

Submission to the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) Inquiry

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For further information or questions about this submission please contact:

Katie Maskiell

Head of Policy and Advocacy

UNICEF Australia

e: kmaskiell@unicef.org.au

m: +61 417 091 806

Australian Committee for UNICEF Limited

Suite 4.02 Building B, 33-35 Saunders Street PYRMONT NSW 2009

P: +61 2 9261 2811 F: +61 2 9261 2844 E: unicef@unicef.org.au

PO Box 488, Queen Victoria Building, NSW 1230 | ABN 35 060 581 437

www.unicef.org.au | Donation Hotline: 1300 884 233

Introduction

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) Inquiry. This submission refers to both children (under 18s) and young people (18-24 year olds), noting the need to engage with under 18s to build knowledge, understanding and capacity of disaster risk reduction (DRR) to participate as future volunteers.

Children and young people are both highly exposed and uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of disasters. Given current greenhouse gas emission trajectories, children's exposure to shocks and hazards will become more prevalent in the futureⁱ. A baby born in Australia in 2020 will experience four times as many heatwaves, three times as many droughts and 1.5 times as many bushfires and river floods as those born in 1960ⁱⁱ. Children and young people from First Nations backgrounds, remote and regional areas, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to experience disastersⁱⁱⁱ.

Children and young people are also uniquely vulnerable to disasters due to their stage of physiological and cognitive development. Children and young people experience trauma from disasters and lose access to learning and education, recreational spaces and health care. Alongside this, there is significant economic impact of disasters on children and young people, with \$3.1 billion in average annual costs due to the impact of disasters on children and young people in an average year, and up to \$6.2 billion in a high disaster year such as 2020^{iv}.

Children and young people are worried about climate change and their increased exposure to climate shocks and hazards. A 2021 UNICEF survey found that 84% of young Australians surveyed were extremely, very or moderately worried about climate change^v. Almost half of those surveyed felt distressed to the extent that it was affecting their daily functioning^{vi}. The *We Deserve to Live in a Thriving World: Child-Centred Indicators for Climate Change* report that children and young people are 'angry, disappointed and deeply concerned that their generation bears a disproportionate burden of responsibility to solve climate change'^{vii}.

Thus we see children and young people continue to call for more ambitious action in relation to climate change, and they are taking climate action in a variety of ways. In the 2024 *National Child and Youth Statement on Climate Change*, which was based on consultations with almost 200 children and young people across Australia, participants called for a more urgent and ambitious approach to mitigation^{viii}.

In this context, it is critical to consider the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (the Scheme) as part of a wider response to addressing the needs of children and young people before and after disasters. It is also important to directly engage with children and young people in ways that are meaningful to them, in designing a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme and any related initiatives targeting young people. In order to design an effective scheme, we must recognise and better understand the motivations and means by which children and young people may already be volunteering in disaster response, recovery and preparedness, as well as in climate action. Equally, it is important to understand the specific and general barriers to volunteering if the scheme is to be sustainable.

With the projected increase in frequency and intensity of disasters due to climate change, an increase in disaster response volunteerism will unlikely be sufficient to meet the growing and substantial need. As the Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience noted in its previous report, rates of volunteerism have declined in recent years, especially for young people, due to a range of reasons including the increasing burden on volunteers and financial sustainability.^{ix} UNICEF Australia therefore urges the Committee to take a more holistic view of workforce needs when it comes to disaster response and long-term resilience building.

Summary of recommendations:

1. Recognise that an increase in volunteerism should be designed as part of a more holistic response to disaster response, recovery and resilience, noting that both volunteerism and increased workforce capacity will be required to meet the growing needs as a result of more frequent and intense disasters.

