CAMS Submission to the
Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry
April 2011

Introduction

About CAMS

The Community Action for a Multicultural Society (CAMS) network is a group of 20 community workers undertaking systemic and group advocacy, and community capacity-building activities to strengthen multiculturalism across the state and to support people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Workers include local and regional officers, a grants access officer, and ethno-specific workers for three communities - Australian South Sea Islanders, Pacific Islanders and African communities with a focus on refugee settlement. There are also several state-wide systemic advocacy workers.

CAMS has a strong interest in improving access for people from CALD communities to services and information they require to make informed choices. It is important to ensure that easily accessible information and support are available to people from CALD backgrounds, especially those who may not be proficient in English or have disabilities. This is particularly vital in the context of a disaster.

About this submission

The 2010/2011 floods across Queensland (the floods) were unprecedented in magnitude, scale and scope. The floods have caused much damage and affected the lives of many Queenslanders. CAMS workers and other services provided prompt feedback and reflections from CALD individuals and families in flood-affected areas. Given the unpredictable weather patterns and series of natural disasters, those in unaffected areas also offered observations and measures to be taken into consideration to better prepare in the event of future emergencies.

QCOSS hosts one CAMS position and has coordinated joint input to a submission on the Flood Inquiry. The submission provides an overview of the key issues and recommendations and may not necessarily represent the views of organisational members of the CAMS network.

In the context of this submission, the term culturally and linguistically diverse communities refers to the wide range of cultural groups and individuals that make up the Australian population, including groups and individuals who differ according to religion, race, language and ethnicity except those whose ancestry is Anglo-Saxon, Anglo Celtic, aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander[i]

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Queensland is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse places in the world, with 33% (or 1,292,384) Queenslanders born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. 7.6% (or 296,690) Queenslanders speak a language other than English at home[ii]. In 2006, 1.2% (or 47,976) people said they spoke English not well or not at all[iii].

In addition, it is important to take into consideration - from an disaster management perspective – that approximately 4.17 million people visit Australia each year, many of whom do not speak English[iv]. There are also large numbers of itinerant groups of people in Queensland at any given time, these include international and interstate tourists and travellers such as 'backpackers', international students, as well as people who move to the area for work, particularly those doing seasonal work in agriculture and those involved in the mining industry[v].

Australia's CALD communities may be a particularly vulnerable part of Australian society in the context of emergencies. Many variables may contribute to this vulnerability; for example, people may not be as resilient in an d if their English is not proficient and they cannot access information,

or they may be susceptible to particular hazards or risks as new arrivals in an unfamiliar environment. Additionally, cultural or linguistic differences may distort the meaning of messages[iv].

However, it is also important to be cognisant that many CALD communities demonstrate great resilience, as they often possess a range of experiences and skills in dealing with emergencies[iv]. Individuals from refugee backgrounds are some of the most resilient people in the face of an emergency. EMA suggests that it is paramount that emergency management agencies draw on the communities' competencies during any phase of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery (PPRR)[iv].

1. More responsive services and targeted information for CALD communities

There are significant numbers of people from CALD communities who continue to face barriers when accessing services or information they require. In many instances, this lack of equity in access for people from CALD backgrounds is a violation of basic human rights and is in breach of the Anti-Discrimination Act. In the event of a disaster, the lack of access to critical information about what to do and to support services could significantly increase the risk of loss and harm and may lead to death.

Queensland's growing CALD population is a key impetus for the need to invest more resources for targeted strategies to empower and support CALD communities in a disaster. Experiences from the recent floods highlighted significant gaps in strategies to address the specific challenges faced by CALD communities in the context of a disaster in Queensland.

Lack of knowledge
A significant number of people from CALD communities, especially recent arrivals, had never experienced flooding and had difficulty conceiving the extent of a severe flood. Prior to the 2010/2011 floods, many of these people in flood-affected areas lacked knowledge and experience on how to prepare for and respond to the floods.

Due to increasing unpredictable weather conditions, many communities are more concerned about emergency preparedness. Many ethnic communities in both recently flood-affected and unaffected areas alike have raised concerns about the lack of community education to inform and equip CALD communities.

Prior to the floods, some people from CALD communities were not aware of where flood-prone areas are in Queensland. Some CALD home-owners were not aware that their homes were previously flooded. This information was either not made known to them at the time of purchasing their homes or they were not concerned about this 'historical information' due in part to perceived optimism.

