

Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee

National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 – Review of Operation

Submitted by: Mijica Lus

Date: 15 February 2026

Introduction

I am a young person, first responder, and volunteer with Australian Red Cross, Vinnies, and Helping ACT, supporting Australians during floods, bushfires, and public health crises. I have worked with youth, multicultural, and vulnerable communities to ensure emergency response is inclusive and effective.

I have also collaborated with disaster researchers at the University of Canberra and University of New South Wales, working with community partners to co-design culturally appropriate strategies and strengthen volunteer and first responder capabilities. This submission reflects my frontline, research-informed, and Defence-collaborative perspective.

Operation of the Act

- The National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 provides a clear framework for rapid mobilisation of Defence, federal resources, and volunteer networks.
- During the 2022 NSW Floods, the Act facilitated timely deployment, but clarity on powers, roles, and community engagement responsibilities could be improved.
- CALD communities and vulnerable groups sometimes experience delays in accessing support, highlighting the need for more culturally responsive operational guidance.

Community, Multicultural, and Youth Engagement

- Trusted community relationships are critical. Collaborative projects with universities and community partners have improved awareness, resilience, and emergency response among youth and multicultural groups.
- Volunteers and first responders are most effective when supported by research-informed tools and culturally appropriate strategies.
- Engaging youth and community leaders builds proactive readiness and strengthens community networks before emergencies occur.

Defence and Coordination

- Defence mobilisation is essential for large-scale emergencies.
- Effective operation under the Act requires:
 - Clear legal guidance and operational protocols
 - Strong coordination with civil agencies and volunteers
 - Training that includes cultural awareness and community-specific needs
- Past experiences show that the Act works best when institutional powers are paired with community trust and pre-established networks.

Legacy and Proactive Preparedness

- As a young person, I emphasise the importance of building a sustainable legacy for future Australians:
 - Training youth and volunteers in disaster response
 - Strengthening networks between volunteers, researchers, and communities
 - Embedding proactive preparedness strategies to reduce reactive responses
- This ensures the next generation is resilient, empowered, and able to anticipate and respond to emergencies.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen guidance in the Act for culturally responsive engagement, particularly for CALD communities.
2. Integrate proactive preparedness measures, including youth and volunteer training programs.
3. Support ongoing partnerships with universities, researchers, and community organisations to inform evidence-based practices.
4. Clarify Defence roles and coordination protocols for rapid, legally clear deployment.
5. Establish feedback mechanisms to capture lessons from volunteers, first responders, and community partners.

Conclusion

The National Emergency Declaration Act 2020 is essential for national emergency responses. Its effectiveness is maximised when legal powers are paired with community-informed practices, youth and multicultural engagement, and proactive legacy-building, ensuring the next generation of Australians is prepared, empowered, and resilient.