Australian Human Rights Commission

Celebrating 40 years

Resilience through rights:

Upholding human rights in disasters and emergencies

November 2026



humanrights.gov.au

Acknowledgements

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders – past and present.

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Windsor and Pitt Town, NSW, Australia, following flood event.

About the Australian Human Rights Commission

Our vision for Australia is one where everyone can live free and equal in dignity and rights as part of a strong, healthy democratic society.

We have 4 core functions under our legislation:

Access to justice: We help people to resolve complaints of discrimination and human rights breaches through our complaint handling services.

Fairer laws, policies and practices: We review existing and proposed laws, policies and practices and provide expert advice on how they can better protect people's human rights. We help organisations to protect human rights in their work. We publish reports on human rights problems and how to fix them.

Education and understanding: We promote understanding, acceptance and public discussion of human rights. We deliver workplace and community human rights education and training.

Compliance: We are the regulator for the positive duty requiring employers and others to address workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination, sexist conduct and related victimisation.

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Resilience through rights:

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Commissioner's foreword

Disasters are part of the Australian experience. Bushfires, floods, cyclones, storms and heatwaves have shaped our communities for generations. Yet many Australians are now experiencing disasters with increasing frequency and intensity, with impacts that often continue long after the immediate emergency has passed. Beyond the immediate threat to life and safety, disasters can result in displacement and disconnection, personal loss, financial strain, and ongoing effects on physical and mental wellbeing.

As Australia confronts these challenges, it is vital that we continue to learn from those who experience disasters first-hand.

This report began with a simple question: what can we learn from people's experiences of disasters, and how can those lessons help us build stronger, fairer and more resilient communities?

That question builds on the Commission's earlier *Collateral Damage* report, which examined the human rights impacts of Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the central lessons from that work was that emergencies are never experienced equally. People's circumstances matter. The same is true in the context of disasters arising from natural hazards.

During this project, the Commission heard from disaster-affected individuals and communities, emergency service personnel, community organisations, government agencies, experts and local leaders across Australia. While every experience was different, a consistent theme emerged: disasters affect everyone, but they do not affect everyone in the same way.

A person's experience of disaster is shaped not only by the event itself, but also by the realities of their everyday life. Whether someone has secure housing, access to information and support, strong community connections, or caring responsibilities can influence their ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. Emergencies often expose and deepen existing vulnerabilities and inequalities.

This matters because disaster resilience is ultimately about people. While infrastructure, emergency powers and disaster management systems are critically important, they are only part of the picture. The experiences shared through this project demonstrate that resilience also depends on trust, participation, inclusion and people's ability to access information and the support they need when they need it most.

This is why a human rights-centred approach matters.

Human rights are not abstract principles that sit alongside disaster management. They provide a practical framework for understanding how people experience emergencies and for ensuring that decisions remain focused on fairness, dignity and the diverse needs of communities. They encourage us to ask important questions: who may be most affected by a decision, whose voices may not be heard, and what barriers may prevent people from accessing information, services or support?

Importantly, a human rights-centred approach is not only about identifying risks or preventing harm. It also helps ensure planning, decision-making and support reflect the diverse circumstances of people affected by disasters. Systems designed in this way are often more effective, more trusted and better able to support communities before, during and after disasters.

This report forms the second phase of the Commission's Emergency Responses project. It identifies key lessons from recent disasters and explores how human rights principles can contribute to more effective preparedness, response and recovery. The next phase of the project will focus on translating these lessons into practical tools and guidance.

Ultimately, the message we heard throughout this project was clear: resilient communities are built through people, relationships and trust. By placing human rights at the centre of disaster planning and decision-making, we can help build communities that are better prepared for future disasters and better able to recover when they occur.



Dr Lorraine Finlay
Human Rights Commissioner

Support Services

We understand that the issues discussed in this report may cause distress.

Crisis and suicide prevention

- If you or someone else are in immediate danger, call **Triple Zero 000**
- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14 or visit www.lifeline.org.au

Mental health support and advice

- **Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800 or visit www.kidshelpline.com.au
- **Beyond Blue:** 1300 22 4636 or visit www.beyondblue.org.au
- **MensLine Australia**: 1300 78 99 78 or visit www.mensline.org.au
- **13YARN:** 13 92 76 or visit www.13yarn.org.au
- **QLife:** 1800 184 527 or visit www.qlife.org.au

Family domestic and sexual violence support

- **1800Respect:** 1800 737 732 or visit www.1800respect.org.au

Child sexual abuse support and advice

- **BraveHearts Support Line:** 1800 272 831 or visit www.bravehearts.org.au

Executive summary

Australia is experiencing more frequent, severe and compounding disasters. Bushfires, floods, storms, cyclones and heatwaves are causing loss of life, displacement, damage to homes and infrastructure, disruption to essential services, and long-term social, cultural, health and economic harm. Impacts however are not equally shared.

These events are not only operational emergencies. They are also human rights issues that test whether governments and institutions protect people fairly, listen to affected communities and support their recovery with dignity.

This report examines how disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery measures affect the human rights of people in Australia, with a focus on disasters caused by natural hazards. It draws on a national survey of over 2,000 adults, targeted consultation sessions with affected people, community organisations, emergency management agencies, experts and governments, and a review of legal, policy and research literature.

Our central finding is that while disaster management frameworks are evolving from reactive responses towards fostering community resilience, human rights principles and outcomes are not always explicitly embedded, applied, or measured across disaster management systems.

Personal circumstances, location and access to resources shape both exposure to harm and the ability to recover from disasters. For instance, people with disability or health conditions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, older people, people on low incomes, unemployed people and some regional communities experienced particular barriers or more severe and prolonged impacts. These disadvantages intersect in different ways.

Treating everyone identically can therefore produce unequal outcomes; fair disaster management requires services and assistance that people can actually access and use. Better disaster outcomes require coordinated systems that address the varied vulnerabilities, strengths and recovery needs of different communities before, during, and after an event.

These findings are about more than particular groups or communities. Disasters affect everyone, but they do not affect everyone in the same way. A person's experience will often depend on a combination of factors, including their health, income, housing, support networks, location, work and caring responsibilities. Most Australians will experience one or more of these circumstances at different points in their lives. Understanding how these factors shape disaster impacts is therefore not about dividing people into categories. It is about recognising the realities of people's lives and ensuring that disaster systems work effectively for everyone who may need them.

