

REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022

Organisation: Australian Red Cross

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Submission to the Review of the *NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022*

Date: May 2024

About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world's largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don't take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs.

Highlights from our [2022-23 Annual Report](#):



18,000+
members and volunteers
acting for humanity



324,000+
Australians supported during
33 emergency activations

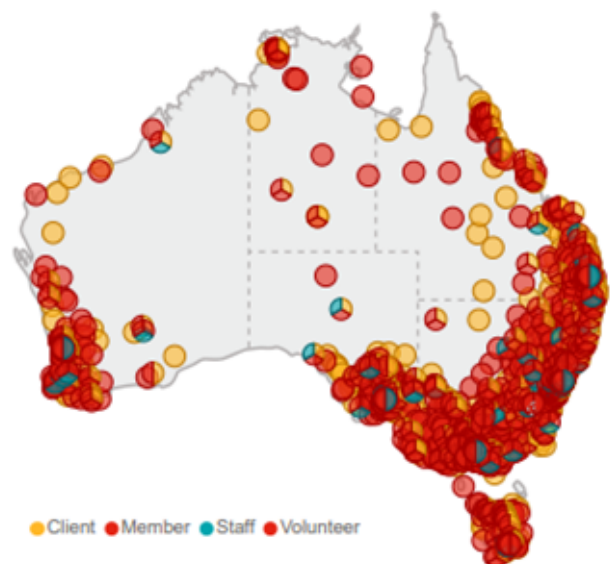


216,000+
social support hours
delivered



19,700+
people from 125 countries
supported through migration
programs

Location of Red Cross people and clients



Purpose

The Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority is reviewing the *NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022* (the Act) to ensure that the policy objectives remain valid and that the terms of the Act remain appropriate for securing the policy objectives.

Australian Red Cross works in partnership with the NSW Reconstruction Authority, communities, households and individuals to prevent, prepare for and adapt to natural disasters and other emergencies, and to recover and respond when events occur.

This submission provides feedback based on Australian Red Cross experience of the practical implications of the Act in our work with individuals, households and communities.

Summary of recommendations

Australian Red Cross recommends that:

Recommendation 1

The Act make explicit that '**community resilience**' includes **social resilience**, which must be prioritised alongside physical resilience, and that this change be reflected throughout the legislation.

Recommendation 2

The NSW Government consider using the Act to encourage or require the NSW Reconstruction Authority to enable and support an understanding of disaster and climate risk, and the development of plans to mitigate and adapt to that risk, at the **individual, household and community level**, prioritising the most at-risk Local Government Areas and populations experiencing vulnerability.

Recommendation 3

The practical application of the Act be better utilised to support the recovery of communities following **Collective Trauma Events**.

Community resilience

The Act defines **resilience** as the ability of a community and its systems to restore essential infrastructure and community functions, and to accommodate or adapt to the impact of a disaster.

To be truly reflective of the impact of disasters, research indicates that resilience includes social resilience, which must be prioritised alongside physical resilience.

The Act could be strengthened to ensure that this is understood and embedded in the functions of the NSW Reconstruction Authority.

Resilience is a process of positive adaptation before, during and after adversity. It is strengthened by bringing community members together to understand their collective risk, existing networks, strengths and resources. The strength of one's social networks play a role in supporting one's ability to adapt to challenges.¹

Australian Red Cross has undertaken research about the importance of community resilience in the context of disasters and climate adaptation.²

Building social resilience requires investment in social capital. Investing and delivering preparedness action improves psychosocial health by empowering individuals, households, and communities to foster resilience and collective action, thereby reducing reliance on external assistance.³

Pre-disaster preparedness actions mean people are better equipped for disasters and understand how to take personal responsibility for their lives, livelihoods and properties. Those who are part of well-prepared communities or organisations tend to do better than those who are not connected to any community support.⁴ Social preparedness involves fostering a sense of collective responsibility and building strong social networks that can support response and recovery efforts.⁵

Current government funding allocations do not always reflect or prioritise the value of social resilience.

- Of the \$32.1 million in overall funding for NSW under Round One of the Disaster Ready Fund, for example, only \$2.8 million was dedicated to community development initiatives and those that prioritised wellbeing and social resilience.
- Further, social connectedness and psychosocial wellbeing have emerged as a significant gap across the drought cycle, with only 11% of drought funding directed here, as compared with logistical, innovation, research and development, scientific or infrastructure supports.⁶

¹ Hilbrink, D, 2023, 'Social connection and resilience' Australian Journal of Emergency Management, Volume 38, No. 4, October 2023

² Australian Red Cross, 2023, 'what resilient communities look like', <https://www.redcross.org.au/globalassets/cms/publications/what-prepared-communities-look-like-report.pdf>

³ Boon, H, 2013, Preparedness and vulnerability: an issue of equity in Australian disaster situations, Australian Journal of Emergency Management, Volume 28, No. 3, July 2013

⁴ Norris FH, Stevens SP, Pfefferbaum B, Wyche KF & Pfefferbaum RL 2008, Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness. American Journal of Community Psychology, vol. 41, nos. 1–2, pp.127–150.

