



Australian Council of Social Service

**Extreme weather, climate change and the
community sector**

**ACOSS submission to the Senate Inquiry
into recent trends in and
preparedness for
extreme weather
events**

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I Introduction

I.1 Australian Council of Social Service

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is the peak body of the community services and welfare sector and the national voice for people affected by poverty and inequality. ACOSS' vision is for a fair, inclusive and sustainable Australia where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from social and economic life. We provide independent and informed policy development, advice, advocacy and representation about issues facing the community services sector; a voice for all people in Australia affected by poverty and inequality; and a key coordinating and leadership role for non-profit social services across the country.

Our membership represents over 3000 organisations plus additional individuals through the combined network of the Councils of Social Service (COSS). Our members comprise community service providers, professional associations and advocacy organisations.

I.2 Extreme weather preparedness and climate change

Our interest in extreme weather preparedness and climate change adaptation is primarily the result of our interest in matters affecting people on low-incomes and experiencing disadvantage and inequality in Australia. Our work in this area flows from clear evidence from research that people facing poverty and inequality will be affected first and worst by the impacts of climate change, including increasingly frequent and intense extreme weather events such as heat waves, drought, bushfires and floods. They have the least capacity to cope, to adapt and to recover.

Our interest also flows from concern that the crucial role that thousands of community sector organisations – such as neighbourhood and learning centres, community health, child welfare and family support services, financial counselling and crisis accommodation services – play in supporting their communities to respond to and recover from disasters and extreme weather events remains poorly recognised and resourced within federal and state emergency management arrangements.

I.3 ACOSS Report: Extreme Weather, Climate Change and the Community Sector – Risks and Adaptations

In 2012-13 ACOSS received funding from the Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency (DCCEE) via the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) to research the vulnerability and preparedness of community sector organisations – and the individuals and communities they support – to climate change impacts, including extreme weather.

The project was conducted in partnership with Climate Risk Pty. Ltd., an organisation with long-standing experience in climate change and extreme weather risk analysis in government and the private sector. Its key aims were to investigate: the vulnerability of community sector organisations to climate change and extreme weather impacts, particularly to infrastructure; the mechanisms by which climate change and extreme weather impacts can trigger the strain or failure of community service delivery; the impacts of service failure on people experiencing poverty and inequality; and suitable adaptation options and barriers.

The final project report, *Extreme Weather, Climate Change and the Community Sector – Risks and Adaptation (Climate Change and the Community Sector)*, is due for submission to NCCARF in March 2013. Our initial findings indicate that community service organisations are highly vulnerable and not well prepared to manage extreme weather and climate change risks. Additional findings include that the vulnerability of people experiencing poverty and inequality will likely be increased by the extreme weather-driven failure of the organisations on which they rely to meet basic needs but that, if well prepared, these organisations can make a significant positive contribution to the preparedness and resilience of their clients and the community through the use of their specialist skills, assets and facilities.

These findings support the experiences of many thousands of organisations within our networks that have played an active role in the response to and recovery from recent disasters, such as the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, the floods in both Queensland and Victoria in 2010-11 and the 2013 bushfires in Tasmania and New South Wales. The documentation and analysis of these experiences by state level peak bodies such as the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and the Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) have been drawn on in the preparation of this submission.

2 Senate Committee inquiry into recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events

ACOSS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Senate's *Inquiry into recent trends in and preparedness for extreme weather events*. We are responding in our capacity as the national peak body for community services and, as such, this submission only addresses the terms of reference of relevance to community service organisations, the vulnerable and disadvantaged people who rely on them, and where we can add value based on our research and consultation.

In developing this submission, ACOSS has primarily drawn on the findings from the *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project, which is currently under peer review and is scheduled for publication in the second quarter of 2013. A copy of the draft final report for the project is provided **in confidence** as an attachment to this submission. **While it cannot be published in full at this time, we invite the Standing Committee to reference it in its report on the inquiry.** We do so based on the understanding that the final report for the *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project will be published prior to the release of the Inquiry's report on 20 March 2013.

In this submission, ACOSS specifically responds to sections (b)(ii), (c), (d), (e) and (g) of the inquiry's terms of reference. We also provide a series of recommendations for the committee's consideration.