The report calls for a shift in both mindset and practice. People affected by disasters are often best placed to identify the challenges facing their communities and the support that will be most effective. Recognising and drawing on that experience will not eliminate the difficult decisions that arise during emergencies. However, it can help decision-makers better understand the consequences of those decisions, reduce avoidable harm, and build stronger, more resilient communities.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Australia has experienced a series of major disasters of a scale and frequency that have challenged communities, governments and emergency management systems across the country. These events have not only challenged the limits of our national response efforts but have also tested our collective resilience in the face of loss and profound disruption.

Bushfires, repeated and widespread flooding, severe storms, cyclones and heatwaves have led to loss of life, widespread displacement, housing damage, disruptions to essential services, and long-term social and economic impacts. Recent disasters have also exposed the cumulative and compounding nature of disaster risk, with many communities facing multiple events in quick succession and with limited time to recover between them.[1]

Emergencies heighten the responsibility of governments and institutions to protect and uphold human rights. They are not only operational challenges but also tests of how well our systems support people when they are at their most vulnerable.

Disasters can affect a wide range of human rights, including the rights to life, safety and security, health, adequate housing, food, water and access to essential services. The impacts are not felt equally. Disasters often disproportionately affect people who already experience disadvantage, including people with disability, older people, First Peoples, people on low incomes, and those facing social, cultural or geographic barriers. These factors can combine in different ways affecting access to resources, information, services, support networks, and decision-making.

During emergencies, rapid decision-making and command-and-control structures are often relied on to protect life and safety. While these approaches are essential in disaster response, there is a risk that people's rights, voices and individual circumstances can be overlooked. As one consultation participant observed:

> **'we know best practice for many years is around community centred approaches, but that often rubs up against command-and-control structures...and often that then changes the approach - we don't have it embedded deeply in the system.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [12 June 2025][2]

Gaps in response and recovery can sometimes be seen as administrative problems rather than harms experienced by people and communities. A human rights-based approach reframes this by recognising people affected by disasters as rights-holders, not simply recipients of assistance. By emphasising participation, fairness, dignity and accountability, individuals, communities and government can together ensure that disaster planning, response and recovery are undertaken in ways that are lawful, inclusive and responsive to the needs of affected communities.

A human rights-based approach expands the focus of disaster management beyond immediate response outcomes. It recognises the agency, strengths and capabilities of affected communities and supports recovery processes that are not only effective, but also equitable, inclusive and grounded in dignity.

1.1 Key findings

Overall key findings

Disasters are situations where people have heightened needs, and governments have heightened obligations to uphold human rights. A disaster is a stress test that uncovers pre-existing pressures and structural problems within society. Disasters also put individual and social safety nets to the test, exposing who has access to support and resources, and who falls through the cracks.

Over the past 2 years, the Commission has heard from Australians across the country about their experiences of disasters in the country. What we have learnt is outlined in this report, but can also be distilled into the following 7 Guiding Principles and additional lessons learnt:



Human rights must be part of every disaster decision

- Human rights must be built into disaster management and risk reduction, with laws, policies and practices designed and implemented in ways that protect and promote human rights.



One-size does not fit all

- There is no single solution that works for everyone after a disaster. Governments and emergency agencies must build ongoing relationships with affected communities, listening and working with them before, during and after disasters to understand what support is needed.
- Disaster risk reduction before, during, and after a natural hazard event must recognise that some people face existing economic and social disadvantages that can make disasters harder to recover from.



Emergency measures must always be proportionate

- Sometimes emergency measures may restrict certain rights to protect public safety. These measures must be transparent, accountable, the least restrictive options available and only remain in place for as long as necessary.



Balance rapid response with compassion and long-term consequences

- Rapid disaster response must be person-centred and trauma-informed to avoid prolonging or exacerbating community suffering.
- Ensure that people have appropriate support to engage with recovery processes, especially when they have experienced multiple disasters.
- Delays or complexity in accessing assistance can slow physical, emotional and mental recovery.

Clear communication saves lives and supports recovery

- Provide communities with accurate, timely information from trusted sources. Coordinate communication across communities, response agencies and all levels of governments.
- Meet the communication needs of groups facing information barriers.

Communities are the most resilient when they lead and are well connected

- Recognise, leverage and resource community leadership and capacity during the entire disaster cycle.
- Provide support for at-risk groups to be able to self-advocate for their needs, especially those who have intersecting needs and who have barriers accessing systems.

Disaster management must look beyond the immediate crisis

- Utilise disaster recovery to embed long-term community resilience, including through compounding events.
- Continuously monitor and evaluate effectiveness of disaster response measures and consider how lessons learned, innovations and institutional knowledge can be retained and shared.
- Funding models should reflect the long-term nature of recovery, and future disaster risk. Work towards preventing and mitigating the 'funding cliffs' that are common during emergencies.

National survey

The Commission's national quantitative survey (the survey) asked over 2,000 Australians about how they had been impacted by natural hazards in the past decade. The survey conducted between 23 April 2025 and 20 May 2025 explored people's experiences of disasters caused by natural hazards and their impacts, including disruptions to essential services, support received, finances, health and safety, displacement, social connection, and personal losses (Appendix A). It focused on severe storms, floods, bushfires, grassfires and cyclones, which are among the most common and significant disasters affecting Australians. The analysis looked at how many people experienced each impact, how highly people ranked it compared with other impacts (MaxDiff), and how severely it affected those who experienced it (standalone impact).

The survey showed that disasters affect many Australians, but not everyone is affected in the same way. People's experiences are shaped by factors such as the type and severity of the disaster, how prepared they were, and their access to information and support. Personal circumstances, including age, health and income, also play a role. For example, some groups faced more difficulties accessing essential services and support than others. These findings highlight that disaster impacts are not shared equally and that emergency and disaster management needs to take account of different experiences and circumstances.

1.2 Impact snapshot

Disasters are a common Australian experience

Data analysis of our survey results showed that 55% of all Australians have been impacted by a natural hazard disaster in the past 10 years, and 22% have experienced moderate or severe impacts. Although more people who responded to the survey had experienced severe storms, people were more likely to have experienced severe problems due to major floods and bushfires than other events. The experience of disasters was spread across Australia with 59% in capital cities and 41% outside capital cities.

Poor communication and anxiety are widely felt

While experiences of those surveyed were varied with people experiencing a broad range of impacts, one of the most common experiences was anxiety and lack of certainty about the future. People also commonly reported problems with road blockages and over half (55%) said they were impacted by poor communication. There was a particularly strong desire for better provision of information and more long-term support.

