



16th February 2023

To: The Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Regarding: Invitation to make submission to the Inquiry into Australia's Disaster Resilience

Dear Committee Members

I refer to the email correspondence sent to our employee Michael Higgins on 20th January 2023 enclosing an invitation to make a submission to the above Inquiry and thank you for the opportunity to participate.

I advise that Michael was employed by the Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) in September 2022 and was not part of the organisation prior to that date.

As the Manager of NNIC, I was tasked with supporting and despatching jobs to the Australian Defence Force (ADF) troops when they came to Nimbin following the Feb/March 2022 flood event and have direct experience of the ADF operations in our area.

I therefore address the Terms of Reference below.

(a) current preparedness, response and recovery workforce models,

i. the role of the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters.

The damage in our catchment area was caused by extensive and widespread landslips and washouts which resulted in severe damage to both council/state road networks as well as internal access routes into private properties.

There are several large rural land sharing communities in the area which maintain many kilometres of internal roads, many of which remain compromised at the date of this submission.

The first ADF personnel to arrive in our area were Reservists. They were enthusiastic and willing to work hard. However, they had no tools, no equipment

and their capacity to help was limited by the nature of the work involved. Nonetheless they did spend several days at one of the local rural land sharing communities, assisting residents to dig through the mud. This included digging one community members' house footings out from several metres of mud, which no doubt saved the house from further damage and was work that required sheer manpower and a lot of shovels, which were provided by the residents. (See picture at the end of this submission).

Their presence in the community definitely boosted community morale, but it quickly became apparent that there was little they could do given the nature of the damage in our area and their lack of equipment.

ii. the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters, due to climate change, on the ongoing capacity and capability of the Australian Defence Force.

I am unable to comment on this, other than confirm that natural disasters are becoming more frequent and more severe in our region

iii. the impact on the Australian Defence Force in responding to domestic natural disasters.

I can only comment on what the various ADF personnel said to me. I did ask many of the personnel how they were going and were they okay? Some of them commented that their own families were also facing threats from severe weather events but due to the collapse of the communications network across the region, they were unable to maintain contact with family members and reported feeling worried and anxious about this.

Without the communications network, the ADF personnel, who at the beginning changed every day, were quite disoriented with no access to GPS or online maps etc. Fortunately, NNIC had some large topographical maps of the whole area and these maps became the primary operational maps for the combat agencies who came into the village. I also drew a lot of 'mud maps' for the ADF personnel to help them find where they needed to go.

Eventually the Reservist personnel were replaced by the deployment of the regular ADF personnel. They had better vehicles and some equipment such as on-board winches, but were still limited in what they could achieve in our area.

One of the mains water lines in Nimbin, the Rural Service Line which services 80 people, was irreparably damaged in the flood event by massive landslips. The line was replaced by a temporary line in order to restore water to the 80 impacted residents. ADF troops rendered considerable assistance to Lismore City Council staff in the establishment of the temporary line.

Unfortunately those troops were impacted by a COVID breakout and were suddenly stood down. They told me before they left that they were not looking forward to being isolated back at the camp, given the ongoing wet weather and damp and muddy conditions.

iv. the role of Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services in preparing for, responding to and recovering from

natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability.

Nimbin became isolated as a community for several weeks after the floods. The community itself was split in half by a major landslip which cut off the main road to the community members to the East of the village – impacting over 300 people. The alternate route out of that part of the community via The Channon was also cut and remains so to this day.

As a result, the initial response on the ground was by locally isolated RFS Brigade personnel, Police, an experienced ADF reservist, NNIC and a group of community organisations and community members who sprang into action to form the Community Response and Recovery Team.

Over the two weeks following the flood event, combat agencies gradually began to get through to Nimbin to support response efforts. When the first ADF personnel arrived in town it became clear that they needed direction as to where they may be able to help and so I was tasked as the Manager of NNIC, to start developing a list of people needing assistance, locations and details of the help needed, in order to despatch jobs to the ADF personnel.

At first it was quite chaotic because the ADF personnel changed over each day and had no knowledge of what the team before them had done. So, with the help of the local member of the ADF reserve personnel, we set up a system whereby the ADF personnel on the ground attended at NNIC every day at 7.30am where I would show them the list of jobs, photos, what equipment and/or materials were available on site, locations etc to enable their provide mud maps if needed. This would enable the personnel to undertake initial assessments of the work needed and go out to attend various jobs. Then at the end of each day they would report back to me at NNIC as to which jobs they had attended or investigated and any outcomes etc.

The list grew and grew every day. Once the ADF personnel left the community that list became the case list for recovery services and eventually was handed over to our new Recovery Support Service staff (funded by NSW Reconstruction Authority – formerly Resilience NSW) to follow through with impacted people and develop recovery plans, assist with funding applications etc.

