

NSW YOUTH SUMMIT ON LIVING WITH DROUGHT

Call to Action



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CALL TO ACTION

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In October 2019, UNICEF Australia hosted the first Youth Summit for young people living with drought. The summit presented an opportunity for young people living with drought in New South Wales to have a break from the land, work with their peers who are going through similar struggles, and have an opportunity to connect, engage and reflect, surrounded by beautiful Lake Macquarie. Over three days, participants explored the ways decision-makers can best support children and young people to build resilience and become better prepared to reduce the negative impacts of ongoing and future drought. Most importantly, the summit saw children and young people come together with decision-makers and one another to discuss the challenges they face living with drought in NSW and how responses can be improved. The culmination of three days' work, the young participants discussed and presented this 'Call to Action' to a panel of influential decision-makers who accepted the invitation to attend. This is what they had to say.

PART A INTRODUCTION

1. We are 88 young people from 57 properties and 26 towns across New South Wales. Between us, we cover around 700,000 acres of land across the state.
2. We are a diverse group of young people from Aboriginal backgrounds, 7th and 8th generation Australian farming families, new entrants to agriculture, and migrant families who have settled in communities across regional NSW.
3. For Aboriginal young people from NSW, we are concerned about the impact the drought has on our culture. For us, the river is more than just a water source. It is a source of spirituality and connection to country. The river is the blood of our people. Our ancestors have been the custodians of the environment for thousands of years. If we fail to continue nurturing our lands, we not only make it impossible for future generations to practice their cultures, but we also disrespect our ancestors' legacy. We need you to know that the drought is affecting the wellbeing and mental health of Aboriginal people.
4. As a group, we are young farmers, community leaders, apprentices, students, mental health practitioners, remote financial counsellors, educators, and health professionals. Collectively, we know that, when farmers struggle, everyone struggles.
5. We are proud ambassadors for regional and remote Australia and its long-term sustainability. We have a strong love of the land, and a love of our way of life. We would never choose to grow up anywhere else—even though, for the youngest members of our group, we've seen more drought than good years.
6. We have all of the same challenges as other young Australians. But, we also face the difficulties and risks of remoteness. And we are now in the third year of state-wide drought, which exacerbates the inequalities that already exist. We want our grandchildren to live on the same land as our grandparents.

7. Australia needs a plan to future proof our communities. We need infrastructure, community education, and technology. Without this, we will never be prepared for drought, and this will be a conversation that never ends.
8. This drought came on fast and strong. We were only just beginning to recover from the Millennium Drought. We have to ask, what, in concrete terms, was done in the meantime? What policy, what strategies, what water infrastructure? Unless we commit to long term action, we will be having this conversation over and over and over again.
9. We urgently need an honest national conversation about water security. Without this, our primary industries and our economies face a certain failure. Drought will eventually affect our food security, eco-systems, and eventually our cities. We understand that the government can't make it rain. But when it does rain, we want to be ready.
10. We are three years into the state-wide drought – and young people are only convening now for a state-wide conversation. Why has it taken so long to include us in a conversation? Why weren't we here in the first year?
11. It is hard to survive around so much death. It is hard to survive when the dust never settles. It is hard to survive without some of the most basic services.
12. We need you, and our fellow Australians, to look past the Great Dividing Range at what is happening for young people who live with drought every day. We want to bridge the divide between regional and remote Australia and the cities. We want people to understand us better; to understand where the food on the kitchen table comes from; and to respect water saving behaviours as a new norm.



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PART B

ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS

13. Today, we will make some brief comments on five key areas for action:
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing;
 - Youth participation and decision making;
 - Mental health;
 - Families; and
 - Education.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing

14. First, we need Australia to understand the profound impact of drought on Aboriginal people. We want people to understand the importance of Aboriginal culture and our connection to country.
15. We need a review into water rights and an agreement established between the NSW government and Aboriginal communities, elders and young people on joint water management and planning.
16. We need the protection and conservation of sacred sites and cultural practices to be a priority, not only for the future of Aboriginal peoples, but our country.

Drought decision-making

17. Second, we are working hard alongside our parents, and our towns and communities to cope with drought. It is critical that we have formal channels to be involved in drought decision making.
18. We need regular access to relevant state and federal ministers. We need accountability, transparency and communication with stakeholder groups, and money spent where it's needed most.
19. We need to employ young people strategically as Youth Liaison Officers in the drought response – beyond just year to year contracts.
20. Ultimately, we have the right to be involved in decision making because we are the future of regional and remote Australia, and the farming industry.



We need a united mindset going forward as we face the challenges of a changing climate, and food and water security. We are all in this together.

Mental health in the community

21. Third, the drought is putting stress on our mental health. We emphasise that:
- Loneliness and isolation are a big part of our lives;
 - It is unrealistic to expect that rural kids can rely heavily on the Internet for mental health support, when we face poor bandwidth and data access;
 - We need tailored regional specific mental health strategies and specialized services;
 - We need mental health nurses and access to psychiatrists in every regional hospital - billed through Medicare.

Families and financial stress

22. Fourth, we constantly worry about our families.
23. Many of us hide our own struggles because we don't want to add to the serious worry of our parents.
24. Many of us feel anxious about going to school during the day, or boarding for the term, and leaving our parents alone to deal with struggling stock and failing farms.
25. Many of our families and communities are under extreme financial stress. We ask that Australian governments consider a drought employment scheme – employing people across local communities to alleviate some of the worst aspects of drought.

Education

26. Finally, we have seen some wonderful leadership from certain schools to support drought affected communities. Schools and their infrastructure can and should play a central role during time of adversity – like prolonged drought.
27. The high costs of a quality education for children and young people in regional and remote areas is prohibitive, particularly during periods of drought.
28. We need a HECS style payment for high school students – with a pay after school scheme so that we can continue our education, even in times of adversity.
29. We need research into good practice for transitional support arrangements for regional and remote students in city-based universities. Too many country kids are dropping out because of the multiple pressures they face.
30. And we need local programs to foster understanding between regional, remote and urban children – like the paddock to plate program. We need a united mindset going forward as we face the challenges of a changing climate, and food and water security. We are all in this together.



PART C

CONCLUSION

31. We are a generation that won't give up easily. But we shouldn't have to fight for everything.
32. Australia is a global leader in farming and agriculture. And our generation want to be global leaders in drought response and planning.
33. We want remote and regional Australia to thrive, but for that to happen, we need to act now.
34. We appreciate sympathy - but what we really need is long term thinking, a national drought plan and concrete solutions.
35. This work is urgent. Our communities are depending on us, and on you. We won't stop fighting for the people and places we love.

This document was authored by Amy Lamoin in consultation with 88 children from remote NSW and sector experts.