

Australian Red Cross
submission to
Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry

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Preliminary

This submission is made in response to the specific request for early submissions relating to issues of flood preparedness (particularly dam operations, early warning systems and responses) relevant to next summer's wet season.

In doing so it makes some observations and recommendations that take into account not only the responses to the 2010/11 floods but also the cyclones that preceded and followed the floods.

The observations and submissions are based on the direct experience of Red Cross in responding to the 2010/11 floods, but also draws on our experience in responding to all previous state disaster events since Cyclone Larry.

In particular this submission will focus on those terms of reference of the Commission relating to:

- a) the preparation and planning by federal, state and local governments; emergency services and the community for the 2010/2011 floods in Queensland,
- c) all aspects of the response to the 2010/2011 flood events, particularly measures taken to inform the community and measures to protect life and private and public property, including:
 - immediate management, response and recovery
 - resourcing, overall coordination and deployment of personnel and equipment
 - adequacy of equipment and communication systems; and adequacy of community's response

Role of Red Cross in disasters

The establishment of the Red Cross under Royal Charter confirms our distinctive status as an auxiliary to the human services of the public authorities, including during times of natural disasters. This sees Red Cross recognised by government as a unique organisation and as a predictable and reliable partner outside the NGO sector.

Prior to, and particularly since Cyclone Larry, Red Cross nationally has enhanced its capability to contribute to disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

This has included:

- The development and distribution of a range of resource materials relating to disaster preparedness for individuals, seniors, children and those with a disability. This program is called Emergency Rediplan.

- The development and distribution of post disaster booklets including “Coping with a major personal crisis” and “Cleaning up after an emergency – Dealing with wind and water damage”. These publications are widely distributed to people in evacuation centres and those attending recovery centres as well as residents visited as part of outreach visits.
- The establishment of an Emergency Services national structure including appointment of Emergency Services Coordinators in key regional centres in Queensland, who generally serve on Local Disaster Management Groups.
- The recruitment and training of emergency service volunteers (over 1000 in QLD and approximately 10,000 in Australia) to undertake a range of roles based on state/territory emergency management arrangements, including:
 - management of evacuation centres
 - assisting with personal support and meet and greet functions in government established Recovery Centres
 - undertaking door to door welfare checks on people immediately affected by disasters
 - undertaking outreach visits in affected communities, in partnership with other agencies, such as Department of Communities and Lifeline in Queensland
 - registration of evacuees on the National Registration and Inquiry System, and matching enquirers with evacuees
- The adoption of AIIMS (Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System) for all disaster operations, aligning Red Cross operations’ command and control with other emergency service agencies.
- Active contribution to emergency management planning and policy, through representation of senior staff on key committees at all levels of government (eg in Queensland the State Disaster Management Group, State Disaster Coordination Committees, State Community Recovery Committee, District Disaster Management and Recovery Committees, and Local Disaster Management Groups).

Through this broad commitment Red Cross has become an integral part of disaster management and response in Queensland with its role accepted by government departments and a number of Local Regional Councils.

In Queensland Red Cross has established MOUs (Memorandum of Understanding) with a number of local Government Authorities as well as the Department of Communities, and Queensland Police Service. These MOUs detail the responsibilities and commitments of Red Cross with organisations in times of disaster and generally reflect the roles detailed above.

In response to the recent floods in Queensland Red Cross:

- deployed 1400 volunteers and staff to assist in the disaster including a number from interstate and New Zealand
- managed 34 evacuation centres throughout Queensland accommodating over 12,000 people
- managed 11 emergency shelters (related specifically to Cyclone Yasi) accommodating 6500 people
- assisted in 30 Recovery centres providing personal support and meet and greet, and recovery triage services
- deployed outreach teams to 31 different locations in affected areas, in partnership with Department of Communities staff and Lifeline counsellors

In addition to this early involvement, Red Cross has also embedded teams with a number of the worst affected communities to work with them in longer term recovery.