2. Recognise that psychosocial services for children and young people post-disaster must be delivered by appropriately trained professionals, and that there is a need to invest in workforce capacity, alongside volunteer initiatives, to meet this need.
3.
 - a) The Australian Government develops a national framework for children and young people before and after disasters that can be adapted for different natural hazards and operationalised at all levels of government.
 - b) To inform the development of this framework, the Australian Government convenes a national summit that brings together Federal and State and Territory Governments, non-government organisations involved in disaster response, recovery and resilience, academic experts and children and young people themselves, to share best practice and inform minimum principles or standards for addressing children and young people's needs before and after disasters.
4. Consider paid community service leave provisions, including for casual employees, under the National Employment Standards, to increase young people's uptake of voluntary emergency management activities.
5. Invest in developing a national disaster resilience education (DRE) plan that can be used as a basis for consistent, practical DRE across Australian schools, and for teacher training.
6. Consider funding for programs and services that would address the mental health of youth volunteers, alongside other responders and professionals involved in disaster response, recovery and resilience, as a key component of disaster planning.
7. Ensure that the governance of any national volunteer scheme that targets young people should involve young people in its governance structure.
8. Consider key international disaster resilience and response frameworks to inform best practice.

Children and young people's needs and the disaster response, recovery and resilience workforce

Australia's defence and national security system has been identified as a nationally significant climate risk in the First Pass National Climate Risk Assessment, and disaster response and recovery is a component of this risk^x. An increase in disaster response volunteerism from young people (or the population generally) will not be sufficient to meet the growing need in response to more frequent, intense and compounding disasters caused by climate change. Additionally, to meet the needs of children young people, and other affected groups after disasters, there is a need for trained professionals with expertise in child-sensitive psychosocial and mental health support, rather than a reliance only on volunteers. Both greater investment in disaster resilience, as well as alternative paid workforce models and support for programs to deliver child specific interventions (and the skilled workforce to deliver them), must be considered as part of a holistic response to disaster response, recovery and resilience in Australia.

Psychosocial support for children and young people after disasters is critical but often inaccessible or unavailable. As such, it is important that alongside measures to increase volunteer numbers, that Federal, State and Territory and local governments have available and qualified workforces and budget to support impacted communities as required, and not rely exclusively on volunteers to manage psychosocial needs.

It is also critical to consider ways to strengthen and develop pre-existing capacity within communities. In First Nations communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) often play a major role in disaster response, recovery and resilience building, but are underfunded and unacknowledged in this area. The *Flood Response and Recovery in Fitzroy Crossing: Needs Assessment* found that ACCOs played a critical and major role in responding to the Fitzroy Crossing floods in January 2023, over and above ongoing regular work. This included using their connections with community, assets and resources to attend to the most urgent needs, whilst also ensuring information flows to community members and coordination of logistics. They brought specialist skills and delivered programs in early childhood, development, health and wellbeing, education and employment. ACCOs and community-led organisations, and their workforces, should be recognised and treated as key partners in disaster preparedness, response and resilience cycle, and receive greater financial support so they can continue to play this critical role. Recognising and financing pre-existing community services and community based organisations will also reduce demands on a national workforce. Volunteers from outside communities cannot replace the knowledge, connections, skills and trust of ACCOs and other

community-led organisations.

Additionally, Federal, State and Territory and Local governments should also collaborate with designated specialist organisations to build workforce capacity in schools, local government areas, ACCOs and primary health networks to address emergency psychological needs of children, young people, and their families in communities across Australia when a natural hazard takes place. Such a commitment requires holistic, sustainable, evidence-based investments in the right blend of mental health first aid, child-centric psychosocial care, and specialist training and support for a variety of first responders over multiple years. Where feasible, these trainings can be embedded into teacher-training, professional development programs for social workers, and for staff at local councils.

Recommendation 1

Recognise that an increase in volunteerism should be designed as part of a more holistic response to disaster response, recovery and resilience, noting that both volunteerism and increased workforce capacity will be required to meet the growing needs as a result of more frequent and intense disasters.