Not feeling understood can have a big impact

About a third (31%) of people felt that local government had a good understanding of the issues facing those impacted by a disaster at the time of the event. There was less confidence that state and federal governments had this understanding than locally. People who considered others did not understand their experience rated this among the most significant impacts they felt.

Experience of disasters is uneven

Individual and place-based factors affected experiences of disasters. For instance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, those with disabilities or a health condition were more likely than other people to experience greater impacts from disasters. People with disability were also significantly more likely to feel that sufficient support was not provided, compared to other people. Geographic location and income were also important factors.

1.3 Significant negative impacts on people

Personal losses including loss of life

Fortunately, death of someone known to the survey respondent was relatively uncommon, although around a third (29%) experienced personal losses, which also included things such as pets, livestock and photographs. For people who had experienced personal losses, this had the most significant impact for them compared to other issues (49% said it was significant or catastrophic).

Health and safety

Anxiety and uncertainty stood out as having the most negative impact on people relative to other experiences Australia-wide and was strongly felt in all states and across all types of events. Two thirds of respondents (66%) experienced negative impacts relating to their health and safety. Anxiety and uncertainty about the future were the most common health and safety concerns. Although, the impact of personal losses was more likely to be considered significant or catastrophic for people who experienced these.

Essential services

Negative impacts relating to essential services were experienced most broadly by survey respondents (70%). Disruption to essential services such as utilities and roads was ranked as having a strong impact relative to other issues Australia-wide. Loss of telecommunications and utilities (water, power, gas) were particularly serious concerns for people who had experienced this disruption.

Response and support

Issues with receiving support were also broadly felt (70%). Communication was rated as a particularly important issue. Many people felt they did not get enough support or resources at any stage of the recovery process. This was especially true in the months after the event, when only 42% felt the support available was enough. People reported feeling that good support was more likely to come from local community than the government.

Financial impacts

Around two in three people (67%) experienced problems relating to finances, most commonly frustration dealing with insurance companies (30%), followed by loss of income and inability to fix or replace lost items.

Displacement and disconnection

Around three in five people (61%) experienced negative impacts relating to displacement and disconnection. Social breakdown (41%) (such as loss of community, separation from friends, and family breakdown) and inability to work (26%) were particularly significant issues. Half (49%) of people needing somewhere to stay due to power outages and evacuations faced a lack of suitable accommodation.

1.4 How personal circumstances affect experience of disasters

Location and economic factors

Those living regionally (outside capital cities) with lower household incomes (less than $50k) were less likely to report negative impacts because of an event compared to others. However, they were also less likely to feel they received enough support during recovery, including from local and state governments. They were more likely to describe the overall impact as severe and to take longer than a month to recover.

Those unemployed were significantly more likely to rate the impacts of an event as severe and take more than a month to recover. They felt less understood by the state and federal government and were significantly less likely to feel supported in the weeks and months after the event.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experienced more negative impacts including displacement, disconnection and personal loss, and longer recovery times than others. However, they were also more likely to say they felt understood and supported by charities and government.

People with a health condition or disability

Those with health conditions or disability were also disproportionately impacted. This was so for all types of disasters and across all impacts (essential services, support, financial, health and safety, displacement, and personal loss). They were also more likely than those without health or disability barriers to feel support and resources during the event and afterwards were inadequate.

Age

Younger people (aged 18 to 29) were more likely to report experiencing disasters and to report negative impacts, but they were also more likely to feel supported and recover more quickly. Older people (aged 60+) were more likely to experience severe impacts and longer recovery times and were less likely to feel understood or supported during recovery.

2. About the project

2.1 Objectives

We examined the impacts of emergency measures on the human rights of Australians in the context of natural hazards including severe storms, major floods, major bushfires, cyclones, and earthquakes. This project builds on our earlier work, *'Collateral Damage: What the untold stories from the COVID-19 pandemic reveal about human rights in Australia'* (Collateral Damage Report). A key finding of that report was that human rights were not always considered or protected during the pandemic response, reinforcing the importance of placing people, their experiences, and their rights at the centre of emergency planning and decision-making. This project sought to understand whether similar issues emerged in the context of natural hazards and whether these insights could help shape a more people-centred, human rights-based approach to reducing disaster risk.

The key objectives of this report are to:



Learn from recent disasters in Australia about **what works well and what could be improved** to better protect people's rights.



Show how disasters and disaster management decisions can **affect different people and communities in different ways.**



Explore the **common challenges and broader issues** that shape people's experiences of disasters and recovery.



Inform **practical guidance for emergency services** and other organisations to consider people's rights throughout disaster planning, response and recovery.

2.2 Methodology

This report brings together extensive research and engagement undertaken by the Commission over the past twelve months, combining stakeholder insights, quantitative survey evidence, and a broad body of literature including scholarly articles and research, government inquiries, national and international disaster risk management frameworks.

This project undertook:

- a national quantitative survey
- targeted stakeholder consultations with affected people and communities, emergency management agencies, subject matter experts, and community organisations around Australia
- ongoing engagement with government agencies throughout the project, as well as broader discussions through conferences, forums and professional networks.

2.3 Quantitative data analysis

The Commission engaged Quantum Market Research to undertake a national survey to understand the prevalence and impacts of natural hazards on Australians and affected communities, as well as their experiences of response and recovery.

Key objectives of the survey were to:

- Understand the impact of disasters caused by natural hazards on Australians generally
- Examine how impacts differ across population groups (e.g. by age, location, health status, and socio-economic circumstances)
- Identify perceived gaps in community, state and national responses
- Provide evidence to inform broader public consultation and policy development.

The survey was conducted online between 23 April 2025 and 20 May 2025 with a sample of 2,000 Australians aged 18 and over. To make sure the survey reflected the experiences of Australians who had been seriously affected by a natural hazard disaster, researchers used a two-step approach:

- First they surveyed a nationally representative group of more than 2,100 Australians. From this group around 500 people reported being moderately or severely impacted by a natural hazard within the previous 10 years.
- Researchers then recruited additional participants to create a final sample of 2,000 people, using the characteristics of the initial group to ensure the sample remained representative of Australians who have experienced significant impacts from natural hazards.

The final sample was then weighted by the characteristics of the initial group to correct for minor deviations in the obtained sample from the projected population, ensuring representativeness.

Using a representative sample, a large number of participants, and statistical testing at 95% confidence ensured the findings can be considered a reliable reflection of the experiences and views of Australians who have been significantly affected by natural hazard disaster.

