skills, education and wellbeing.
- 5. Mental health models should emphasise community-based, strength-based approaches, rather than medical models that pathologise experiences like grief and sadness – get the balance right.
- 6. Map communities by key characteristics to establish which mental health and psychological services would be most effective.
- 7. Improve mental health and psychological services skilling in regional areas to an approach that doesn't pathologise young people or common/ healthy transitory stress (ie peer to peer models).
- 8. Improve coordination of mental health services by type and location.
- 9. Inclusion of young people – there is a growing level of generalized anxiety in many young people which may be compounded by concerns about major public policy issues such as climate change and a lack of trust in decision-makers.
- 10. Close the gap in mental health by quickly increasing efforts to address the impacts of drought and climate change on the health and mental health of Aboriginal young people.
- 11. State governments should consider wrapping a youth employment strategy around drought response (youth drought coordinators, financial counsellors & peer-to-peer roles w Australia growing and developing the local disaster risk reduction industry.
- 12. Focal points should consider how to effectively communicate and engage with young people as participants – treat as stakeholders not mascots.

Meaningful participation – a grounding concept - Young people are stakeholders, not mascots

Stakeholders working in drought response should create opportunities for young people to meaningfully participate in issues effecting their lives and to play leadership roles in those areas.

- Young people must be considered not only as recipients of the decisions made today, but as equal partners in discovering solutions for the future.
- Young people are experts, not only in their own lives, but also in farming, drought, regional living, resource management and many other issues.
- Young people understand the urgency of the situation they are in, are willing to communicate to power truthfully, and are innovative thinkers capable of finding new creative and practical solutions to the everyday challenges in regional and drought-affected Australia.

Strengthen local leadership to expand opportunities for young people so that decision-makers not only provide time and resources, but benefit from the approach.

- In relation to drought and water responses, local governments: must implement higher levels of transparency and information-sharing to young people and children; reach out to young people from all walks of life to better understand the available services that can help them, and to understand how to design and deliver them in partnership with those they seek to support.

- Youth councils should have clear decision-making authority, rather than just being advisory.
- Local councils should find ways to employ young people as drought responders.
- Nurture young talent/ identify young leaders/ provide ongoing development.

State and federal level must commit to more meaningful opportunities by:

- Establishing concrete mechanisms for young people to provide input and to have their perspectives considered adequately.
- creation of a regional youth taskforce, with clear decision-making authority, to develop a regional youth strategy.

Coordination is a critical component of success

One of the most crucial, yet overlooked, aspects of drought response has been coordination at all levels. From local community or shire, up to the federal government, there is little coordination, it's not prioritized, but also fundamental misconceptions of its vital importance in drought response.

- Lack of information-sharing between responders
- Gaps and duplication resulting from this
- Lack of knowledge about what's available due to an absence of service mapping
- Frustration at inefficiencies and confusion as ideas are quickly picked up and dropped
- No-one is sure if what they are doing is working.

Effective coordination in an area as complex as drought response is essential. It greatly enhances the impact of responses for communities and the young people in them. Effective coordination would allow more consistent and up to date service mapping

- – crucial in the area of youth, mental health and drought, which is highly specialized and uniquely different from other sectors.
- Critical that actors involved on the ground in drought-affected communities are brought together with state and federal governments – these meetings are the greatest opportunity to ensure that overall approaches leave flexibility for local coordination arrangements, and for embedding recognition that each area has its own unique and specific needs and demands as well as strengths
 - State and federal governments need to recognize this issue as a priority and provide dedicated resources
 - Need clear identification of overall responsibility for coordination at state and fed levels
 - Provision of guidance and necessary support (including financial) to local towns and shires to develop coordination structures + involve young people in these bodies
 - Service-providers should be encouraged and encouraged to play a more active role in coordination forums & to collaborate/partner with other organisations
 - Coordination structures must be both horizontal and vertical.

Reliable, relevant service provision is the foundation

It is just as important to invest in social support structures, mechanisms and services for farmers and drought-affected communities, as it is in financial support – particularly for young people, who are very often overlooked.

- If mental health and youth services are not accessible (cost, location, platform, reliability), if young people are not aware of them, or if the services are not context-sensitive, it doesn't matter what level of investment you make in them.
- Greatest challenge is funding instability:
 - prevents organisations planning beyond a year
 - prevents young people from being able to build relationships with communities and to engage in longer term initiative
 - often results in brief unfinished projects that start but can't continue (eg., counsellors that start to visit/ engage then funding is cut and they stop – often more harmful to the young people involved than not engaging at all – creates mistrust and acts as barrier to seeking support).

According to drought summit participants, the following are **features of the best service provision**:

- Strengths-based approaches – initiatives that build on the strengths, talents and lived experiences of young people and their communities

- Tools/guidance developed for regional young people, not those in a city (eg., go to a movie is not relevant when the nearest cinema is hundreds of kms away)
- In person, regular support – funding and other support for providers to go to these remote young people, not expect them to leave responsibilities and come to them, or rely on limited internet access for inferior online support
- Peer support models of mental health support – peers are trusted and speak in their language – eg coach or member of a youth group – need opportunities to formally train these young people in supportive conversations, encouraging help-seeking behaviour and how to refer to appropriate services
- Peer-to-peer group-based activities – opportunities for service-providers to consider the ways they can develop collective support/ small group forums (in person & online)
- Mental health and wellbeing approaches that are strength-based & holistic – emphasizing social connectedness, life skills, problem solving and personal development – rather than pathologising grief and sadness in medicalized approaches.
- Employ arts/ storytelling/ narrative approaches – eg photography, music, dance, short story writing, theatre – as conduits for young people to explain and share their experiences.