⁵ Hilbrink, D, 2023, 'Social connection and resilience' Australian Journal of Emergency management, volume 38, no. 4, october 2023

⁶ Acil Allen (2020) Drought Resilience Research Development Extension and Adoption Stocktake – Gaps and Opportunities for Investment – Final Report

Case Study: 2022 Northern Rivers Floods

Following the Northern Rivers Floods, Australian Red Cross witnessed first-hand why it is important to embed social resilience across the disaster management spectrum.

Staff and volunteers observed a range of reactions at each recovery milestone and saw how those with strong social resilience levels in different sections of the community had a better general response, and those with limited social resilience levels were more deeply impacted.

Staff and Volunteers have worked with communities to provide Psychological First Aid to those in need, delivering community barbeques and other outreach events to ensure connections among community members are increasing and undertaking significant preparedness programming to help empower communities for future events.

Australian Red Cross preparedness programs encourage people to take proactive action (such as securing appropriate insurance) and to take preventative measures around the home, like understanding when it's time to leave and how to access critical information.⁷ These actions can result in fewer callouts for emergency services, fewer claims for reimbursements, lower inflation, less strain on local economies and better outcomes for communities.

By ensuring community resilience explicitly includes social resilience and reflecting this throughout the legislation, it is more likely to be prioritised. The NSW Reconstruction Authority will have a clearer mandate to prioritise this work, and properly and directly incorporate all aspects of the disaster management spectrum into their functions.

Recommendation 1

That the Act, make explicit that '**community resilience**' includes **social resilience**, which must be prioritised alongside physical resilience, and that this change be reflected throughout the legislation.

⁷ Newnham, E.A. & Dzidic, P.L. (2022). Australian Red Cross Perth Hills Preparedness Emergency Programs: Impact Evaluation. Perth, Australia: Curtin University.

Building adaptive and resilient communities

The Act requires the NSW Reconstruction Authority to develop and implement a state disaster mitigation plan and empowers the Authority to request that relevant entities prepare disaster adaptation plans. The requirement for a state disaster mitigation plan underscores the government's responsibility to proactively manage risks and enhance community resilience. We note the recent launch of the NSW State Disaster Mitigation Plan, a foundational step towards comprehensive disaster management.

A significant opportunity exists for the NSW Government to further leverage its authority under the Act to encourage or require the NSW Reconstruction Authority to work with individuals, households and communities to develop their own disaster adaptation plans. The Act could encourage or require proactive measures that prioritise at-risk Local Government Areas and vulnerable communities.

Such an approach aligns with the overarching goal of fostering community resilience through understanding climate risks, implementing mitigation plans, and fostering adaptive capacities.

Case Study: EmergencyRedi Workshops

In New South Wales, Australian Red Cross regularly delivers EmergencyRedi Workshops – including 52 this financial year. These workshops are designed to help participants identify and undertake action and support them to complete a RediPlan.⁸ Our approach is informed by lived experience, is human-centred, strengths-based, and community-led. We ensure that the voices and needs of those experiencing vulnerability, have a disability, or are from culturally and diverse or First Nations backgrounds are heard and considered.

The Act allows the NSW Reconstruction Authority to issue guidelines about the content, format and development of state level plans. Therefore, the Act could also enable the NSW Reconstruction Authority to issue guidelines for plans at the individual, household and community level.

We note that the NSW Reconstruction Authority operates within the context of broader cross-jurisdictional and national frameworks, such as the Second National Action Plan on Disaster Risk Reduction and the proposed Commonwealth National Adaptation Plan. Ideally, guidance on the format and content of mitigation and adaptation plans would align with these broader frameworks, creating national consistency, informed by better practice. This would ensure that efforts at national, state, community, household and individual level are evidence-based and work collectively to achieve the desired outcomes.

Importantly, guidance should ensure that mitigation and adaptation activities are not limited to physical infrastructure but include those that build social capital. This approach not only strengthens community resilience but also builds collective responsibility and solidarity in addressing climate challenges.

Recommendation 2

That the NSW Government consider using the Act to encourage or require the NSW Reconstruction Authority to enable and support an understanding of disaster and climate risk, and the development of plans to mitigate and adapt to that risk, at the **individual, household and community level**, prioritising the most at-risk Local Government Areas and populations experiencing vulnerability.

⁸ Australian Red Cross, 2024, 'EmergencyRedi workshops' Working alongside communities to strengthen resilience and prepare for disasters, <https://www.redcross.org.au/emergencyredi/>

Supporting communities recovering from Collective Trauma Events

The Act applies to 'emergencies in relation to which the Minister has requested assistance from the Authority, and other emergencies in relation to which a public authority including a Minister other than the Minister administering the Act has requested assistance.'