Reflection from one CAMS worker:
> Gold Coast is the largest tourism destination and has large Asian and other community groups. There is a lack of communication between disaster management and community groups. For example, the Japanese Society of Gold Coast Inc., Japan Club of Brisbane, and the Consulate General of Japan Brisbane all reported that the well-established Japanese community on the Gold Coast have never heard any information about evacuation processes or centres in the years that they have been established.

There are significant gaps in awareness raising and community education available around disaster management in Queensland. It is essential to ensure information about flood prone areas, how to find out if a home has been previously flooded, what to do in the event of an emergency, evacuation processes and the role of evacuation centres are made available in relevant languages, in both written and audio format. Local community groups, religious gatherings, ethnic newspapers

and radio are some key mediums through which important emergency management education can be conducted.

Perceived optimism
Many people in Queensland displayed varying degrees of 'perceived optimism[vii]' when the flood warnings were first issued. CAMS workers reported that a number of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds also displayed perceived optimism that may have been compounded by:

- Lack of knowledge and experience about floods
- Unfamiliarity with physical environment and context
- Lack of connection with local community and 'word of mouth' information
- Belief that Australia is a 'safe haven', especially those who may have been from countries where their lives have been in danger

A CAMS worker recounts the experience of one refugee family:

> "A family from refugee background in Goodna received weather warnings and saw their neighbours evacuating but seriously doubted the severity of the floods. They left their house to go to the shop for groceries and upon their return had lost everything, including important documentation and personal valuables."

International students and others with temporary visas
Temporary residents living in Queensland are an often 'unseen' group in the policy context. These people include refugee claimants, international students and other itinerant groups of people such as international and interstate tourists and travellers such as 'backpackers', as well as people who move to the area for work, particularly those doing seasonal work in agriculture and those involved in the mining industry.

There were reports that international students were particularly uninformed and uncertain about what to do during the floods. Some students were not sure whether they were eligible to access evacuation centres 'for affected Queenslanders' as they did not necessarily identify themselves as Queenslanders. Following the floods some students, unaware of their rights, faced tenancy issues, including disputes with landlords about costs of clean up, rental increases, and changes in rental agreement.

Targeted information should be developed and made available for tourists, international students and other temporary visa holders about what to do in an emergency or disaster and subsequent information about entitlements. Inclusive language should be used to ensure important messages are conveyed to everyone affected by the disaster.

Access to insurance and financial support
Some members from CALD communities were unfamiliar with the concept of insurance and others were unable to receive the information and advice needed to gain appropriate insurance.

There were some reports that those who did not speak English well were 'brushed aside' by some volunteers who were trying to help as many people as possible. Individuals who sought information or support to obtain financial assistance particularly experienced this, as the eligibility criteria, written information and forms were only available in English in the immediate aftermath of the floods.

It is acknowledged that not long after the floods took place, Multicultural Affairs Queensland arranged for the translation of information on the Premier's Disaster Appeal and the Department of Communities Disaster Relief Financial Assistance into 27 languages other than English. These were emailed directly to key stakeholders, distributed to community recovery centres and uploaded to the department's website.

Some Pacific Island people with Special Category Visa (SCV) were originally not eligible for the Commonwealth flood assistance. This decision was eventually reversed and members of this community were able to get assistance, however, it was poorly communicated and many were not aware of their eligibility.

Ongoing culturally responsive support is required for members of CALD communities to ensure they have what it takes to rebuild their lives. It is important to increase the capacity of community organisations and government agencies in flood affected areas to ensure they are able to respond effectively to CALD individuals and families who are affected. In some cases, this may mean increasing resources for training in cultural responsiveness and other to equip staff in community organisations and government agencies.

Where possible, targeted information in relevant languages should be widespread and available well before a disaster.

Increase support in housing and employment
Some communities continue to experience hardship following the floods. CAMS workers reported a significant increase in housing issues amongst CALD communities. During the floods CALD individuals and families who were displaced from homes sought support from family or friends and were therefore not immediately identified by government services as needing housing support. These families continue to struggle with finding appropriate housing.