As a result of our direct and ongoing involvement we believe we are well placed to make a number of observations which may assist with disaster preparedness and response in the future.

In addition, Red Cross can draw upon its international experience in emergency management including the internationally recognised SPHERE standards for disaster response developed by humanitarian NGOs and Red Cross Red Crescent movement in 2004.

New Queensland disaster management arrangements

It is the view of Red Cross that the new disaster management arrangements implemented as a result of changes to the Disaster Management Act 2003 have been an outstanding success and have facilitated more effective response operations.

In particular the appointment of a State Disaster Coordinator from within the Police Service has enabled a level of coordination and reach not before experienced in the response phase of disasters in Queensland. Significantly it has enabled the input of vital information from the field directly into the SDMG.

Similarly the appointment of a State Recovery Coordinator to focus on recovery operations will prove beneficial in the long term.

The Act sets out the membership and functions of the SDMG. Its formal membership is restricted to Directors General of State Government Departments as well as a representative from the Local Government Association of Queensland. It is noted however that the meetings convened during the floods and cyclones also included the Premier and Ministers, representatives from Red Cross, Australian Defence Forces, and key utility services including Energex, Optus, Telstra, and Bureau of Metrology. Broader

involvement of non Government organisations was at the invitation of the Chair of the SDMG. This collaborative approach proved to be an important contribution to more effective information exchange and coordination of activity.

Consideration should be given to amending the Disaster Management Act 2003 in the future to recognise the role of non-government organisations in contributing their expertise and experiences in the development of emergency management policy and practice.

LDMG disaster preparedness and early warning

The Disaster Management Act 2003 establishes Local Government Disaster Management Groups (LDMG) with specific functions including:

- developing effective disaster management and regularly reviewing and assessing disaster management (Clause 30b)
- helping local government prepare disaster management plans (Clause 30c)
- identifying and providing advice to relevant district groups about support services required by the group to facilitate disaster management operations (Clause 30d)
- identifying and coordinating the use of resources (Clause 30h)

The effectiveness of the committees is critical to the local operations of disaster management, including both response and recovery. However, the membership, level of preparedness and decision making abilities of these committees vary considerably. It is critical that local governments be strongly encouraged to fulfil these requirements, including ensuring effective relationships between agencies and the regular review of plans and arrangements. This can be a challenge in areas where major emergencies or disasters have not occurred in recent memory.

While some LDMGs undertake disaster management exercises not all of these exercises involve agencies outside the Government sector. The disadvantage of this is that in real life disaster operations the linkages and respective roles undertaken by these agencies are not understood, or misunderstood or not well coordinated.

In disasters it is the marginalised, disadvantaged and socially isolated who are most at risk. The homeless, those with disabilities, those in aged care facilities and those elderly with English not as their first language need special consideration which need to be taken into account in local disaster plans.

Other groups include, but are not be limited to:

- those with mobility difficulties (eg restricted to wheelchairs)
- those with oxygen dependent equipment
- socially isolated elderly dependent on meals on wheels or other homes based services

In many cases these clients are managed by non government agencies. But it is the linkages and incorporation into disaster plans that will ensure they are accounted for in disasters. There have been examples in the past of residents trapped in houses who have been unable because of their medical and mobility conditions to notify authorities of their immediate evacuation needs or post disaster assistance. Whilst door to door welfare visits sometimes identify these clients, better preparation in the form of social mapping by local governments would help identify those who are at most risk during times of disaster.

The preparation of local government disaster plans needs to include consultation with organisations working with these client groups and incorporate information sets, and organisational linkages, that clearly identify those groups or citizens most at risk.

Early preparation is essential in managing disasters especially when the deployment of volunteers and emergency services personnel are involved. Early warnings of impending disasters must be matched by early plans to evacuate or relocate residents.

For support agencies such as Red Cross the need to pre-position emergency service volunteer teams into locations before access and transport is closed is essential to being able to support and manage evacuation centres.