The survey collected information on respondents' experiences of disasters, including the types of negative impacts experienced across multiple domains, such as essential services, response and support, financial, health and safety, displacement and disconnection, and

personal losses. The survey focused on a range of disasters associated with natural hazards commonly experienced in Australia, including severe storms, floods, bushfires or grassfires, and cyclones. These events were selected to capture the most prevalent and impactful disaster types affecting Australians. For the purpose of the research, respondents who had experienced multiple disasters were asked to identify and reflect on the single event that had the greatest impact on them, ensuring consistency in how impacts were assessed across the sample.

A key feature of the methodology was the inclusion of a Maximum Difference Scaling exercise, which asked respondents to identify the most and least impactful experiences from a set of negative impacts. This approach enables a more robust assessment of relative importance, allowing the study to prioritise which issues had the greatest perceived impact on affected individuals.

The survey results have been incorporated throughout this report.

2.4 Stakeholder consultations

This report is shaped by extensive stakeholder engagement undertaken across Australia. The Commission carried out consultations through a combination of in-person and online sessions, ensuring broad participation across Australia. Since March 2025, we held 37 engagement sessions which ranged from one-on-one interviews to small group discussions and larger community forums, enabling both detailed insight and broader reflection.

We engaged people from emergency services agencies, community organisations, service providers, advocacy bodies, academics, subject matter experts, local and state government representatives, and individuals and communities with lived experience of disasters.

Consultation discussions were centred on understanding people's views on various aspects of Australia's disaster management activities, including the effectiveness of existing measures, key challenges and gaps, and the impact of these disaster activities on the rights of affected individuals and communities. People were also invited to identify lessons learned from recent disaster events and opportunities to strengthen approaches to better support and protect human rights in future emergencies.

The following guiding questions formed the basis for discussion:

1. What has been done well in Australia's disaster response (particularly from a human rights perspective)?
2. What have been the key challenges in your personal/professional experience?
3. Are there specific ongoing (human rights) challenges facing particular sections of the community?
4. What lessons can be learnt from recent disasters?
5. Any final thoughts on how human rights can be better protected during future emergencies

These conversations helped us understand the broader structural and systemic issues shaping disaster experiences, while also identifying practical insights to improve future responses. Through detailed discussion of specific disaster experiences, they highlighted both shared challenges and the diverse impacts of disasters across Australia, as well as the evolution of disaster management and recovery approaches over time. Insights from these consultations are embedded throughout this report, including through the use of de-identified quotes.

3. Finding the right words

Our survey results highlighted that exposure to natural hazards is a common experience in Australia, but not all people experience disaster in the same way. Through our inquiry, people with diverse personal, professional and geographic experience revealed different perceptions and ways of describing disaster and risks. Those differences shaped their preparation for and responses to disasters.

3.1 Talking about disasters in Australia

In disaster and emergency management, many related terms are used interchangeably. Different terminology is used in different contexts, including media, academia, legislation and policy, often for different purposes and with different outcomes. For example, governments in Australia use different terminology when declaring emergencies, including state of emergency, state of disaster, natural disaster declaration and national emergency declaration.[3] Definitions also evolve over time as research and understanding progresses.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction promotes consistent use of disaster risk reduction concepts, recognising that the terms we use shape perceptions of risk and influence how we prepare for, manage and respond to disasters.[4]

Natural disaster is a commonly used term to describe a catastrophic event caused by a natural hazard. Natural hazards are not in themselves 'disasters'. A disaster results when a natural hazard impacts a community resulting in human, material, economic and environmental losses.

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has said there is no such thing as a *natural disaster*.[5] A disaster arises through exposure and vulnerability to hazards that impact people and the environment. Disasters arising from hazards, including extreme weather events such as cyclones, bushfires and floods, can also be caused or exacerbated by humans and our actions.[6] Factors such as poverty, exclusion, and discrimination can increase vulnerability to disaster. Countless choices made by governments, companies, communities and individuals also lay the groundwork for a disaster to occur. The extent and severity of disaster impacts are influenced by decisions about where we build our communities and how we respond to and manage risk.[7]

Some argue that referring to a disaster as 'natural' minimises the responsibility people have to avoid or reduce risks, suggesting outcomes are inevitable.[8]

'And when they're told that a disaster is natural, then they feel like there's nothing they can do to change it, like it's going to happen anyway.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][9]

For the purposes of this report, we adopt the terms 'natural hazards' and 'disasters' to refer to the event and aftermath of extreme weather events in Australia.

Disaster cycle

A widely used disaster cycle model in Australia is the four-phase Prevent, Prepare, Respond, Recover (PPRR) model. This framework, which is reflected in the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience *Australian Emergency Management Arrangements Handbook,* has been used in Australia to organise activities before, during and after disasters.[10] Examples of activities commonly associated with each phase are:



This model is depicted as a continuous loop where the lessons learnt from one disaster event should be used to improve community resilience. While this model simplifies the reality that recovery often takes years or even decades and does not occur in neat stages, it remains a useful framework for understanding the different phases and activities involved in disaster management.

4. The Australian experience

Australia's disaster risk is increasing with more severe, complex and compounding disasters being experienced in recent years.[11] Escalating natural hazards threaten human rights by impacting the health and wellbeing of people and communities requiring a stronger human rights centred focus on resilience and risk reduction.

4.1 Natural hazards are a common Australian experience

Australia's variable climate, geography and environment make it highly prone to natural hazards and extreme weather events, with temperature and rainfall fluctuating across seasons and from one year to the next.[12] Disasters caused by natural hazards in Australia can be either sudden or slow onset. [13] Common sudden-onset disasters include bushfires, floods, cyclones and storms. Occurring quickly, they can cause immediate damage to life, property and infrastructure, often requiring coordinated responses from multiple agencies and levels of government. In contrast, slow-onset disasters, including drought, sea level rise and environmental degradation, develop over years or decades and can have extensive, long-term and potentially irreversible impacts. Some hazards, such as heatwaves, sit between these categories, with conditions emerging over days while impacts accumulate over time.[14]

Our project predominantly investigated emergency responses to common sudden-onset disasters in Australia, such as bushfires, floods, cyclones and storms.

Based on a nationally representative sample, our survey results indicate that over half of Australians all across Australia have been impacted by a disaster in the last 10 years. About one in five people (20%) have been severely impacted. Severe storms were the most commonly experienced event, followed by major flood, bushfires, and cyclones. Many people had been impacted by multiple events.

