REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022

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<u>Review of the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022</u>
Submission to the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority

To the Chair of the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority,

We are a team of university-based scholars and managers of non-government organisations, conducting a project that aims to <u>build resilient Australian communities</u>. Funded by the <u>James Martin Institute for Public Policy</u>, this project has involved engaging with communities affected by disasters – namely, communities in the Northern Rivers and South Western Sydney. The project will establish the role of government and non-government organisations in fostering community resilience by facilitating social connectedness for vulnerable families. As such, we are well placed to contribute to the review of the <u>NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022</u>, the purpose of which is to determine whether: the policy objectives of the <u>Act</u> remain valid; and the terms of the <u>Act</u> remain appropriate for securing the objectives.

At present, the primary object of the <u>NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022 No 80</u> is to:

> *promote community resilience to the impact of disasters in New South Wales through –*
>
> *(a) disaster prevention, preparedness and adaptation, and*
>
> *(b) recovery and reconstruction following disasters.*

The <u>Act</u> states that the primary object will be achieved by:

> *(a) establishing the NSW Reconstruction Authority to facilitate community resilience to the impact of disasters in New South Wales through prevention, preparedness and adaptation, and*
>
> *(b) providing for the functions and powers of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, including functions and powers to –*
>
>> *(i) facilitate the protection, recovery and reconstruction of affected communities, and*
>>
>> *(ii) mitigate against the impact of potential disasters on communities, and*
>>
>> *(iii) improve the resilience and adaptability of affected communities in relation to potential disasters, including, for example, by the betterment of affected communities, and*
>
> *(c) providing for the exercise of functions by the chief executive officer of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, subject to the Minister's control and direction, including ensuring the Authority exercises its functions effectively and efficiently.*

To ultimately promote community resilience, it is recommended that the primary object and strategies to achieve this object, be revised as follows (amendments are in bold text for clarity):

> ***promote community resilience in New South Wales through –***
>
> ***(a) social infrastructure***
>
> *(b) disaster prevention, preparedness and adaptation, and*
>
> *(c) recovery and reconstruction following disasters...*
>
> *The primary object is to be achieved by –*
>
> *(a) establishing the NSW Reconstruction Authority to facilitate community resilience in New South Wales through **social infrastructure**, prevention, preparedness and adaptation, and*
>
> *(b) providing for the functions and powers of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, including functions and powers to –*

> (i) facilitate **social infrastructure**, the protection, recovery and reconstruction of affected communities, and
>
> (ii) mitigate against the impact of potential disasters on communities, and
>
> (iii) improve the resilience and adaptability of affected communities in relation to potential disasters, including, for example, **via social infrastructure and** the betterment of affected communities, and
>
> (c) providing for the exercise of functions by the chief executive officer of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, subject to the Minister's control and direction, including ensuring the Authority exercises its functions effectively and efficiently.

Correspondingly, it is recommended that the terms of the Act be revised to align with the current and emerging evidence-base on community resilience[1]. This would involve ensuring the terms:

- Define community resilience, recognising its multifaceted nature
- Recognise that the effects associated with a disaster can be exacerbated by ongoing hardship
- Stipulate strategies that prioritise sustained community engagement – this might involve supporting and sustaining community hubs, which are driven by communities

The aforesaid recommendations follow five key reasons:

1. **Community resilience and social infrastructure are closely linked concepts**

   Reflecting previous research[2-4], our project suggests that community resilience and social infrastructure are closely linked concepts, essential for community wellbeing. Social infrastructure encompasses networks and institutions facilitating social interactions and support within communities. It includes schools, healthcare facilities, community centres, and more. Strong social infrastructure fosters trust and cooperation among community members, enabling collective action during crises. It serves as the backbone for support networks, mobilising resources, and assistance in times of need. Social infrastructure also builds community capacity by promoting resilience through social cohesion and civic engagement. Moreover, it reduces vulnerability by addressing socioeconomic disparities and promoting inclusivity. Community resilience, in turn, relies on robust social infrastructure to withstand and recover from challenges. Investing in social infrastructure and engaging communities in resilience-building efforts are vital to enhance adaptive capacity and promote equity and social justice. Together, they form the foundation for thriving and resilient communities in the face of adversity.

2. **Community resilience is a multifaceted social process**

   Scholarship on community resilience suggests it is 'More than bouncing back'[5] – instead, it is a 'multifaceted social process'[6], characterised by the collective capacity of individuals, groups, and institutions within a community. For instance, it has been described as set of networked adaptive capacities, including economic development, social capital, community competence, as well as information and communication[7]. As a multifaceted social process, community resilience involves various interconnected dimensions, including social cohesion, community engagement, resource mobilisation, and adaptive governance. It encompasses the ability of communities to foster strong social networks, support systems, and shared values that enable them to collaborate, innovate, and respond collectively to crises. Community resilience also involves building partnerships with external stakeholders, leveraging diverse perspectives and resources to address complex problems. Overall, it emphasises the dynamic interactions among people, institutions, and the environment, shaping the resilience of communities over time.