CALD individuals and families have reported loss of job security, particularly those living in flood affected areas in Rockhampton, Gatton and Toowoomba. Many individuals continue to be unemployed following the floods and are struggle to find employment. Unemployment and unstable housing situation are leading to complex family and social issues for some individuals and families.

Having appropriate housing and stable employment are fundamental to rebuilding lives and communities after the floods. The floods have placed more pressure on a service system that is already struggling to meet the housing and employment needs of CALD communities. A greater commitment by the Queensland Government to invest in long term culturally responsive housing support and employment strategies are required.

Increase mental health support services
Given the high prevalence of experiences of trauma and torture among refugee communities, and the stress inherent in the settlement process, there is potential for the recent floods to impacts on psychological well-being of individuals, families and communities of refugee backgrounds. It is possible that the recent floods, with its threat to life, livelihood and possessions, may have triggered memories of traumatic event and associated sensations, thoughts, behaviours and emotions. Mental health services working with CALD communities have reported an increasing demand for services. It is likely that this demand will continue to increase as mental health issues can take as long as 12 months to emerge.

Increased capacity for culturally appropriate community and government mental health services may be required to support CALD individuals in flood affected areas over the next 8-12 months.

2. Improve language support for CALD communities

Provision of good quality language services – interpreting and translating – should be a standard part of all service provision for people from CALD communities where required. This is a fundamental part of providing a culturally responsive service. Quality language service provision can have profound impacts on economic participation, social inclusion, and facilitates early and effective intervention[vii].

It was acknowledged that the coverage and spread of flood warning messages by major television networks and radio (e.g. ABC radio) were timely and efficient. It is welcomed that official briefings

on the floods were supported by AUSLAN interpreters for people who are Deaf. These communication channels were geared towards people who speak English proficiently. Concerns were raised about the limited reach of these messages in CALD communities, especially those who had low proficiency of English or spoken no English at all.

While it was acknowledged that the Emergency Management Queensland and Brisbane City Council had emergency and flood management resources translated into some community languages, CAMS identified that on a whole there is a gap in the availability of translated material and audio-visual resources (such as You Tube videos) in various languages other than English aimed at reaching CALD communities.

In Queensland, there are ongoing concerns from service providers and CALD communities alike that about the lack of access to interpreters or translated information. In the words of the former Northern Territory Commissioner for Health and Community Services (1999), *"we may state, and believe, that we do not discriminate in the provision of our services and we provide them openly to all people. If however we forget to take into account whether people can read or write, whether they speak our language, whether they have money and transport to get to our offices, whether they know we even exist, then the services we offer are likely to be inequitable and discriminatory."*

Due to the vastly diverse languages spoken across Queensland, information dissemination can take longer to reach CALD communities than for English speaking people. In describing the effectiveness of weather warning messages, a staff member of the Bureau of Meteorology said "the message is useless if it is not used efficiently by the community"[v]. When providing information about preparing for and what to do in the event of an emergency, it is critical that people from CALD communities, especially those who may not be proficient in English or speak no English at all, are engaged with and provided information in a way that they understand. This should be done in a consistent and systemic rather than an ad hoc way.

3. Increase engagement with CALD communities at the local level

Importance of social networks and access to services
It can take years for individuals and families to establish support networks for themselves. For a newly arrived family from refugee background, this can take even longer due to unfamiliarity with the language, the local culture, the place, amongst other factors. In some cases, lack of appropriate housing has forced large refugee families to live far away from their support networks. In some regional towns, there has been sporadic settlement of refugee families in areas where there is little social or community services available for them. There are ongoing social issues resulting from these less-than-ideal arrangements of accommodation and settlement. As evidenced from the floods, these issues can be exacerbated in the event of a disaster, placing these individuals and families at more risk of disadvantage and social exclusion.

During the floods, some organisations that worked with migrants and refugees provided intensive support to their clients to take the appropriate course of action for their safety. One organisation pointed out that while state emergency services (SES) provided excellent support to the community at large… the emergency response was based on the voluntary of evacuation of people with the assumption that all people have access to private transport, have established support networks to access shelter or speak fluent English[viii].

Community organisation were central to providing information to CALD communities and where required, referred them to appropriate support services and information. While CAMS workers were key connectors to the CALD community, they are a limited resource. A more systemic, comprehensive and localised approach is needed to effectively communicate to CALD communities during times of emergency.