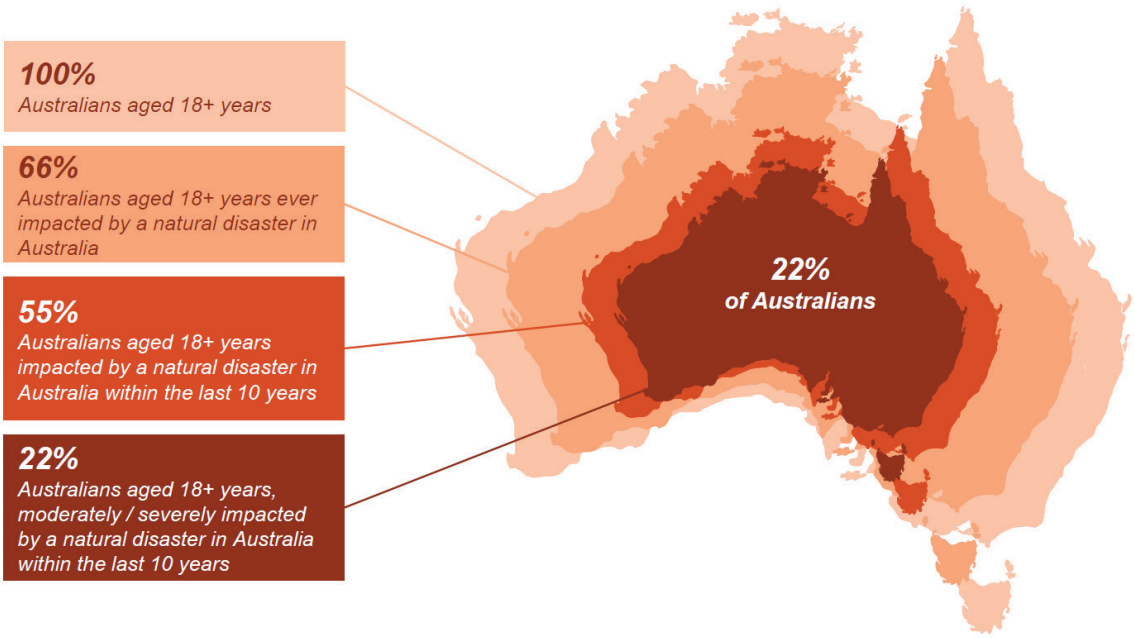


Figure 2: The Commission's Quantitative Survey (2025) – Scaling the impact of disasters caused by natural hazards in Australian in the last decade.

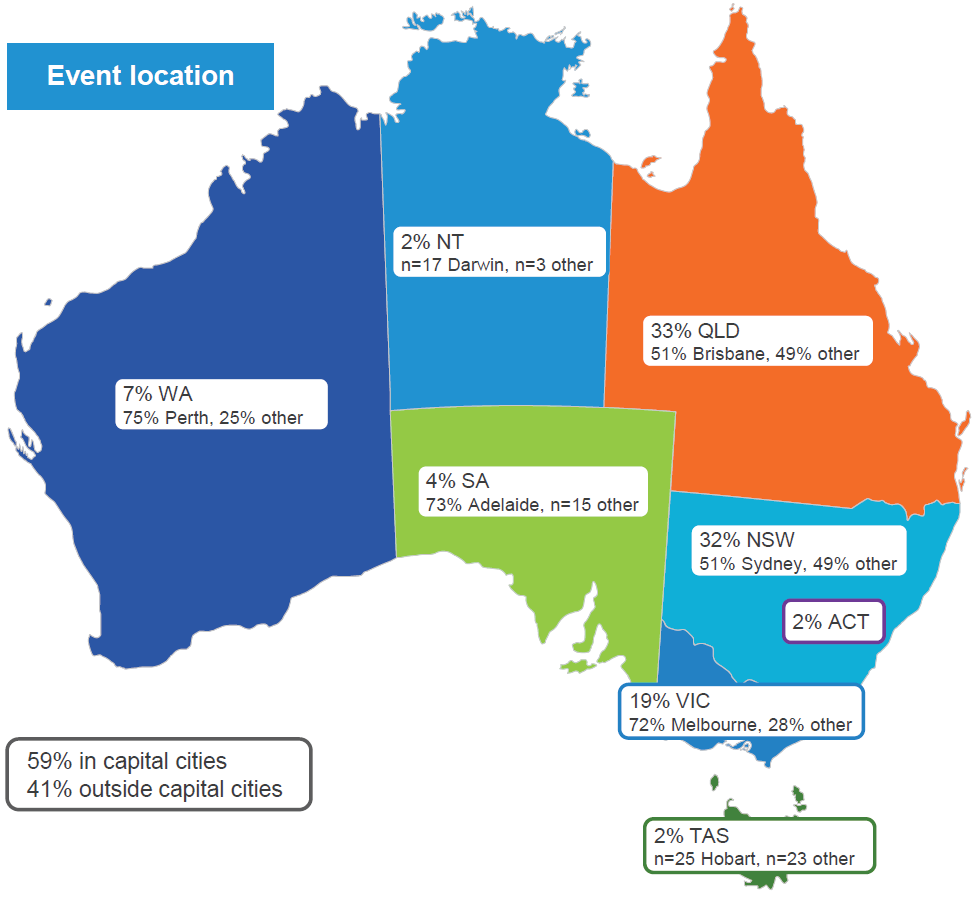


Figure 3: The Commission's Quantitative Survey (2025) – Disaster event details.

Recent major disaster events illustrate the scale and reach of natural hazards in Australia. The 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires raged through many Australian states including NSW, Victoria, Queensland, the ACT, Western Australia and South Australia. The fires resulted in 33 direct deaths (including 9 firefighters) and may have caused many more deaths linked to smoke exposure. More than 3,000 homes were destroyed and more than 24 million hectares burned. Nearly 3 billion animals were killed or displaced including threatened species.[15] Millions of Australians were impacted directly or indirectly through displacement, smoke exposure, and disruption to essential services[16]. National financial impacts were estimated at over $10 billion.[17]

The 2022 eastern Australia floods similarly affected vast areas of Queensland and NSW as well as Victoria and Tasmania.[18] The floods claimed 32 people's lives, inundated thousands of homes and displaced entire communities, with cascading impacts on housing, livelihoods, and infrastructure.[19] The Insurance Council of Australia estimated the event to have cost $3.35 billion in insured losses alone, making it one of Australia's costliest disasters.[20]

More recently, events such as Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred caused at least one reported death. Transport and power outages affected more than 500 000 people across Queensland and NSW. Some communities were already recovering from previous disasters demonstrating the complexity in managing successive events.[21] Insurers received more than 116,000 claims relating to damage totalling more than $1.2 billion.[22]

The people we spoke to across Australia shared their experience of how such events impacted them and their communities, including their experience of multiple, compounding events.

