Submission on the NSW Draft Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines

August 2024

![Australian Red Cross logo]

About us

Established in 1914 and enacted 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, meaning we 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. 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
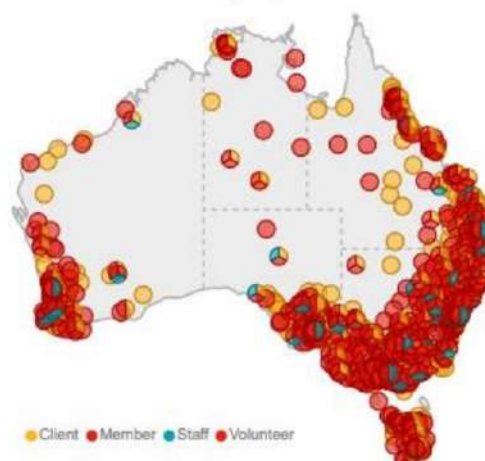
216,000+ social support hours delivered

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

Location of Red Cross people and clients

Client · Member · Staff · Volunteer

Purpose

The New South Wales Reconstruction Authority is seeking feedback on the Draft Disaster Adaptation Plan (DAP) Guidelines (the guidelines), which aim to improve how all levels of government plan for, build resilience to, and reduce the impact of, disasters in New South Wales. Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NSW Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines.

Our input to the Guidelines is consistent with, and reinforces, the recommendations made in our submission to the Joint Select Committee on the NSW Reconstruction Authority's Review of the *NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022* and our submission to the Australian Government's National Adaptation Plan Issues Paper.

Summary of recommendations

Australian Red Cross recommends to the NSW Reconstruction Authority:

Recommendation 1

> That the Guidelines make explicit that **social resilience** must be prioritised alongside physical resilience – thereby strengthening the disaster resilience of people across Australia, especially those living in the most **at risk** Local Government Areas and the **population groups most vulnerable** to the impacts of disasters, and particularly the changing nature of disasters as a result of climate change.

Recommendation 2

> We invite the New South Wales Government to more **formally recognise** the distinct and **permanent role of Australian Red Cross as auxiliary** to the public authorities in the **humanitarian field** by embedding Australian Red Cross in emergency services governance arrangements (at all levels), including those set out **under the Disaster Adaptation planning process**.

Disaster adaptation in New South Wales

A well-adapted and resilient New South Wales is one in which individuals, households and communities understand their climate and disaster risk, have plans in place to mitigate and adapt to that risk, and have the networks and resources to act upon those plans.

Through our research, there are four indicators that we look for when building disaster resilience. If a community or person has all four elements, they likely have high resilience.

Knowledge	• having access to, and the ability to act upon, appropriate information, communal knowledge, and local wisdom.
Wellbeing	• a person or community's health and wellbeing status, including psychological coping ability.
Security	• having adequate shelter, safety, and the capacity to maintain financial protection of assets and livelihoods.
Connection	• the amount of support people can draw upon (social capital) to achieve goals or shared objectives.

Importantly, resilience cannot be developed for, or on behalf of, communities (AIDR, 2020). Communities must be **enabled and empowered** to build resilience, and this requires sharing of information and resources within and between communities and partners.

Although strengthening community values, promoting self-leadership, and developing greater community resilience are not typically seen as 'climate change adaptation,' in our view, they are.

Anything that enhances social capital and infrastructure reduces the damage that future disasters will have on people and communities.

This is climate change adaptation in action.

The review of the *New South Wales Reconstruction Authority Act 2022* (the Act) and the proposed New South Wales Disaster Adaptation Plan Guidelines (the Guidelines) are welcome first steps in creating the conditions for adaptation and resilience in New South Wales.

The importance of the social environment

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, academic literature – along with our experience – shows that resilience includes **social resilience**, which must be prioritised alongside physical resilience.

Australian Red Cross has recommended to government that the act be strengthened to ensure that this is understood and embedded in the functions of the NSW Reconstruction Authority.

Further, we have proposed that act go beyond plans at the regional level and enable the NSW Reconstruction Agency to issue guidelines at the individual, household and community level.

Consistent with this recommendation, we welcome the prioritisation of community engagement in the proposed Guidelines and note that social infrastructure and social cohesion form an important part of the risk reduction toolkit.

We note, however, that most of the proposed adaptation pathways presented focus on systems and physical infrastructure, as opposed to human infrastructure and social connection, and are focused on regional mitigation and adaptation.

While systems and physical infrastructure is valuable, there are risks in prioritising the structural and regulatory environments at the exclusion or expense of the social environment, including:

- an expectation on the part of communities that the responsibility for adaptation and risk mitigation lies solely with governments;
- underestimation of the importance of community fabric and the disruptive impact disasters can have on community functioning;
- underestimation of the value of social impact of disasters and the economic cost of that social impact ([Australian Business Roundtable, 2021);](#)
- under-investment in measures that strengthen community resilience (community events, community development exercises, connection-building among residents and neighbours); and
- an over-representation of solutions that can be measured quantitatively.

We suggest that such risk be mitigated in the presentation of the Guidelines by demonstrating the central role and necessity of building social capital, including at the individual and household level.

"People are key to adaptation and resilience"

For many, including communities themselves, the most obvious methods of building resilience are installing and improving systems and infrastructure: early warning systems; building codes and strategic planning controls; firebreaks, levees, seawalls.