3 Terms of Reference (b)(ii) The costs of extreme weather events and impacts on social and economic infrastructure and human health

Australia experiences a range of emergency events, including natural disasters and extreme weather events, such as long-term drought, heatwaves, floods and severe storms and bushfires. While Australia is a resilient nation, emergencies can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of individuals and communities, having the potential to cause great physical, financial and emotional hardship, as well as loss of life. As such, it is important that consideration of the total cost of the impacts of extreme weather events, which are likely to become more frequent and intense as a result of climate change, include consideration of their social costs, particularly their impact on communities, those most vulnerable and disadvantaged within them and the services that support them.

People experiencing poverty and inequality are affected first and worst by both direct and indirect climate change impacts. This includes:

- People on low incomes
- The unemployed
- People living in poor quality housing or in the private rental market
- Frail older people
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Single parents
- Newly arrived migrants and refugees
- People with a disability and their carers.

Australian and international research literature reviewed as part of the *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project clearly demonstrates that these groups are most likely to be affected by the negative effects of climate change on human health and wellbeing. However, the report also reveals that there is greater understanding about the ways in which some groups, such as frail older people, are vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather impacts than others, including people experiencing homelessness, people with a disability and women and children at risk of domestic and family violence.

These research findings are borne out by the experiences of people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in recent disasters in Australia and overseas. For example, in analysing the social impacts of the Queensland floods in 2010-11, QCOSS (2011) highlights that they had a disproportionate impact on people already in poverty, particularly as a result of:

- Lack of or under-insurance and the rejection of flood insurance claims, which left people unable to live in or to repair their homes;
- Loss of employment through disruptions to and closures of local businesses;
- Loss of rental tenancies and inability to meet higher bond payments and rents;
- Increased pressure on public housing waiting lists; and
- Increased living costs.

The floods also had serious negative consequences for people at risk of poverty before they occurred, for many of whom the disaster was the final stressor that led to financial insecurity.

More recently, tens of thousands of New York public housing residents were trapped without power, heating or access to medical or other support services for up to two weeks in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy (New York Times, 9th December 2012). The extensive flooding caused by the storm surge directly impacted 402 public housing buildings resulting in the loss of power to 77,000 residents; 34,565 residents also lost access to heating and water supplies. Without power, lifts and lights in the affected buildings could not operate, effectively stranding tens of thousands of residents – many of whom were elderly or living with a disability or chronic health problem – in freezing and pitch black apartments. People in wheelchairs were unable to evacuate, diabetics were left without access to insulin and residents attempting to heat their homes using their stoves suffered carbon monoxide poisoning. In the storm's immediate aftermath, the government agency responsible for public housing struggled to respond in a timely manner due to poor long-term planning prior to the event: it took almost two weeks for power to be restored and for a coordinated approach to be established to locate residents and assess and support their needs.

Community service organisations are embedded within their communities, deliver key services across local communities, have in-depth knowledge of local people, history, risks and vulnerabilities and are best placed to understand and identify their support needs. The services they provide are a critical feature of Australian society, complementing the income support system as well as health and education systems. As such, community service organisations comprise an essential component of the social infrastructure in human settlements. Indeed, for many people experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion, these organisations are often the primary source of connection to the broader community and form the basis of their resilience to everyday adversity as well as in times of crisis.

Despite the severity of extreme weather impacts to communities – particularly to those most vulnerable within them – national and state-based emergency

management and other relevant policy frameworks do not adequately resource community service organisations to fulfil the critical role they can and do play in supporting communities and individuals to respond to and recover from emergency events. As a result, very little is understood about ways in which community-based social service delivery will be impacted by increasingly frequent and intense extreme weather events.

The *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project addresses this significant knowledge gap. Its focus is on the relationship between physical and social infrastructure failure through the lens of the not-for-profit community sector and its clients. **It finds that extreme weather events have the potential to seriously disrupt community service organisations' service delivery and that the consequences of service failure are serious, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged sectors of the community.** For example, the national survey of community service organisations conducted as part of the project reveals that one week after an extreme weather event, which caused serious damage to their premises, 50% of organisations would be unable to operate. **Indeed, 25% of organisations reported that damage caused by an extreme weather event might lead to its permanent closure.**

The survey also found that community service organisations are particularly vulnerable and not well prepared to respond to the failure of critical infrastructure services including power, water and telecommunications, with disruptions to these services extremely likely to result in the total cessation of service provision. At the same time, disasters can lead to significant increased demand for the services provided by community service organisations, both over the short and long-term.

The consequences of the total cessation of community-based social service delivery in response to an extreme event at a time when demand for services is increased are serious – for their clients and for the community more broadly, particularly in smaller communities with limited social infrastructure. Key themes that emerged from the *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project include that the failure of service delivery could place individuals at increased risk of homelessness, financial hardship, hunger, disease and ill-health, mental ill-health and suicide and violence. In the worst case scenario, people with high level personal and health care needs and people who are homeless could be at increased risk of death if social service provision were to fail.