The Nimbin community's experience during the 2019 bushfires, which involved a significant number of spontaneous volunteers to combat the fire, plus the 2022 floods has informed the development of the Nimbin Community Disaster Plan, which has recently been revised and includes strategies to increase resilience and preparedness in the face of increasing natural disasters, as well as documenting the community's role and processes in the initial response and recovery phase.

In both events the community-led responses supported and augmented those by the combat agencies on the ground. Following the floods NNIC provided the initial food parcels that were sent out to isolated communities. Eventually more supplies began to come in, by which time we had all but exhausted our own supplies.

Community members worked at the Evacuation Centre which was also the primary staging ground for the combat agencies, to organise food/essential items lists, pack up food and essential items into parcels based on who needed what, for despatch either by vehicle or helicopter. Our big maps went down to the staging

ground for the combat agencies to use to plan routes, identify safe landing sites and so forth. With no communications and no petrol either for some time, community members supporting the response and recovery walked many miles to undertake welfare checks or to run messages and equipment between NNIC, the Nimbin Branch of the CWA and the Evacuation Centre. A temporary information desk was set up at our Town Hall to gather and disseminate information to community members especially about the local road networks and other major hazards, water issues, updates on fuel availability and where to get help. Information posters were posted across the village and updated several times a day in the first two weeks especially.

The Disaster Plan including its review is overseen and driven by a volunteer group, the Nimbin Disaster Resilience Group (NDRG). NNIC provides underlying support for the NDRG, for example by applying for and auspicing grants aimed at achieving the strategies listed in the Community Disaster Plan.

NNIC also hosted various recovery agencies at our Centre (e.g. Resilience NSW, Services NSW, staff from the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, etc.), which enabled wrap around services to impacted people and saved the NSW Government the additional costs of establishing a State Government Recovery Hub in Nimbin. We were referred by the recovery agencies as Nimbin's "Assistance Centre".

We also provided a workplace for two locally isolated Services Australia employees who usually worked in Lismore but were unable to due to the Lismore Centre being completely destroyed. This enabled them to continue to work and maintain their livelihoods whilst augmenting our existing Services Australia /Centrelink Agency. Their presence at NNIC for the five-week period was invaluable to our community.

Neighbourhood Centres in rural areas such as Nimbin are often the first on the ground to support our communities in natural disasters quite simply because we are here, we are well known to the community and we have a strong knowledge of local geography etc.

However, we are not funded to do this work and our resources are so severely stretched that it is a constant struggle just to keep the doors open and sufficient staff on board to deliver the services we are funded for. We need recurrent funds to support our role in disaster response, recovery and response and to ensure we can remain ready to support the community when we are needed.

(b) consideration of alternative models, including:

i. repurposing or adapting existing Australian civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services.

It is encouraging that the role of community-based NGOs, and spontaneous volunteers is increasingly being recognised as being crucial in this space.

There remain several barriers to optimising the effectiveness of these groups however, including insurance costs, complexities in managing spontaneous volunteers, and the general resourcing of NGOs as stated above.

The NDRG has developed a Spontaneous Volunteers Strategy (currently being refined) as part of our Community Disaster Plan. It remains a wicked problem, however, given that by definition such volunteers are not members of or accountable to any particular organisation.

We are also working on a local Emergency Radio Network which is designed to work together with our Community Care Team members (a model also arising under our Disaster Plan) and RFS Brigade members on the ground across our catchment to address the issue of possible loss of communications in future, and provide better support to the community and the RFS in particular by providing additional 'eyes on the ground' to carry out basic assessments and welfare checks to identify where assistance from the combat agencies is needed. The aim is to work together to direct limited resources more efficiently to where they are most needed.

Again, NNIC is providing the underlying scaffolding to support these initiatives, by e.g. owning and insuring the radio network equipment, hosting Disaster related info for the community on our website, supporting the training and development of the Community Care Team members.

ii. overseas models and best practice;

I have not undertaken sufficient research in relation to overseas models and best practice, to be able to comment.

(c) consideration of the practical, legislative, and administrative arrangements that would be required to support improving Australia's resilience and response to natural disasters

As above, the main issue for us is the lack of resourcing in an ongoing way to support the very existence of key locally-based organisations on the ground.

Summary

In summary I make the following key points;

- 1. Before dispatching ADF troops on the ground it would be beneficial to firstly contact key local organisations on the ground to establish local conditions and what is needed including what equipment and materials are involved. This is particularly the case where communities have become locally isolated and communications are compromised, as only the people on the ground may have a solid understanding of what is happening. This may include seeking expert assessments from e.g. geotechnical engineers before any meaningful decisions are made about what equipment and materials are needed.**

In the case of the 2022 floods the Local Council was also relying to an extent on information being sent through by NNIC as to the local conditions and issues.

- 2. ADF personnel need to be properly equipped and supported to optimize their effectiveness as well as their own wellbeing.**

- 3. Locally based organisations in smaller rural communities need to be resourced to work in the disaster space and the significant value added to the emergency response process needs to be recognised and incorporated into the various response and recovery processes.**

Yours Sincerely

Natalie Meyer

Manager