Localised strategies and structures

In recognition of the vastly different regional areas and needs of Queensland's regional, rural and metropolitan areas, engaging with communities should take place at the local level. Post-flood studies in Traralgon highlighted the importance of localising the information to the specific community[v]. A key learning from the Brisbane floods was the importance of existing local structures or new structures that are created as a result of an event.

> *In Brisbane recently, many communities quickly assembled leaders from all sectors to plan localized recovery efforts and ensure that engagement with government articulated local needs and coordinated resources, services and help to have the greatest positive impacts. Some communities are already extending the role of these groups to develop local recovery plans and the workshop highlighted that all community and regional planning should plan for how disaster recovery will be managed should the worst happen again[ix].*

Local Disaster Management Groups
Although Local Disaster Management Groups (LDMG) exist in every council across the state, there was little knowledge about whether LDMG groups consistently engaged with CALD communities in their area to ensure strategies are in place to help them to respond well in the event of a disaster.

CAMS workers in some areas such as Toowoomba, Caboolture and Logan have had some input into disaster management plans in their areas. More consistent engagement with key members from CALD communities are required to ensure a greater understanding of the unique challenges and needs faced by those communities, and to ensure strategies are put in place to raise awareness, increase knowledge and skills to prepare and respond well in the event of a disaster.

4. Key recommendations

There are significant numbers of CALD people living in Queensland who were affected by the floods and continue to struggle rebuilding their lives. The experiences from the floods have exacerbated the negative impact of existing gaps in services and lack of cultural responsiveness in service and information provision in Queensland.

CAMS makes a number of recommendations for the improvement of information and service provision in Queensland, particularly in the context of a disaster.

Recommendation 1
Improve cultural responsiveness of government and community services to ensure appropriate communication and support of CALD communities during a disaster.

It is recommended that the Department of Community Safety, especially Emergency Management Services, include improved strategies to better engage with and meet the needs of CALD communities in their multicultural action plan, business and unit plans. Strategies may include:
• building the capacity of emergency services to engage with and respond to CALD communities
• ensuring accurate data on the demographic and communication requirements of local CALD communities
• developing engagement opportunities with key CALD community members who represent the diversity within those communities
• implementing mechanisms to gauge the level of awareness of CALD communities about natural disasters and respond appropriately
• developing the cultural diversity of the Department of Community Safety workforce to employ more people from CALD backgrounds who can effectively engage with a diverse range of people

Recommendation 2
Improve language services to ensure high quality interpreters and translated material are accessed when providing information and services to CALD communities

It is recommended that the Queensland Government invest significant resources to improve the provision of language services to address the myriad of gaps and issues in this area. Specifically in relation to communication with CALD communities in the context of a disaster, strategies may include:

- providing information to CALD communities about how emergency management services and how to access them in the event of a disaster
- translate and widely distribute existing information about disasters into community languages that are made available in written and audio formats (such as You Tube videos or MP3)
- utilise ethnic newspapers and radios to promote the role of emergency management services
- use face to face information strategies such as meeting with community groups, religious gatherings and school gatherings

Recommendation 3
Engage with key CALD community members in Local Disaster Management Group in every council

It is recommended that Local Disaster Management Groups in every council should actively engage with key members of the local community, including a range of CALD community members to ensure specific needs within each community area are addressed when preparing for and responding to a disaster.

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[i] http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi_terminology.asp

[ii] Multicultural Affairs Queensland, *"Diversity Figures"* (August 2010)

[iii] Department of Immigration and Citizenship, "*People of Queensland - Statistics from the 2006 Census"* (2008)

[iv] Emergency Management Australia, *"Guidelines for Emergency Management in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities"* (2007)

[v] Emergency Management Australia, *"Guidelines for the Development of Community Education, Awareness and Engagement Programs"* (2010)

[vi] Emergency Management Australia describes people with 'perceived optimism' as individuals who refused to take authoritative advice because they prefer to operate on visible environmental conditions.

[vii] Queensland Accessing Interpreters Working Group, *"A Matter of Interpretation"* (2008)

[viii] Multicultural Development Association, *"2011 Queensland Floods"* (2011)

[ix] Caniglia, F. & Trotman, A. *"A Silver Lining – Community Development, crisis and belonging"* (2011)