4 Terms of Reference (c) An assessment of the preparedness of the of key sectors for extreme weather events, including major infrastructure (electricity, water transport, telecommunications), health, construction and property, and agriculture and forestry

Alongside the sectors listed above and all levels of government, the community services sector plays a significant role in preparing for, responding to and recovering from extreme weather events and natural disasters in Australia. Its organisations play an important part in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of individuals and communities through providing vital advice and information about emergency preparedness and recovery, and are generally best-placed to provide support to local community members, particularly over the longer term once the formal emergency services have withdrawn.

According to VCOSS (2011), research supports the critical importance of community development and psychosocial support in disaster recovery. Psychosocial support is an approach to victims of disaster, catastrophe or violence to foster the resilience of communities and individuals. It is aimed at easing the resumption of normal life, facilitating affected people's participation in their convalescence and preventing pathological consequences of potentially traumatic situations. Psychosocial interventions are particularly important for individuals and communities that are already experiencing vulnerability, disadvantage, social or economic stress. The psychosocial support services provided by community service organisations assists community recovery from emergencies and contributes to the emotional, social, spiritual, financial and physical wellbeing of individuals and communities, particularly those that are vulnerable or face disadvantage. Services include:

- Psychological first aid
- Practical assistance
- Access to general and specialist services (including counselling)
- Information and education
- Psychosocial and social support.

Despite their connection with local communities and their ability to provide critical information and services during and after extreme events, the lack of formal recognition and resourcing of community service organisations to participate in emergency planning and response has also meant that understanding and supporting the preparedness of this critical sector has been overlooked.

The *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project comprises the first attempt to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the preparedness of the community service sector to respond to climate change and extreme weather impacts.

Findings from the national survey of community service organisations conducted as part of the project reveal that very few organisations within the sector have begun to take systematic action to manage, mitigate or transfer climate change and extreme weather risks. Respondents to the survey reported high levels of under-insurance against losses caused by climate change and extreme weather impacts and low levels of action in areas such as disaster management planning and risk assessment. Significantly, the survey found that organisations that had experienced an extreme weather event in the previous 10 year period were more likely than those that had not to have taken concrete actions to build preparedness and response capacity. Other factors that contribute to a greater level of preparedness within the sector include organisational size and level of knowledge about climate change and extreme weather risks.

The project also identified key barriers to adaptation and preparedness for community service organisations. These include: lack of adequate financial resources and capacity (addressed in detail below); and lack of clear government policies and guidelines in relation to climate change adaptation.

5 Terms of Reference (d) An assessment of the preparedness and the adequacy of resources in the emergency services sector to prevent and respond to extreme weather events

While ACOSS supports the recognition within the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* that ‘disaster resilience is the collective responsibility of all sectors of society...including the non-government sector’ and the acknowledgement that ‘non-government organisations are at the forefront of strengthening disaster resilience in Australia’ (COAG 2009, ii), we remain concerned that, in practice, not enough has been done to resource community service organisations and their networks to build emergency response capacity and to facilitate their active participation in emergency management planning, response and recovery efforts.

The *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project found that lack of adequate financial resources and contracting for service arrangements between government funding agencies and community service organisations were key barriers to climate change adaptation. Lack of financial resources prevents organisations from engaging in resilience and capacity building to prepare for disasters. Inflexible contracts for service provision place limits on their capacity to participate effectively in emergency response and recovery efforts and to meet increased demand for services during and after disasters.

These findings are supported by the experience of organisations on the ground. According to VCOSS, ‘current emergency response funding arrangements do not facilitate a rapid response by relief and recovery agencies, nor do they facilitate longer term recovery and building resilience within communities’ (2011,6). In its submission to the Victorian Emergency Management Green Paper, it further states:

In recent emergency management events in Victoria, it has been easier to secure resources to replace and rebuild physical infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, than for equally critical social recovery work, such as counselling and outreach services, with a tendency by Government to dismiss examples of identified need’ (2011, 11).

By way of example, it cites the experience of Victorian Neighbourhood houses after the 2011 floods. Despite the critical role they played in providing information and support services, particularly in small communities with limited social infrastructure, they were unable to secure even modest requests for additional resources to support relief and recovery efforts (VCOSS 2011, 12). Experiences such as this were repeated after the floods in Queensland, where community service organisations were originally left out of the Queensland Government’s approach to the

Commonwealth for disaster relief funding. It took several weeks longer for a funding package to support community sector recovery efforts than for the small business sector.