Throughout consultations, participants described experiencing disaster fatigue. A farmer from South Australia shared her experience of droughts followed by floods in her region. Bringing people together to maintain the family and community livelihood through these cascading challenges left her feeling as though she was 'running out of puff.' A participant from a fire and rescue service organisation expressed concern about the increasing impact of more frequent and severe bushfire seasons on the mental health and wellbeing of frontline workers. In Queensland community neighbourhood centres spoke about 'disaster after disaster' and the 'burn out' of workers, with recovery disrupted by subsequent events. We also heard about concerns when disasters intersect with other events – such as fuel shortages and market pressures – which effect rural and metropolitan areas differently.

4.2 Australia faces increasingly complex disaster risks

Climate variability has always produced severe disasters in Australia. A body of research describes how changes in our climate are affecting the frequency and complexity of hazards and extreme weather events.[23]

The World Meteorological Organization reported that 2024 was the warmest year on record globally.[24] In Australia, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) similarly reported in 2024 an increase of approximately 1.5°C in temperatures since records began in 1910.[25] Consistent with these reports, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that Australia is becoming hotter overall, with drying in the south-west and south-east, while heavy rainfall events are becoming more intense across much of the country, increasing risks from drought, bushfire and flooding.[26]

According to the IPCC, increasing disaster risk reflects not only changes in climate hazards but also growing exposure arising from population growth, urban development and underlying vulnerabilities.[27] The Australian Climate Service 2025 assessment of Australia's national climate risk found that Australia experiences compounding and cascading hazards that are likely to increase with reduced time to recover:

> Australia's climate is changing and will continue to change into the future. The country is likely to experience more intense and extreme climate hazards, and in some cases in areas where people and places haven't experienced these hazards before.[28]

Traditional approaches to assessing disaster risks and impacts through financial losses can underestimate their true consequences and obscure changes over time. Non-economic losses such as displacement, mental health impacts, cultural heritage loss, and damage to ecosystems and Indigenous cultural values can be more difficult to quantify but can have profound and lasting consequences.

There is increasing recognition in contemporary disaster-risk literature that disaster impacts extend beyond direct economic losses. For instance, the IPCC points to evidence of impacts on health and wellbeing, including death, injury, and illness, due to climate and natural hazards including extreme heat and variations in rainfall.[29]

Further, there is increasing awareness of how Indigenous cultural heritage is exposed to a range of climate-related risks, including sea level rise, flooding, storm surges, and bushfires, which can damage or destroy cultural sites, including burial places, rock art and culturally significant landscapes.[30]

Findings from our national survey also reflected the widespread and evolving complexity of disaster risks. Exposure is frequent, geographically dispersed, and increasingly cumulative over time. Events vary in type and severity, but consistently disrupt core aspects of daily life, particularly where they intersect with structural barriers.

The survey results show that disaster impacts vary by hazard type and location but consistently disrupt core aspects of daily life. While cyclones were more strongly associated with difficulty accessing essential supplies, floods affected physical access, and bushfires were more strongly linked to health and safety concerns. Communication was a stronger concern for people who experienced a severe storm than other types of disaster. Anxiety and lack of certainty about the future stood out as one of the most serious concerns in all types of disaster.

Most respondents experienced disasters at home (84%). Disaster effects extended well beyond physical damage, with around 70% reporting impacts to essential services, 67% financial impacts, and 66% health and safety impacts. Anxiety and uncertainty about the future (43%) and communication-related challenges (55%) were among the most commonly reported impacts overall, highlighting the significance of social, psychological and systemic consequences alongside direct physical loss.

Impacts were greatest for people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and older Australians. People with an intellectual, psychosocial or mental health disability were much more likely to experience health and safety impacts (84% compared with 57% of other respondents). Similarly, people with a physical disability or health condition had disproportionate health and safety impacts (74% compared with 63%), while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were far more likely to report experience of displacement and disconnection (87% compared with 60%) and personal losses (55% compared with 28%). Those aged 60 or older were significantly more likely to have faced severe impacts and taken more than a month to recover.

These findings are consistent with the disaster-risk literature, demonstrating that the consequences of natural hazards are increasingly complex and shaped by the interaction between changing hazards, exposure, vulnerability and broader social factors (such as healthcare, housing and environment, justice and cultural systems) that affect people's lives.

'So, for me, so we had Cudlee Creek and while we were in recovery for that, we had COVID. So, we're trying to manage the recovery process under all of those restrictions, which was, that was very, very hard because you know, the coming together of people is such an important aspect of recovery, that connection. So suddenly we're trying to find ways, how can we find connection and build that when people are stuck in their homes and gosh, right through to how do we do user guides for how to use Zoom. So, we had that going on and then we had the Cherry Gardens fire as well. So, we had three events on top of each other.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][31]

We are looking at longer and longer fire seasons. And our people are just getting exhausted.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [20 February 2026][32]



Image: Burnt building ruins and rubble at Blue Mountains, NSW, Australia.

5. Disasters and human rights

Vulnerability to risks arising from extreme weather events and natural hazards is fundamentally a human rights issue. Disasters often expose and worsen existing disadvantage, meaning that people who are already struggling are frequently hardest hit when extreme events occur. There is increasing awareness that human rights are also a fundamental consideration in participatory disaster management planning and decision-making processes.

'Human rights should be at the front of every action from emergency services and supporting services in their actions, involving the people who have experienced the disaster from the beginning'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [25 March 2026][33]

5.1 Disasters affect people's human rights

Although there is currently no comprehensive international treaty dedicated specifically to natural hazard disasters, a substantial body of existing international human rights law applies to disaster situations.

Australia is party to seven core international human rights treaties (in addition to a range of other treaty obligations). The relevant treaties are discussed in this chapter 5 of this report and included in **Appendix A**. Australia has ratified these international treaties and therefore has an obligation to protect and fulfill the rights recognised in the treaties for all people.