Accordingly, **approaches to drought response need to be shared across jurisdictions and communities** – great things have been happening across drought-affected NSW.

- Without any mechanisms, avenues or opportunities to share with other drought-affected areas, these ideas and experiences, and lessons learned from them, much of it is lost. For example:
 - **Wellness hubs** have been created by a number of schools in various ways depending on available resources – A thorough analysis and evaluation of these hubs, as they currently exist, including the number and qualifications of dedicated staff needed to provide guidance to others seeking to implement similar initiatives – would be of tremendous value.
 - **Youth councils** could be analysed by governments and the lessons learned from various models shared to provide guidance to other local councils – they need to represent the diversity of their community and have real power to influence decisions.
 - **Mental health and wellbeing leadership** – the successes of a number of organisations already implementing programs that seek to destigmatize mental health and encourage help-seeking behaviour among young people in NSW should be amplified
 - Examine, evaluate and publicly share **peer-support models** that various NSW Local Health districts and non-government service-providers have developed, which combine clinical and social work models, and comprise teams with local community members with relevant lived experience who are provided training to build expertise.
 - Organisations working through schools to provide **group-based peer-to-peer activities** (including talking and arts-based) are a valuable addition to schools supporting student wellbeing – critically important in remote schools – they should be strengthened and developed with additional and longer term resources.
 - Establish, disseminate and utilise best practice demonstrated by organisations that have adopted collaborative approaches to ensure skills and knowledge remain with communities for **community capacity building**.
 - A better understanding of the factors that contribute to **resilience in communities** and among their young people is a foundation to success – resources should be allocated to universities to collaborate with local communities, service providers and governments to establish this guiding knowledge.

The role of governments: strategic guidance

With a complex network of actors from multiple sectors working across three levels of government, governments could have a significant impact on improving the cohesiveness and effectiveness of drought response by providing greater strategic guidance to drought responders at all levels. For example, the drought summit suggested:

- Councils are often at a loss about how to spend grant funding – state and federal governments could provide a suite of ideas and options (see above) by identifying successful approaches from various communities.

- A lack of state and federal drought strategy has resulted in band-aid and ad-hoc solutions that lack coherence, as well as decision-making that lacks transparency and accountability.
 - This could be rectified by developing and resourcing an integrated national drought management strategy (NDMS) based on scientific evidence, extensive stakeholder consultation and the principles of the Sendai Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (adopted by the UN in 2015), including:
 - developing state/territory preparedness plans
 - investing in capacity development
 - publicising and building awareness of the NDMS & preparedness plans
 - integrating drought into the formal mandate of key national emergency management agencies.

Three small ideas from the summit that could deliver big wins

Three core ideas emerged from the summit that could not only deliver high impact during times of drought, but also potentially be scalable. Participants challenged themselves to bring as much of the thinking as possible from the summit together is a small suite of solutions that could be implemented with minimal to moderate investment. They are intended to be practical and implementable in the real world. But they are by no means being put forward as the three ways to solve the drought. They could be first steps - a beginning – a conversation starter that might lead to bigger things.

1. **Community chest** – community-based banking or pooled funding that can be designed and adapted based on the needs of the individual local area –
 - to help ‘make ends meet’ during times of crippling levels of debt from formal banking loans
 - trusted community leaders have oversight of, and operate a fund headquartered locally
 - community members can draw on urgent small sum financing and repay over short period
 - enables access to flexible, small, short-term loans not often available in standard banking
 - an informal safety net for individuals and families with guidelines and tips
 - could create community cooperation during times of high financial stress.
2. **Government schools as a hub** – when communities are experiencing drought, schools can be more than just a platform to learn – they can collaborate with student populations and community leaders to develop action plans with priorities for providing community assistance during drought and to address social, emotional and geographic isolation among local students. For example:
 - group peer mentoring programs, informal social activities for drought-stressed parents and communities, exchange programs with city student to build understanding
 - informal and community-based childcare, community infrastructure programs (washing machines, showers, after hours water),
 - community transport programs for remoteness and disadvantage, as well as linking to regional hubs, casual employment, sport & recreation
 - partner with businesses for entrepreneurship, skills development, employment transition
 - drought noticeboards; green playgrounds, community gardens, aquaculture
 - aggregator and disseminator of information on drought impacts on education, as well as measures to support student wellbeing and educational achievement.
3. **Youth-developed- and-led water awareness campaign:** Under international law, states are required to work towards achieving universal access to water for all, without any discrimination and while prioritizing those most in need.
 - This understanding, however, has not been sufficiently promoted in Australia to raise public awareness about water scarcity – water security is essentially non-existent for so many remote communities – summit participants highlighted the urgent need for a more integrated approach to managing water, land and other resources: a water awareness campaign would:
 - promote understanding of the situation of drought-affected Austrialians
 - promote water as everyone’s responsibility
 - promote a water conservation/ efficiency mindset
 - promote understanding of water security threats in Australia
 - help develop and influence better daily water usage habits and behaviour among all Australians

- help motivate strong strategic commitments and financing (innovation, partnerships and investment in water for the long run).

In conclusion

With the “Generation Drought” report , UNICEF Australia has strived to share data sourced from action-based research in order to provide the most comprehensive bank of information, ideas and analysis possible - with a view to inspiring new and innovative approaches to drought response in Australia.

A huge step in this regard, and an underlying point of this report, is that we must recognize and treat young people, not as mascots or photo opportunities, but as the important stakeholders and survivors they are, with critical expertise developed through lived experience.

13 August 2020