This lack of adequate financial resources is exacerbated for many community service organisations by rigid service funding contracts, which fail to make allowances for the impacts of disasters on organisations' capacity to deliver services as contracted or provide for a pre-agreed proportion of resources to be used in the delivery of services to meet needs during crisis and recovery. A clear example of the serious consequences of this for organisations was provided by an organisation that participated in one of the national workshops held as part of the *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project. This organisation mobilised its entire workforce – on a voluntary basis – to participate in the response and recovery efforts to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. It was not able to recover the costs expended in seconding its professionals to the response effort. More seriously, when the organisation resumed normal operations, it was informed by its government funding agency that it was to lose a substantial funding payment because it had missed a contractual reporting deadline while participating in the disaster response.

Provisions need to be included in Government service contracts, particularly at the state level, to provide flexibility to support service providers to play a key role in disaster management, for example by enabling them to deliver services by agreement in a declared disaster without violating contractual obligations. One example of such a mechanism is the model currently used in Queensland, which provides memoranda of understanding between government funding agencies and contracted service providers that guarantee that community sector organisations will be reimbursed for providing a range of services and supports for affected communities in the event of a declared natural disaster.

6 Terms of Reference (e) The current roles and effectiveness of the division of responsibilities between different levels of government (federal, state and local) to manage extreme weather events

There is increasing recognition of the critical role that community service organisations play in building community disaster resilience and in responding to and recovering from disasters when they occur, for example in the *National Disaster Resilience Strategy*. Nonetheless ACOSS is concerned that the resourcing of emergency response capability tends to be limited to emergency service organisations and does not encompass the broader needs of communities. In order to improve interagency coordination and service delivery the pivotal role of local community sector organisations needs to be fully recognised and resourced (VCOSS 2011).

While community service organisations are often called on by governments and the community to contribute volunteer services, resources, support, facilities and equipment to emergency response efforts – even when most of their own workforce may be subject to disaster impacts - they are not included as key stakeholders in emergency response and recovery planning, which is usually limited to formal, uniformed emergency response services. For example, in the aftermath of the Queensland floods in 2010-11, community sector representatives were initially excluded from the Prime Minister’s Flood Taskforce, which was the key forum for discussion about how to fund the national response to the disaster and to manage the pressures on the federal budget arising from it.

The importance of the role of community service organisations cannot be underestimated. In order for communities, particularly vulnerable communities, to prepare for extreme weather and be resilient, the support of local community service organisations is critical.

Case Study

At the local level, the experience of an organisation operating in south-west Victoria further exemplifies the difficulties faced by community sector organisations involved in participating in formal response and recovery efforts. The community in which the organisation operates was affected by 13 years of drought, during which the 2009 Victorian Bushfires occurred, and which was broken by the devastating floods in 2011. When the bushfires broke out, the organisation's response was hampered by a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies involved, including the state government department of human services, the local government and non-government agencies. Rather than being clearly defined prior to the disaster, the roles and responsibilities of the various agencies were resolved in the context of the emergency response.

Initially the organisation received no recognition or additional funding for its emergency response and recovery work. However, over a five year period of systematic advocacy, the organisation is now represented on the regional emergency management committee and holds formal memoranda of understanding for funding and service delivery during and after extreme events with the Victorian Department of Human services and the local government. The critical role it plays in emergency management is now recognised by the Country Fire Authority as well as the local community.

Examples of the value of effective partnerships and coordination between governments and community sector organisations have also emerged. One such example is that of the coordinated response of the City of Whittlesea through the Whittlesea Community Futures (WCF) group to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. WCF is a network of over 40 human service organisations, community groups and state government departments working with the City of Whittlesea to deliver projects to increase community capacity and resilience. Following the bushfires, the pre-existing relationships and communication networks established through WCF were critical in increasing the effectiveness and coordinated use of local resources to best meet the needs of individuals and communities affected.

7 Terms of Reference (g) Any gaps in Australia’s Climate Change Adaptation Framework and the steps required for effective national coordination of climate change response and risk management

The *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project identifies a key gap in Australia’s approach to climate change adaptation: the vulnerability and preparedness of people experiencing poverty and inequality and of the community-based, social service organisations that support them.