Human rights of all people are engaged in natural hazards because disasters can affect everyone. Extreme weather events can undermine the enjoyment of internationally recognised human rights, including the rights to life, health, adequate housing, food, water, and an adequate standard of living as protected under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* and *International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*.[34]

People's experiences of disasters are shaped by their individual circumstances and characteristics. For instance, children, older people, people with disability, First Peoples and those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage may face unique and intersecting risks and barriers to recovery[35]. Such outcomes engage the principles of equality and non-discrimination reflected in international human rights treaties to which Australia has committed. In addition to those treaties already mentioned above, these include the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*,[36] *Convention on the Rights of the Child*,[37] *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*[38] and *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*.[39]

Human rights are important throughout disaster management processes. Human rights protections help ensure that people are included in decisions that affect them and are treated equally.[40] This applies not only during and after a disaster, but also when planning for and reducing future risks.[41]

In Australia, human rights protections are drawn from a combination of federal, state and territory laws, as well as international human rights obligations. Australia has not adopted a national Human Rights Act. Human rights are protected through legislation such as the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986* (Cth), anti-discrimination laws, and human rights legislation in the ACT, Victoria and Queensland. Together, these frameworks help guide decision-making and promote consideration of human rights impacts during disaster management. Relevant laws are set out in **Appendix A**.

5.2 Disaster management frameworks and human rights

International frameworks

The leading international framework is the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.[42] The framework was adopted by 187 UN Member States, including Australia, in Sendai, Japan, in 2015. It sets out globally agreed priorities for reducing disaster risk and building resilience and informs Australia's approach to disaster risk reduction both in Australia (led by the National Emergency Management Agency, NEMA) and internationally through Australia's overseas development assistance program.[43]

The Sendai Framework is aimed at reducing disaster risk through improved understanding of risk, stronger governance, investment in longer term measures to promote resilience, and effective preparedness and recovery. Human rights are supported through the Sendai Framework. It prioritises the reduction of loss of life, health impacts and damage to livelihoods and essential services, which align with the rights to life, health, housing and an adequate standard of living. The framework also promotes participation, inclusion and accessibility in decision-making processes affecting disaster-affected communities.

While several influential international instruments and guidance documents offer operational guidance on protecting people and their rights before, during and after disasters,[44] the Sendai Framework provides an overarching global framework for disaster risk reduction[45].

While human rights protections are largely implicit in the framework, the Sendai Framework's guiding principles recognise that managing risk of disasters is aimed at protecting people and their assets while promoting and protecting all human rights.[46] The UNDRR's subsequent 2023 report on Human Rights and Disaster Risk Reduction brings greater focus to how human rights can be protected and promoted as part of disaster response and post-disaster recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.[47] The UNDRR report recognises and explores how a human rights based approach to disaster risk reduction can support efforts to implement the Sendai Framework. The report establishes that human rights are both a foundation for and an outcome of effective disaster risk reduction. It highlights that failures in disaster governance can constitute human rights violations. In this context, UNDRR identifies a human rights-based approach as a practical framework for guiding decision-making, ensuring accountability, and clarifying the responsibilities of governments and others.

Australia's disaster governance arrangements

Australia's disaster management system is built around a set of national, state, territory and local frameworks that work together. States and territories have primary responsibility for preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters. Local governments help put these arrangements into practice at the community level and are often the first to support affected communities. The Australian Government provides national leadership, coordination, funding and assistance during major disasters.

Australia's national, state and local disaster governance is guided by a collection of frameworks spanning prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. While these frameworks broadly align with human rights principles in some respects, their interaction with human rights obligations is not always explicit and multiple frameworks can create complexity for decision-makers.

People we consulted during the project, including community organisations and government agencies frequently highlighted the complexity of the existing governance landscape and the challenges of applying human rights principles in practice. Some identified a need for more accessible guidance on how human rights obligations interact with emergency management powers and other relevant frameworks.

> **'...as we've kind of built up our capability and maturity as a partnership, these issues of human rights just keep popping up and we're becoming more literate and more able to kind of recognise them, but also see those grey points ... the absence of a clear framework is causing confusion'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [4 May 2026][48]

National disaster frameworks

Australian federal, state and territory governments have agreed on a suite of national frameworks that help guide disaster management across the country. They apply across all phases of disaster management including risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery.[49]

The *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* was developed to respond to increasing vulnerability to disaster and improve resilience.[50] The strategy emphasises the need for a shared responsibility between government, community, business and individuals, and initiated a shift from primarily focussing on reactive disaster responses to reducing risk. The strategy recognises that a range of social and geographic factors can influence disaster resilience and the need for disaster planning to consider particular vulnerabilities of people in communities.[51]

The *National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework* (NDRRF) translates the Sendai Framework into the Australian context. Building on the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience,[52] it establishes Australia's national, whole of society approach to proactively reducing disaster risk.[53] The *Second National Action Plan* translates the NDRRF's high-level goals and priorities into actions and system reforms.[54] The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework and Second National Action Plan recognise that disaster risks and impacts are experienced differently across communities and emphasise inclusive activities to address underlying drivers of vulnerability.[55]

The *Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework* focuses on capabilities to prepare for and manage the most severe disasters in Australia and can be read alongside the NDRRF.[56] This framework identifies the critical importance of partnerships across government and communities.[57]

The *Australian Disaster Recovery Framework* identifies principles and practices for all levels of Australian government and community to support effective recovery from disaster.[58] It places particular emphasis on community leadership, understanding local context, inclusion and supporting communities to shape their own recovery.

Collectively, these frameworks reflect human rights principles, including protecting life and promoting participation and equality. However, they stop short of explicitly referencing international human rights obligations, identifying relevant human rights protections, or providing a consistent framework for assessing and addressing human rights impacts in disaster-related decision-making. Human rights considerations are often reflected indirectly through policy principles rather than embedded as explicit requirements across the disaster cycle.

While other frameworks focus on particular hazards, aspects or phases of the disaster cycle, the *Australian Government Crisis Management Framework* (AGCMF) is an overarching Commonwealth government framework for managing all significant national crises, including natural hazards, pandemics, cyber incidents, national security events and international crises.[59] The AGCMF explicitly acknowledges human rights considerations, stating that measures taken during crises should be necessary, reasonable and proportionate, and that particular attention should be given to communities disproportionately at risk of harm.[60]

The *Australian Government Disaster Response Plan* (COMDISPLAN) is the default national plan for domestic natural hazards and sets out how the Australian Government provides non-financial assistance to states and territories during disasters. [61] Operating within the AGCMF, it is guided by principles including unity, flexibility, interoperability, scalability and decentralised decision-making. While the plan does not expressly reference human rights, it highlights the need to consider people who may be disproportionately affected by disasters, including people with disability, First Peoples communities, people experiencing homelessness, refugee and migrant populations, LGBTQIA+ people, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

States territories and local frameworks

Under Australia's disaster governance arrangements, state and territory governments have primary responsibility for emergency management, while local governments play a critical role in community-level risk reduction, preparedness and recovery. [62] These arrangements operate alongside Commonwealth frameworks and, in some jurisdictions, human rights legislation. While state and territory governments may be well placed to identify the type and level of assistance their communities need following a disaster,[63] differences between state and territory laws, policies and support programs can create a complex system that relies on effective coordination, planning and partnerships across jurisdictions.[64] Effective disaster governance requires collaboration across jurisdictions and sectors, as disaster risks and their impacts do not fit neatly within 'bureaucratic, sectoral, jurisdictional, or organisational silos'.[65]

Connection between disaster management frameworks and human rights.