In part the reluctance to act early may reflect uncertainty regarding the eligibility of reimbursement of expenditure under the NDRRA (National Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements). These arrangements set out the conditions under which cost sharing will be undertaken between the State Government and the Federal Government, which subsequently support the operations by local governments and emergency service support agencies.

Greater certainty for local authorities may encourage them to act more quickly in establishing evacuation centres and shelters, thus enabling them to give the public earlier information of the location and capacity of these centres.

Membership of LDMGs varies across local government regions. In some cases Red Cross and other not for profit agencies are included in the membership and not in others. In some cases Local Councils establish Welfare Sub Committees of the LDMG to oversee the establishment of evacuation centres and recovery arrangements.

It is suggested that the membership of LDMGs be reviewed to ensure greater Statewide consistency.

An important aspect of the recent flood and cyclone response was the mass evacuation of residents from a number of towns, hospitals, nursing homes and aged care facilities. In most cases, these evacuations were undertaken by the defence force using military aircraft and helicopters. Whilst these

operations were effectively and efficiently undertaken, it has been suggested that early involvement of the defence forces in the planning process would have enabled a more coordinated and timely response for those being evacuated.

It is suggested that Commonwealth and State arrangements be examined to enable the defence forces to be engaged early in the planning phase of disaster response.

Evacuation centres and emergency shelters

Evacuation centres are a critically important aspect of the response to disasters in Queensland.

Evacuation centres are established in facilities and locations determined by Local Councils as part of their local disaster plans. They are places capable of providing safe shelter for people from rising waters, flooding and storm surges and enable people to be safely accommodated and fed for periods of one day to many weeks. Local Governments also have the responsibility to gain access and open up the facility, organise the provision of bedding and linen, arrange food preparation and distribution, security and other requirements.

The nature of evacuation centres are that they can be required to accommodate a range of people from local residents with children, elderly citizens and carers, in some cases nursing home residents, the homeless, back packers, holiday makers, and people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds including aboriginal and Torres Strait citizens.

It is estimated that over 75 evacuation centres were established during the 2010/11 floods and a further 15 emergency shelters established to accommodate people during Cyclone Yasi.

34 evacuation centres were managed by Red Cross whose role was to:

- coordinate the activities in the centres and the agencies involved (eg Salvation Army, Lifeline, Save the Children etc)
- establish and put into effect ground rules for the operation of the centres (including meal times, lights out, daily briefings and activities etc)
- register evacuees on NRIS
- meet and greet evacuees and provide personal support
- assign accommodation
- manage incidents
- liaise with Police, Health and other key operatives
- provide regular statistics and data for input into SDMG reports.

Evacuation centres, depending on their capacity, are generally supported by:

- Salvation Army who provide food and catering
- Lifeline who provide counselling

- Save the Children who provide activities for children
- First Aiders – sometimes provided by St John's Ambulance

Emergency shelters are established to provide safe haven from immediate danger and generally are placed where residents are protected from immediate danger.

As such they do not generally provide bedding or long term food preparation and require residents to bring their own immediate needs - blankets, pillows, some food and water. Unlike evacuation centres these emergency shelters provide only short term accommodation for up to 24 hours.

Emergency shelters were established in Cairns, Tully, Townsville, Ingham, Innisfail, Palm Island and other locations during the immediate phase of Cyclone Yasi and accommodated over 6500 residents.

Based on the recent flood and cyclone experience the emergency shelter concept and function may require further consideration and development in Queensland to address a range of concerns, including:

- the adequacy of information to citizens about the location of centres
- speed of establishment of centres to ensure that adequate resources are deployed well in advance of their occupancy (eg toilets and water)
- safety and accessibility of location of shelters, particularly in relation to the type and scale of imminent hazard

A number of shelters were spontaneously established by well meaning organisations such as churches. Some of these became unmanageable, as the number of occupants and their duration overwhelmed local resources. In one case this resulted in resources from other nearby centres being deployed to register evacuees and oversee these new facilities.