Recommendation 2

Recognise that psychosocial services for children and young people post disaster must be delivered by appropriately trained professionals, and that there is a need to invest in workforce capacity, alongside volunteer initiatives, to meet this need.

a) Establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

UNICEF Australia urges the Inquiry to consider the broader context in relation to children and young people in disaster response, recovery and resilience, so that solutions are holistic and well targeted, rather than focusing on volunteerism of young people in isolation. Currently the needs of children and young people are overlooked, misunderstood or underserved when it comes to disaster preparedness, response, recovery and long-term resilience building. There are a range of reasons for this, including:

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

Children and young people face specific challenges after disasters. Children and young people who have experience disasters are 4.2% less likely to finish year 12 later in life, leading to \$2,921 million in lost lifetime earnings^{xi}. They are 1.3-4.5% more likely to experience psychological distress, leading to \$162 million in healthcare costs^{xii}. Children and young people are our future parents, workers, professionals, and volunteers, and it is in all our interests for children and young people to be prepared to meet the challenge of more frequent and severe climate disasters in the future. Minimising the impacts on this demographic is particularly critical as we consider how we can support young people to increase their engagement in disaster response and recovery volunteer activities.

In addition, research has demonstrated that children and young people generally feel underprepared to respond to disasters, citing reliance on caregivers, policy makers and other significant adults for many of the things they need to respond to climate change and climate change related disasters, including access to safe and secure housing, adequate healthcare, healthy and nutritious food, protection from dangerous weather, and social and emotional support^{xiii}. This reliance 'means that children and young people are unable to take actions that significantly address their feelings of under-preparedness for the impacts of climate change', including in response to more frequent and intense disasters.^{xiv}

As such, Australia urgently needs a national framework on children and young people before and after disasters to provide consistent support to children and young people in the lead up to and aftermath of disasters. The creation of

such a framework would fill an important gap in Australia's policymaking architecture when it comes to children and young people in disasters.

Such a framework would underpin common principles, standards and action plans to identify and address the most pressing short and long-term needs of all children and young people across mental health, physical health, education, social protection, homelessness and other key domains of wellbeing and rights. It can also consider disaster resilience education, and support for young people to take up volunteering opportunities in disaster response, recovery and resilience.

A national framework would ensure the specific and unique needs of children and young people are considered in disaster preparedness, response and long-term resilience, and therefore enable faster recovery and build psychosocial, cultural and economic resilience, minimising long term costs to individuals, to society and to the economy. Such a framework would better support young people's volunteerism and children and young people's participation and engagement in disaster resilience in their communities.

UNICEF Australia suggests that the first step in developing a national framework could be a national summit on children and young people before and after disasters, that brings together Federal and State and Territory Governments, non-government organisations involved in disaster response, recovery and resilience, academic experts and children and young people themselves. This summit would be an opportunity to share best practice across jurisdictions and develop minimum standards and principles that would form the basis of a national framework on children and young people before and after disasters. This Summit could be convened by the National Emergency Management Authority (NEMA). UNICEF Australia would be happy to support NEMA to convene such a summit.

As mentioned above, it is critical that children and young people themselves are involved in the design of a national framework. Children and young people have a right to be heard and participate in decisions that affect their lives^{xv}. Not only is this a right, but meaningful engagement and participation of young people leads to better and more effective policy and programs^{xvi}. The critical need for children and young people to be involved in disaster response, recovery and long-term resilience building is reflected in regional frameworks: the Sendai Framework 2015-2030 calls for governments to engage with relevant stakeholders, including children and youth, on the design and implementation of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) policies, plans and standards^{xvii}. The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) calls for children and young people to be treated as equal and diverse stakeholders in local and national policy and planning processes as a critical part of implementing the Sendai Framework 2015-2030^{xviii}, and notes that meaningful engagement requires 'incessant, deliberate, well-resourced [and] facilitated' action.

Recognising that children and young people face intersecting inequalities and exclusions, it is particularly critical to ensure that First Nations young people, young people from migrant backgrounds, young people with a disability, young women, gender diverse and LGBTIQ+ young people are engaged as part of any consultative processes, but also in disaster response, recovery and resilience building more generally.^{xix}

Better targeting the needs of children and young people before and after disasters will lead to more resilient children and young people and communities, who are better supported to undertake volunteer activities before and after disasters.