The Australian Government’s 2010 position paper, *Adapting to Climate Change in Australia*, identifies six key priority areas for adapting to the impacts of climate change: water, coasts, infrastructure, natural ecosystems, disaster management and agriculture. While recognising that adapting to climate change is the shared responsibility of governments and the community, the community itself – particularly those most vulnerable within it and the community-based organisations that provide their care – are not included in its priorities. **The Australian Government must include people experiencing poverty and inequality as one of the most critical areas of risk from climate change and prioritise the adaptation of the community services sector to cope with current and worsening extreme weather as well as incremental climate change risks.**

The oversight of the human element, social justice issues and the role of the community services sector in climate change adaptation is also reflected in the Productivity Commission’s 2012 draft report *Barriers to Effective Climate Change Adaptation*. The Commission identified the following key barriers to effective adaptation: market failures, regulatory barriers, governance and institutional barriers and behavioural barriers. It states,

Generally speaking, households, businesses and other organisations are capable of managing the climate variability and the risks they face. This is because people have an incentive to assess the costs and benefits of taking action to mitigate the impacts of climate change on themselves (2012, 5).

As demonstrated by this statement, the particular barriers to adaptation faced by people experiencing poverty and inequality and the community services sector are overlooked. This omission is problematic for a number of reasons already addressed in this submission, however, to reiterate:

- People experiencing poverty and inequality will be first and worst affected by climate change and extreme weather impacts, having the least ability to cope, to adapt and to recover;
- CSOs are a critical component of the social infrastructure of their communities, particularly for people who are disadvantaged or experience social exclusion;
- CSOs also play a critical role in responding to extreme weather events and disasters. They are embedded in their local communities and continue to provide crucial support long after the formal emergency response agencies have withdrawn.

As QCOSS states in its submission to the Queensland Government's Climate Change Adaptation strategy: 'the human element is critical to any discussion on climate change adaptation, and ... vulnerable groups need to be a central focus in any adaptation strategy' (QCOSS 2011, 2).

In identifying the steps required to remedy this gap and to improve climate change response risk management at every level, we draw your attention to the draft final report from the *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project. The report provides clear evidence about the consequences of failing to support the adaptation of the community service sector – for people experiencing poverty and inequality and for the community as a whole – as well as evidence about the positive role a well-adapted, resourced and recognised sector could play in preparedness and response to climate change and extreme weather risks. It concludes with a comprehensive set of recommendations for governments, policy makers and CSOs to address the sector's adaptation needs, which are summarised in the following section.

8 Recommendations

The attached draft report for the *Climate Change and the Community Sector* project presents a comprehensive set of recommendations about the resources and action required to prepare and adapt community service organisations – and the community service sector broadly – to climate change and extreme weather impacts, to which we refer the Committee. Their full implementation by community service organisations and their government and private sector partners will ensure that the sector is able to:

- Fulfil its service delivery mission to people experiencing poverty and inequality sustainably and over the long term as the climate changes and the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events worsens;
- Make a positive contribution to the resilience of the individuals and communities with which they work to climate change and extreme weather impacts; and
- Participate effectively in emergency management planning, relief, response and recovery efforts when disasters occur.

These recommendations fall under three key areas: sector preparedness; building resilience; and sharing risks (see pp. 116 – 119). Key recommendations are reproduced below.

I. Sector preparedness

Contracts for service delivery must provide greater flexibility to community service organisations and enable them to participate effectively in disaster response and recovery efforts. Specifically, they should include mechanisms that:

- Ensure timely compensation for their contributions to response and recovery efforts; and
- Ensure they are not penalised for failing to meet contractual obligations due to their participation in disaster response and recovery.

The community sector needs to be resourced and supported to:

- Raise awareness about the serious risks to its service delivery and to people experiencing poverty and inequality from climate change and worsening extreme weather impacts;
- Undertake climate change and extreme weather risks assessments and develop and implement disaster management and service continuity plans; and

- Invest in climate change and extreme weather preparedness and response training for staff and volunteers engaged in direct service provision as well as management and administrative roles.

2. Building resilience

The community sector needs to be resourced and supported to develop:

- A set of easily accessible, practical adaptation and preparedness tools that meet the needs of a broad spectrum of community service organisations and can be implemented and institutionalised within their current operational arrangements; and
- Adaptation and preparedness benchmarks specific to community service provision that enable organisations, their funding agencies and insurers to plot progress towards risk reduction, resilience and adaptive capacity.

3. Sharing risks

Federal, state and local governments and formal emergency service agencies must recognise the critical role the community services sector plays in emergency management and resource, facilitate and support its effective participation in planning, response and recovery at all levels.

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