The following suggestions are presented for consideration:

- a) *Evacuation centres need to be clearly identified in Local Government Disaster Plans and regularly audited by both councils and service providers to ensure their safety, appropriateness and capacity.*
- b) *Standards need to be established for emergency shelters that enable them to be adequately located and able to withstand the significant forces and danger that accompany disasters.*
- c) *Communication systems need to be put in place at a local level to advise residents, travellers and others of the designated evacuation centres and emergency shelter, and safe routes to centres.*
- d) *MOUs need to be developed between local councils and emergency service providers to clearly identify the roles of each party in establishing and managing evacuation centres and emergency shelters.*

- e) *Regular exercises should be undertaken (not just desk based exercises) which enable all agencies to practice the establishment and management of evacuation centres and emergency shelters and have a better understanding of the difference between the two.*
- f) *Disaster plans at all levels should be reviewed regularly, including audits of facilities and disaster preparations including those of supporting agencies and organisations.*

Information

Timely and appropriate information is critical in disasters to inform and update the public of impending danger, to enable them to make appropriate preparations, and also to provide advice on services and facilities to assist them during and after the crisis.

The use of social media has become a powerful and growing influence in communicating information, although it can also bring with it some inherent challenges and the potential for misinformation. The use of Twitter by the Queensland Police Service during the floods and cyclones was ground breaking in terms of providing up to the minute accurate critical information and also correcting misinformation.

Unlike other media forms which rely on electricity supply (TV and Radio) it enables personal communication devices (modern mobile phones) to access the information. Acknowledging that it is still limited in its usage, nevertheless it has a great capacity to impart instant information, complementing more traditional sources of communication.

Similarly some local councils established special Facebook pages to impart information. These communication methods have high usage not only with the younger generations but also travellers and have the advantage of on-forwarding information to broader audiences.

Greater use of social networking media in disasters should be encouraged and explored by all agencies. This also highlights the importance of flexible approaches to imparting information.

National Registration and Inquiry System (NRIS)

NRIS is a voluntary registration system for displaced people during disasters. It is a computer based filing and retrieval system, designed to provide information and basic details on the whereabouts of persons affected by disasters to authorities and the inquiring public. NRIS aims to reduce distress in communities and families separated by disaster. It also provides information to authorities to assist with response and recovery activities. An example is in assisting police with the identification of people who may be missing as a result of a given emergency.

NRIS was developed as an outcome of lessons learnt from the mass evacuation of Darwin after Cyclone Tracey in 1974. Launched by its then custodian (Department of Defence's National Disasters Organisation) in 1976, NRIS is presently managed, maintained and operated by Red Cross on behalf of the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department.

In the 2010-2011 Queensland and Victorian floods and Cyclone Yasi, NRIS handled more than 34,000 registrations and 15,000 inquiries (In the 2009 Victorian bushfires NRIS took over 22,000 registrations and 21,000 inquiries).

During recent disaster events in Queensland, the majority of people were registered in person by Red Cross volunteers at evacuation centres and other locations. This information was then input into NRIS remotely, utilising both Queensland Police and Red Cross resources. NRIS was also available on the Red Cross website enabling people to register their whereabouts or inquire after missing loved ones on the internet.

In Queensland, responsibility for set up and operation of the State Inquiry Centre (SIC) lies with Queensland Police. Red Cross provides resources in the field to collect registrations and inquiries, and also surge capacity to the SIC should police request assistance.

While the service was delivered adequately, the scale of the events was challenging and necessitated a good deal of flexibility.

As part of an ongoing revitalisation of NRIS since the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, Red Cross has submitted a funding bid to develop and implement a new version of NRIS to the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department. If funding is successfully obtained, this updated version of NRIS will enable:

- Provision of data on persons for whom concern is expressed to Police;
- Near real time information to authorised agencies to improve targeted services and assistance; and,
- Provision of early impact data (including mapping capabilities within agencies systems) to a range of agencies to inform planning and scaling of response and recovery activities.