Recommendation 3

a) The Australian Government develops a national framework for children and young people before and after disasters that can be adapted for different natural hazards and operationalised at all levels of government.

b) To inform the development of this framework, the Australian Government convenes a national summit that brings together Federal and State and Territory Governments, non-government organisations disaster response, recovery and resilience, academic experts and children and young people themselves, to share best practice and inform minimum principles or standards for addressing children and young people's needs before and after disasters.

b) Exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture

The Community Service Leave provisions provide employees, including casual employees, with the ability to take community service leave for activities such as voluntary emergency management. Notably however, community service leave is unpaid, except for jury duty. This has particular implications for young people, who are more likely to be employed as casuals. One in every two people aged between 15-24 is casually employed in their main job, compared to 22% of the wider population^{xx}. Even though young workers often take on temporary jobs whilst studying, each year the percentage of young people starting in casual employment grows faster than any other cohort^{xxi}. Young people are therefore already facing lower pay and less security in their jobs, which will have an impact to their ability to take unpaid leave for voluntary emergency management. The ability to take paid leave, including for casual employees, could increase young people's involvement in voluntary emergency management activities. Due to lower job security in casual positions, the Committee should also consider ways the Fair Work Act can be strengthened to ensure better protections for young people taking community service leave.

This is particularly relevant in the context of housing affordability and insecure housing for young people. For young people out of home in Australia, housing affordability and availability is a significant concern, with unmanageable rent increases, short term leases and limited housing availability being cited as significant barriers to securing stable and adequate housing^{xxii}. Young people are unlikely to be in a position to take unpaid leave for voluntary emergency management when they are facing insecure employment and insecure housing.

Recommendation 4

Consider paid community service leave provisions, including for casual employees, under the National Employment Standards, to increase young people's uptake of voluntary emergency management activities.

c) Integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations

Disaster resilience education (DRE) is an avenue to better and more holistically engage children and young people in disaster resilience and help build their capacity and interest in volunteering. Children and young people want to be better equipped to respond to more frequent and intense disasters. The 2020 *Our World Our Say* report found that 88% of children and young people in Australia feel that they should be learning more about natural hazards^{xxiii}. Although most respondents were taught about how and why these hazards occur, they were not taught about how to respond, and felt "unprepared, undereducated, concerned, and increasingly scared by the prospect of a disaster."^{xxiv} Children and young people want to learn more about how to plan and prepare for, and how to prevent or reduce the risk of disaster in their communities.

Disaster Resilience Education (DRE) involves teaching green skills, emotional and psychosocial resilience-building activities, and basic emergency preparedness skills to children and young people before a disaster strikes. It has the potential to transform children and young people from passive victims of disasters to active and effective respondents. It enables increased awareness of the nature of hazards, higher levels of planning and preparedness, and increased knowledge about what to do when a disaster takes place, and lower levels of anxiety about disasters.^{xxv} Investments in effective DRE programs assist prevention and mitigation efforts, which are also much less costly than rescue, and recovery operations.

Actions that children and young people can take, including volunteer opportunities, can be embedded as part of DRE. This will help build children and young people's capacity to respond to disasters, and their confidence in being part of more formal volunteer activities.

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

Recommendation 5

Invest in developing a national disaster resilience education (DRE) plan that can be used as a basis for consistent, practical DRE across Australian schools, and for teacher training.

d) Creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors.

Skills building opportunities that lead to sustainable, long-term employment for young people is recognised as a critical priority in the UNDRR's guidance on engaging children and young people as part of the implementation of the Sendai Framework. This can also be seen as a part of a 'build back better' approach, where young people from the community engaged in disaster response, recovery and resilience (whether through volunteerism or other modalities) are then equipped with skills or qualifications that can be translated into meaningful employment opportunities. A nationally recognised qualification scheme could be one avenue which supports young people to do this.

e) Investigating whether there are appropriate laws and safeguards to protect the health and safety of volunteers.

Climate change related disasters affect the mental health of children and young people, and the mental health impact could be heightened for youth volunteers and so it is critical that there are appropriate safeguards to protect their health and safety.