Australian Red Cross suggests that the practical application of the Act hasn't yet been utilised to its full extent and could be applied to the recovery of communities following Collective Trauma Events.

Collective Trauma Events do not fit neatly into the traditional parameters of emergency management arrangements. While emergency management agencies are sometimes activated to respond, there is often a concern that more or different support may be needed.⁹

Over the past decade, New South Wales has experienced significant Collective Trauma Events (CTE), including the recent Westfield Bondi Junction stabbing incident, Greta Bush crash, Buxton crash, and Lindt Café siege. Each of these tragic events have highlighted a need for government to have a proactive approach to managing the short-, medium- and long-term psychosocial impacts on the community and how they recover to a 'new normal'.

What is a Collective Trauma Event?

A Collective Trauma Event is an event, irrespective of the hazard, which negatively impacts social life and damages the bonds between people and impairs the prevailing sense of community. Such events may impact things we previously took for granted about public locations, routines and values.¹⁰

Commonly occurring elements of CTEs include:

- witnessed violence,
- horror,
- public grief,
- a strong sense of injustice,
- intense media coverage,
- a highly politicised aftermath,
- judicial or public enquiry processes, and
- identification with victims or locations.

In Section 6, clauses (c), (d) and (e) potentially allow the NSW Government to activate the Authority in relation to other events. Australian Red Cross suggests further consideration of the practical application of this section to ensure it can be more readily used to support communities recovering from Collective Trauma Events.

Broadly speaking, the needs of community following Collective Trauma Events are notably similar to when disasters occur, and partners such as Australian Red Cross, can provide tailored support including Psychosocial First Aid, temporary memorial management and advisory support.

Australian Red Cross has an established role in helping to address the humanitarian and psychosocial needs of people and communities impacted. Our work is informed by real time experience and

⁹ Brady, K, Randrianarisoa, A & Richardson, J 2018 Best practice guidelines: Supporting communities before, during and after collective trauma events, Australian Red Cross, Carlton, Vic.

¹⁰ Brady, K, Randrianarisoa, A & Richardson, J 2018 Best practice guidelines: Supporting communities before, during and after collective trauma events, P5, Australian Red Cross, Carlton, Vic.

guidelines¹¹ and developed in conjunction with experts in emergency recovery, social work, psychology and sociology, and existing literature from around the world.

Case Study: Greta Bush crash

Following the Greta Bush crash, Australian Red Cross was activated to deliver temporary memorial management, and Psychological First Aid. For around 10 days, staff and volunteers focused on providing those who paid their respects, with a safe space to stop, reflect and process their grief. This included:

- providing Psychological First Aid to those at the memorial,
- working alongside local councils, government representatives and other stakeholders to continually assess community need and appetite,
- managing psychosocial needs amongst a high degree of media interest and several visits by dignitaries, and
- assistance with the thinning of flowers and salvaging of cards so they could be preserved and digitised for the families.

Away from the temporary memorial, Australian Red Cross also completed several street walks, speaking with community and providing trauma teddies to children feeling the effects of the crash. Volunteers also provided ongoing support to individuals presenting to the Singleton AFL Club where many of those killed were members.

By better utilising the the Act to support the recovery of communities following collective trauma events, the NSW Reconstruction Authority can call on existing experienced recovery partners like Australian Red Cross to assist with wider efforts to support communities following these events.

Recommendation 3

That the practical application of the Act be better utilised to support the recovery of communities following Collective Trauma Events.

¹¹ Brady, K, Randrianarisoa, A & Richardson, J 2018 Best practice guidelines: Supporting communities before, during and after collective trauma events, Australian Red Cross, Carlton, Vic.

Conclusion

Australian Red Cross emphasises the critical importance of proactive measures, community engagement, and comprehensive support frameworks in building adaptive and resilient communities in NSW. Our partnership with the NSW Reconstruction Authority has been instrumental in advancing these goals, particularly in the context of disaster recovery and preparedness efforts.

The recommendations put forward by Australian Red Cross are designed to leverage the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act of 2022 effectively. Our recommendations aim to empower individuals, households, and communities to enhance their resilience to climate-related challenges. This includes understanding climate risks, implementing mitigation plans, and fostering adaptive capacities, with a focus on at-risk areas and vulnerable populations.

Moreover, our submission highlights the need to explicitly reflect social resilience within the Act, ensuring that communities' holistic needs are addressed in times of crisis. Mandating a response to Collective Trauma Events is another critical aspect that can significantly enhance community resilience and recovery efforts.

Drawing upon our extensive experience and expertise, Australian Red Cross stands ready to support the NSW Government in implementing these recommendations and building stronger, more resilient communities across the state. By working collaboratively and adopting a holistic approach that prioritises community well-being, NSW can navigate climate challenges and other systemic risks more effectively, ensuring a safer and more sustainable future for all.

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