

4 April 2011

Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry  
PO Box 1738  
Brisbane QLD 4001

Dear Sir / Madam,

### **Submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry.

1. Save the Children Australia is a member of Save the Children International, the world's largest independent child rights development organisation, working in more than 120 countries towards a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation.
2. Save the Children Australia was established in Australia in 1919 as a not-for-profit organisation and has been running child-focused programs since the 1950s. We have offices and staff in every Australian State and Territory including offices in Brisbane and Townsville, Queensland.
3. This submission focuses on the following:
  - a. Emergency planning in Queensland;
  - b. The provision of Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs);
  - c. Physical risks to children; and
  - d. Psychological risks to children.

### **Emergency planning in Queensland**

4. There are currently no specific plans in place in relation to children's needs in emergency management and planning in Queensland. Neither the State Disaster Management Plan nor the Disaster Management Strategic Policy Framework makes reference to the special needs of children in emergencies.
5. Before, during and after the flooding in Queensland in December 2010 and January 2011, and Cyclone Yasi in February 2011, there was no specific mention of children's safety and needs in the Queensland Government's media releases. While the Premier instructed parents to prohibit their children from playing in floodwaters, there were no statements suggesting that the Queensland Government was taking into account children's needs during the emergency.

6. We commend Emergency Management Queensland's efforts to educate children about emergencies via interactive online games such as *Get Ready Kidnas!*, *Red Alert! digital stories*, *Dingo Creek* and *Stormwatchers*, through the school-based program *Staying Safe in the Neighbourhood – Watch Out!* and the booklet *Keeping Children Safe*. However, the Queensland Government must not only educate children about emergencies but also ensure that their needs and interests, as a vulnerable and often overlooked group in society, are taken into account in emergency planning.
7. **Recommendation:** All emergency plans in Queensland, including the State Disaster Management Plan and the Disaster Management Strategic Policy Framework should include plans for:
  - a. The provision of services for children in evacuation and recovery centres including the provision of child friendly spaces;
  - b. The provision of psychosocial support or counselling for children who may be traumatized following an emergency; and
  - c. Adequate child protection measures in all evacuations and recovery centres.

### **The provision of Child-Friendly Spaces (CFSs)**

8. During the Queensland floods, Save the Children, in agreement with the Australian Red Cross, operated Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs) at evacuation and recovery centres in nine locations in Queensland including Ipswich and Rockhampton. We assisted over 1,000 families through the provision of CFSs.
9. CFSs provide a safe, fun and professionally staffed area for children to play, socialise and normalize their lives as much as possible during an emergency. CFSs also reduce the stress placed on families during a crisis by offering parents and care-givers safe short-term care for children while they attend to their needs or contribute to an emergency response. CFSs help to meet the physical and psychological safety needs of children and families and are a vital part of any emergency response.
10. The provision of CFSs during the Queensland Floods did not occur however, as the result of a formal government request or established protocol.
11. The establishment of a formal agreement between the Queensland Government and Save the Children and/or other service provider would provide agencies such as the Red Cross with clear guidance and understanding regarding the operation of CFSs in evacuation and recovery centres.
12. A formal agreement for the provision of CFSs would also help to mitigate risks to children. During the Queensland Floods, there were unsolicited offers of help from the public, including some from people who turned up at evacuation centres offering to care for children. While some people claimed to have childcare experience, current police and/or

Working with Children Checks, the use of unknown volunteers in caring for children following an emergency represents a significant child protection risk. Further, there appeared to be no protocols at evacuation or recovery centres directing staff as to how to handle this situation.

13. **Recommendation:** The Queensland Government should seek to ensure the provision of CFSs in future emergencies through a formal agreement with Save the Children and/or other service provider. The agreement should include the following:
- a. A child protection policy and code of conduct for all persons in contact with children at evacuation and recovery centres;
  - b. All staff and volunteers working with children should:
    - i. Be fully screened and checked (Police & Working with Children Check);
    - ii. Preferably trained in early childhood development; and
    - iii. Have the capacity to be deployed immediately.
  - c. Clear procedures for reporting and addressing concerns regarding the safety or wellbeing of children, including procedures for dealing with unsolicited offers of assistance from the public to care for children.

### **Physical risks to children**

14. Following the Queensland Floods, Save the Children staff observed the following child protection risks or concerns in evacuation and recovery centres:
- a. It was unclear whether security personnel provided at centres were required to have a Working with Children Check.
  - b. Evacuation centres did not have sign in and sign out procedures for people accessing the centres, increasing the risk of unknown persons being able to freely access the centres.
  - c. There was no segregation of children and families from other adults in sleeping areas despite the fact that some adults staying at centres had been identified as having mental health or drug-related issues.
  - d. There was inadequate lighting in toilet and shower areas. In some centres, toilets were far away from sleeping areas and were unisex and thus inappropriate for young children.
  - e. In one centre, the lights were turned off at approximately 8 pm, forcing adults and children to use torches to access bathrooms.
15. **Recommendation:** The Queensland Government, in its emergency planning, should ensure the following protocols are followed at all evacuation and recovery centres:

- a. All staff and personnel, including security personnel, must have a Working With Children Check;
  - b. There should be sign in and sign out procedures to monitor all persons accessing the centres;
  - c. Children and families should, as far as possible, be segregated from other adults in sleeping areas;
  - d. There should be adequate lighting and male/female segregation of toilet and shower areas. Some toilets should be close to sleeping areas for children and families; and
  - e. Adequate lighting for children and families to access toilets and showers should be provided 24 hours. Lighting in other areas should be kept on until at least 10 pm.
16. Save the Children staff noted that the presence of St. Johns Ambulance in providing medical assistance to injured children at centres reduced the risk of serious physical injury to children.

### **Psychological risks to children**

17. As noted above, CFSs assist in meeting the immediate psychological needs of children. Staff operating CFSs can provide support and information for parents to minimize the impact of trauma on their children, counseling for children, and referrals for longer term assistance.
18. Save the Children staff observed the following in evacuation and recovery centres:
- a. Although agencies such as Lifeline were present, there was no information provided to parents or caregivers regarding the availability of counselling or psychosocial services for children.
  - b. There were a number of families who had existing child protection concerns and who required additional support from staff at the centres.
  - c. At one centre, homeless young people who were trying to access the centre were not treated respectfully by the centre's staff.
19. **Recommendation:** The Queensland Government, in its emergency planning, should ensure the following:
- a. Information regarding counseling and psychosocial services for children is provided at all evacuation and recovery centres;
  - b. Child friendly spaces are staffed by qualified practitioners who can work with children to minimize the impact of trauma;

- c. The Department of Communities and/or child protection and family welfare agencies should provide additional support to families with pre-existing child protection concerns who are attending centres; and
- d. Evacuation and recovery centre staff should have training, procedures and referral contacts in order to appropriately respond to the needs of persons accessing the centres including young people experiencing homelessness.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to this inquiry. Should you require any further information, please contact Daniel Kerr, Emergency Logistics Manager, by phone (03) 9938 2082 or email [Daniel.kerr@savethechildren.org.au](mailto:Daniel.kerr@savethechildren.org.au).

Yours sincerely,

[SIGNED]

Mike Penrose

Emergency Program Director