As per the findings of the Select Committee's Inquiry on Australia's Disaster Resilience, the mental health of responders, both professional and volunteers, is often overlooked^{xxvii}. This was also noted in the *Flood Response and Recovery in Fitzroy Crossing Needs Assessment*, which found that '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 communities'.^{xxviii} As such, professionals own mental health can be deprioritised, which can lead to burn out.^{xxix} Consideration of how to address the mental health of both professionals and volunteers after disasters is critical and should be a key component of any National Volunteer Incentive Scheme.

Additionally, 'eco anxiety' affects significant numbers of children and young people in Australia. Eco-anxiety is a term used to describe heightened mental, emotional, and somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system.^{xxx} Eco-anxiety is a response to the helplessness and despair felt in the face of an inevitably existential crisis, creating feelings of stress, worry and frustration about the effects of climate change, and the inadequacy of our collective response to the crisis.^{xxxi} However, UNICEF Australia also notes that volunteering after disasters can also be empowering for young people and can help young people feel agency after a 'disempowering event'.^{xxxii} Further research is needed to understand the scale and impacts of eco-anxiety on children and young people and intersection with disaster related volunteerism.

Recommendation 6

Consider funding for programs and services that would address the mental health of youth volunteers, alongside other responders and professionals involved in disaster response, recovery and resilience, as a key component of disaster planning.

f) The structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

As the Scheme intends to specifically target young people, UNICEF Australia supports young people being part of the governance structure of the scheme. This should, at a minimum, include youth representation as part of a governing board.

UNICEF Australia recommends the Committee consider youth led, peer to peer models that have proven effective in engaging children and young people in climate action. For example, AYCC's use of an 'educative-movement-building' approach, which is grounded in principles of climate justice, and utilises 'hybrid organisational structures' to create a space for young people to take climate action, whilst also providing 'education to enhance their leadership and agency.'^{xxxiii} Peer-to-peer education and leadership development opportunities have proven successful in youth led climate networks in engaging children and young people to volunteer and take action, and may prove relevant and useful to the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme.

Recommendation 7

Ensure the governance of any national volunteer scheme that targets young people should involve young people in its governance structure.

g) Comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices

UNICEF Australia urges the Committee to take a broader view of child and youth engagement in disaster response, recovery and resilience building, beyond young people's involvement as volunteers. As such, this submission highlights overseas models that more holistically target child and young engagement in disaster response and resilience. More engaged, educated and empowered children and young people will be more equipped and supported to volunteer as part of disaster response, recovery and resilience activities if they so choose.

Global frameworks such as UNICEF's Core Commitments to Children^{xxxiv} provide minimum standards in relation to providing principled, timely, quality and child-centred humanitarian response (including disaster response) and can be applied to the Australian context as part of a national framework for children and young people before and after disasters (Recommendation 2). UNDRR's companion to implementing the Sendai Framework, *Words into Action: Engaging Children and Youth in Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience Building*,^{xxxv} also outlines key principles and actions to engage children and young people in DRR and resilience building that are relevant to the Australian context.

Recommendation 8

Consider key international disaster resilience and response frameworks to inform best practice.

About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF believes in a fair chance for every child and we are the world's leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of children in over 190 countries. At UNICEF Australia we work to protect and promote children's rights by advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas.

UNICEF Australia would welcome the opportunity to expand further on the measures we have outlined in this submission.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia, (2024), ‘The Impact of Disasters on Children and Young People’, available at: [UA_Impact-of-Disasters-on-Children-Report-2024_V2.pdf](#)
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 17, Places and Spaces: Environments and children’s wellbeing, (2022), < RC17-EN_Places-and-Spaces_Environmentsand-childrens-well-being_Report-Card-17.pdf (unicef-irc.org)>
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- ^{viii} UNICEF Australia, Plan International Australia and Australian Youth for International Engagement, (2024), ‘National Child and Youth Statement on Climate Change’, available at: [UA-LCOY-Report_20240828-final digital.pdf](#)
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- ^{xiv} Ibid. p32
- ^{xv} UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: [https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text](#)
- ^{xvi} UNICEF, (2020), ‘Engaged and Heard! Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement’, available at: [https://www.unicef.org/media/73296/file/ADAP-Guidelines-for-Participation.pdf](#)
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