3. **Disasters can be exacerbated by ongoing hardship**

   Considerable evidence suggests that the negative effects associated with a disaster can be exacerbated by ongoing hardship, whereby people can go 'From Bad to Worse'[8]. People can experience hardship because of health and/or mental health conditions, social exclusion,

housing insecurity, communication challenges, and poverty[9-13]. For example, impoverished areas often lack the resources and infrastructure necessary to withstand and recover from disasters, leading to greater loss of life and property. Additionally, the economic hardships caused by disasters can push people further into poverty, creating a cycle of vulnerability. This is not to suggest that all people who experience hardship are more vulnerable to the effects of a disaster[14] – but rather, that the negative consequences of disasters can be amplified for people who experience hardship, contributing to ongoing adversities for affected populations. Efforts to address hardship and build resilience can therefore help mitigate the impact of disasters and improve community resilience. This point is paramount given that the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements concluded that:

> *We can... expect more concurrent and consecutive hazard events. For example, in the last 12 months there was drought, heatwaves and bushfires, followed by severe storms, flooding and a pandemic. Concurrent and consecutive hazard events increase the pressure on exposed and vulnerable communities. Each subsequent hazard event can add to the scale of the damage caused by a previous hazard event. There are likely to be natural disasters that are national in scale and consequence[15].*

4. **Sustained community engagement is essential for community resilience**

Recovery from disaster can be a long-term process[16], particularly for people who experience hardship. It often requires considerable investment in community development, both long before and after a disaster. As the Australia-New Zealand Emergency Management Committee[17] illustrated (see Figure 1), disaster management cannot be contained to efforts that immediately follow a disaster. Community development work requires sustained community engagement, cross-sector partnerships, and transdisciplinary research[18-23]. Establishing relationships with individuals, groups, and organisations within a community and harnessing their expertise can serve to address issues and achieve goals that are relevant to them. A growing body of research suggests that community engagement can be bolstered by community hubs. These might be defined as physical or virtual spaces that serve as a focal point for activities, services, and resources within a community. Community hubs are designed to bring people together, foster social connections, and support the wellbeing and development of the community, as a whole. They can take various forms and serve different purposes depending on the needs and characteristics of the community they serve. Given their many benefits[24,25], community hubs have been described as 'critical infrastructure'[26]. While the current terms of the Act are comprehensive, they fail to articulate clear mechanisms to sustain the community engagement required for community resilience or draw on the evidence-base on community hubs. For instance, they state:

> *The Authority's functions are... [to] build... community capacity... community engagement... support... collaboration and coordination between government agencies, local councils, service providers and communities... enable[e]... community participation... [and] work closely with affected communities.*

The absence of clear guidance on what is, and is not acceptable leaves considerable opportunity for practices that potentially prevent the Act from realising its primary object.

Figure 1: Effect of disaster on ongoing community development and interface with relief and recovery[17]
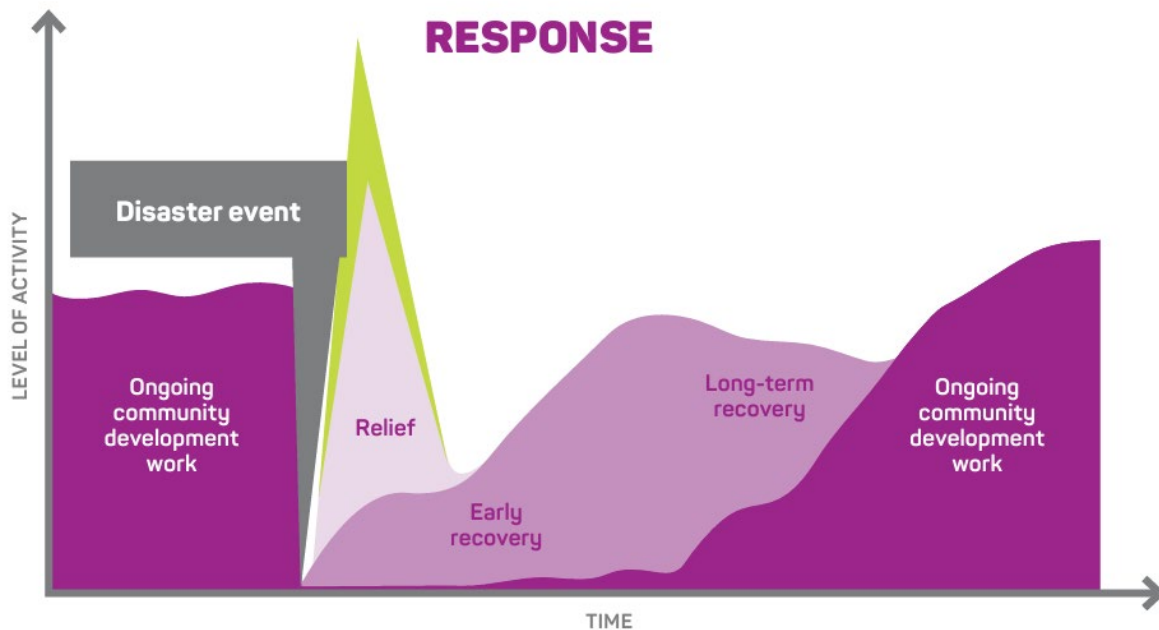
5. **Communities can benefit considerably when they drive and deliver their own recovery journeys following disaster**

    There is substantial evidence and government directives that recognise the value of enabling communities to drive and deliver their own recovery journeys following disasters[15,27-29]. This is largely because communities possess invaluable local knowledge, ownership, and empowerment, allowing for tailored and sustainable recovery plans. Their involvement ensures cultural sensitivity, faster response times, and resilience building through solidarity and trust among members. By leading their recovery, communities can mobilise resources more efficiently and effectively, prioritising long-term sustainability and the wellbeing of future generations. Overall, community-driven recovery efforts are about more than rebuilding infrastructure; they restore hope, preserve dignity, and foster resilience in the face of adversity.

The recommendations presented in this submission will serve to strengthen the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022 to ultimately promote community resilience in New South Wales. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to this review and collaborate with the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority.

Yours sincerely,
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