Greater awareness and acceptance of NRIS and its capabilities by state and local governments and their agencies would further enhance support for affected communities.

Early recovery and recovery centres

Recovery centres provide a focal community point for the distribution of information, emergency financial payments and other forms of support from a range of government and non-government agencies.

While the Department of Communities has tried to implement a new model for recovery centres unfortunately, they were generally still seen as a place to receive financial assistance, rather than a hub of recovery support from a variety of agencies. Much of this can be put down to the size of the recovery venues established and available at the time. The smaller the centre, the less space for agencies.

It was noted that agencies and staff operating in recovery centres did a good job under difficult circumstances. However, there is room for improvement to ensure greater efficiency of operations, especially in the area of payments and people management.

It is suggested that consideration be given to the development of guidelines and procedures to further enhance operations, including:

- *Combining emergency payments by both State and Federal Government agencies to a single point of transaction could be considered to eradicate the need for people to queue twice for different forms of emergency payments.*
- *Establishing triage procedures for assistance would enable those people with special needs to be fast tracked into the system (eg the elderly, those medical conditions, or families with young babies).*
- *The provision of food and water and medical teams should be considered standard operating practice, with flexible opening hours to take into account the distances travelled by residents, or the business operations of farming communities.*

Donations of Goods

The donation of goods is becoming an increasingly significant issue in disaster recovery operations. The public urge to help those in need triggers the collection and transport of clothing, food stuffs, electrical good and furniture in large quantities into towns and communities affected by disasters.

Despite public pleas to the contrary, goods continue to arrive in some cases in shipping container load or semitrailer convoys, arriving unannounced and uninvited at evacuation centres and recovery centres. In some cases the media have encouraged and supported such operations.

Following the Victorian Bushfire an excess of 40,000 pallets of goods from across Australia took up more than 50,000sq meters of storage space requiring approx 35 staff to manage handling, transport, distribution and disposal.

As a result of this growing problem, the Emergency Management Capability Branch of the Federal Attorney Generals Department funded a project by the State Recovery Office of the South Australian Department of Communities that explored:

- Issues related to unsolicited goods

- Issues relating to management of these goods if they are donated
- Issues related to education of the public and the media
- Issues in relation to corporate donations
- Understanding the views and attitudes of recipients of donated good,

The report noted:

“Experience from this and other disasters indicated that a large proportion of what was donated may be either unwanted or unusable causing further expenditure and possible outrage from the public.”

“Donation of unsolicited goods take on a life of its own and public figures such as politicians and community leaders, disaster spokespersons, recovery staff and volunteers find it very difficult to say ‘no’. Some of the effort expended is about finding ways to keep the donors happy and has very little to do with the needs of the recipients. Recipients express strong concerns and commented that they felt the pressure to be grateful for even very substandard goods. Second hand clothing is very rarely seen as a useful donation but these items are usually the bulk of what is donated”.

Those observations could also apply to a number of the donations received by communities resulting from the 2010/11 floods and cyclone events.

The Report entitled “Management of Donated Goods Following a Disaster” published in February 2010 made a number of recommendations, including:

- That proposed (National) guidelines become part of state, territory and regional emergency plans
- That a communication strategy be developed that informs politicians, community leaders, media and emergency management networks and the general public about donated goods. This communication strategy should be incorporated into state and territory emergency management plans
- That recovery managers should regularly and formally access feedback from recipients of donated goods so that their opinions, needs and wishes are considered in any future planning
- That a strategy be developed to encourage corporate donors to work in partnership with government and NGOs and to incorporate disaster needs in their Corporate Social Responsibilities policies.

Consideration should be given to the adoption of these recommendations to overcome an increasingly prevalent problem.