However, the evidence on the benefits of investing in disaster resilience centred around people and communities is clear:

- Every $1 USD invested in community resilience saves between $11 and $13 in recovery and clean-up costs (US Chamber of Commerce, 2024).
- For every $1 USD invested in scaled-up treatment for common mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, there is a return of $5 in improved health and productivity (World Health Organization, 2020).

The people who rely on warning systems and building codes, and who live behind seawalls, firewalls and levees need meaningful support to build the connection, wellbeing, knowledge and security that underpins resilience.

Population movement

Climate-driven population movement is likely to increase in the years ahead – both internally (within Australia) and regionally (IFRC, 2022). The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (UNDRR, 2015) contains specific provisions to 'address disaster-induced human mobility to strengthen the resilience of affected people and that of host communities'.

We are therefore pleased to see the inclusion of managed relocation as part of the draft risk reduction toolkit.

Managed relocation is not, however, an exercise in simply shifting people to a new location; it must be sensitive to the importance of place and to people's connection with the land and community where they live. It will have significant run-on impacts on whole-of-community functioning and cohesion.

The Guidelines and toolkit must therefore ensure that relocation options recognise the need for resourcing, whole-of-community planning, an understanding of social vulnerability, voluntariness, support for those who choose to stay and for those who choose to remain, ensuring safety, dignity and agency of all (IFRC, 2022).

Engagement

With regards to community engagement, we note that more disadvantaged members of our society experience the human impacts of disaster disproportionately.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (UNDRR, 2015) highlights a number of groups including women, children and young people, people with disabilities, older people, Indigenous people and migrants may be excluded from opportunities to strengthen their resilience.

Australian Red Cross has seen this through our:

- long-term research with the University of Melbourne into the aftermath of the Black Saturday Bushfires (Beyond Bushfires Report, 2021);
- work as a founding member of the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience;
- research into Emergency Resilience in CALD Communities (Australian Red Cross, 2021);
- research in partnership with the Global Migration Lab (Locked down and left out, 2021); and
- international experience and working in and with Australian communities affected by disasters for the past 110 years.

It is important that targeted engagement approaches are developed in partnership with these groups to maximise opportunities to build resilience and ensure participation in community engagement processes is equitable. This is particularly relevant, as we know that people experiencing vulnerability are likely to experience the impacts of disasters more severely than those who have greater access to resources and strong social capital (Australian Red Cross, 2021).

First Nations values and knowledge systems

Supporting the above, we suggest the Guidelines encourage building capacity and resilience *with* and not *for* First Nations communities, recognising strengths rather than taking a deficit-based approach, and acknowledging the unconscious biases at play in policy, procedure and practice.

In taking action to strengthen First Nations-led adaptation, a sense of allyship, where government and partners listen to understand, rather than listen to respond, is critical.

To address key issues, such as the loss of cultural heritage, loss of traditional ways of life and displacement in response to climate-accelerated disasters, it is important to acknowledge that mainstreaming processes may be understood as assimilation, and lead to a loss of voice and erosion of cultural activities for First Nations communities.

A bottom-up approach will enable communities to drive their own recovery and identify culturally safe adaptation actions.

Recommendation 1

That the Guidelines make explicit that **social resilience** must be prioritised alongside physical resilience - thereby strengthening the disaster resilience of people across Australia, especially those living in the most **at risk** Local Government Areas and the **population groups most vulnerable** to the impacts of disasters, and particularly the changing nature of disasters as a result of climate change.

Recognising the auxiliary status of Australian Red Cross

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to work with the NSW Reconstruction Authority in implementing the Guidelines.

No other organisation works where we do (we are embedded in communities around the country), when we do (at all stages of the emergency management continuum) and how we do (we focus on the wellbeing and humanitarian needs of people and communities).

We are established under international legal frameworks and domestically under a Royal Charter – this gives us authority to work in the humanitarian field alongside all levels of government, and those who act with their authority. No other organisation has this unique auxiliary status.

We work under an internationally recognised and respected emblem that is regulated under international and domestic law.

We are exclusively humanitarian; neutral, impartial and independent; always seeking to support those who are most in need and ensure the trust and confidence of all.

The benefits that this provides government include access to the largest humanitarian network in the world, and a partner that is fundamentally required and legally mandated to prevent and respond to humanitarian crises.

The Guidelines provide an opportunity to formally define where and how the work of Australian Red Cross supplements disaster adaptation programs and services in New South Wales to realise the full potential of our auxiliary relationship with the government and the people of New South Wales. This could include supporting state coordination groups, regional steering committees and technical working groups.

Recommendation 2

We invite the New South Wales Government to more **formally recognise** the distinct and **permanent role of Australian Red Cross as auxiliary** to the public authorities in the **humanitarian field** by embedding Australian Red Cross in emergency services governance arrangements (at all levels), including those set out **under the Disaster Adaptation planning process**.

Conclusion

Climate adaptation involves actions that aim to reduce, compensate for, or adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change.

To adapt, communities must draw on their strengths. 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.

Australian Red Cross has experience working with and for communities to build resilience. The way we work brings together local people, governments, businesses, and other agencies to address local risks.

Our approach is human-centred, strengths-based, and community-led. We ensure that the voices and needs of those who are vulnerable, people with a disability, people from culturally and diverse backgrounds and First Nations people are heard and considered.

We stand ready to support the NSW Government and Australian communities to deliver the ambition of the disaster adaptation planning process.

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