Australia does not have a national Human Rights Act. Instead, Australia has a patchwork of human rights protections in different federal, state and territory legislation, in the common law, and to a limited extend in the Australian Constitution. Queensland, Victoria and the ACT do have Human Rights Acts or Charters that require public authorities to act compatibly with human rights and properly consider human rights when making decisions, including during emergencies and disasters.[66]

Despite these legal requirements, the explicit integration of human rights into disaster management policy and practice at the state and territory level appears limited.

For instance, a Queensland University of Technology review found an 'absence of explicit connection' between Queensland's disaster management framework and human rights obligations,[67] while the Queensland Human Rights Commission (QHRC) observed that key disaster planning instruments contain 'no trigger to consider human rights implications'.[68] The QHRC emphasised that integrating a human rights lens into emergency planning could reveal blind spots, support more equitable responses, and reduce the risk of adverse outcomes that arise when human impacts are sidelined.[69]

The ACT introduced a statutory right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, which came into effect on 17 March 2025.[70] While the right may be relevant to disaster planning, climate resilience and environmental protection, its practical implications are still emerging.

During our consultations people spoke about ongoing challenges in embedding human rights considerations in practice despite legislative obligations. As one person from a Community Legal Centre observed, 'a lot of times we're having to remind them that, hey, human rights, you haven't considered these human rights for this person'[71], while another noted uncertainty about 'how the Charter is practically being incorporated into decision making processes'[72].

'They're not all aware of these things, and there are still institutions in Queensland that probably don't know that there's a Human Rights Act in existence.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [25 March 2026][73]

While our survey did not directly ask about disaster governance frameworks, we found that people affected by disasters commonly reported poor communication, difficulty finding information, uncertainty about available support and limited confidence in government understanding and assistance. The greater negative impacts and reported lack of support experienced by people with disability, mental health conditions and long-term health conditions also suggest that principles of accessibility, equality and non-discrimination are not always consistently translated into practice. In the context of multiple overlapping governance arrangements, these experiences reinforce the need for clearer practical guidance that expressly embeds human rights considerations in disaster planning, communication and decision-making.

6. Protecting life, safety and dignity

Emergency management powers are fundamentally framed by the imperative to protect the right to life. The exercise of these powers directly shapes the safety and security of affected communities in practice. The effectiveness of emergency measures in protecting the right to life depends not only on formal powers but also on effective early risk management and planning, communication and governance. Emergency measures must be proportionate and balance safety risks with compassion.

Relative to other consequences of natural hazards in Australia, loss of life is rare but one of the most significant disaster impacts. Our survey found that death of someone known to the respondent was the least likely personal experience but unsurprisingly had the strongest standalone impact. While deaths and injuries directly caused by disasters in Australia are usually recorded, the impact may actually be underestimated because indirect effects, such as respiratory and cardiovascular illness, disrupted healthcare, recovery-related accidents, and long-term mental health consequences, are more difficult to measure. [74]

HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS: Right to life and positive state obligations



The right to life is the most fundamental of all human rights. Article 6(1) of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* recognises every human being's inherent right to life, which has been described as 'the supreme right of the human being'.[75] The right to life is a prerequisite for the enjoyment of all other human rights.

Protecting the right to life requires governments to take 'preventative and positive measures to meet certain foreseeable threats to life',[76] including taking 'special measures of protection towards persons in vulnerable situations'[77] and taking appropriate measures to address '...the general conditions in society that may give rise to direct threats to life or prevent individuals from enjoying their right to life with dignity.'[78] These positive state obligations mean that proactive steps must be taken by governments, rather than just abstaining from violating this right.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee has said that states should develop disaster management plans to increase preparedness and address disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes, that may adversely affect enjoyment of the right to life.[79]

6.1 Compassion and risk management

Governments have a positive obligation to protect lives.[80] The right to life in the context of natural hazards requires governments to take proactive, long-term measures to reduce risks and create the social, environmental and infrastructure conditions necessary for people to live safely. It can also mean using proportionate emergency powers during disasters to protect people from imminent threats and preserve life when rapid responsive action is needed. Human rights law recognises that keeping people safe during emergencies may sometimes affect other rights, requiring a balanced approach.

Measures to protect life and safety are important however managing one risk can sometimes exacerbate others. Emergency responders and community members that we spoke to highlighted the difficult balance involved in making decisions during disasters. Many recognised that measures such as evacuation orders, exclusion zones and roadblocks are often necessary to protect life, property and public safety, and that emergency personnel must frequently make rapid decisions in highly challenging circumstances. There was also wide recognition of the critical importance and risks experienced by emergency services, both paid and volunteers, in protecting lives and safety, often operating with limited staffing and finite resources.

At the same time, what people told us suggested that the implementation of emergency measures can sometimes prioritise operational objectives without fully accounting for the human impact. We heard that such measures could isolate communities, separate families and disrupt support networks, affecting people's sense of connection and control at a time of heightened vulnerability.

Some noted that people may be reluctant to evacuate if they believe they will be prevented from returning to care for family members, check on neighbours, protect homes or support recovery efforts, potentially increasing risks to themselves and others.

People also observed that perceptions of inequity and tensions can emerge. They referred to prolonged or poorly explained restrictions, instances in which local emergency responders had authority to access affected areas while other residents remain excluded, and where the role of responders was misunderstood or experienced as threatening.

'So all of the pressure of people to evacuate, they won't go because they know they can't get back in. And once you're in, it feels very oppressive, I have to say. You're afraid to leave your property because you're afraid you won't get out back in. And that lasts for a week or two. And the police cars are driving past. It's not a nice feeling.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][81]

'So anyway, the next thing I go up there, there's about 12 policemen there, all queued up in this big line and some of the homeless people walked in and saw the police and they just took off.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [23 March 2026][82]

'They will call police and evacuate you off the land, quite rightly so if you've got an impending fire coming. But it's the time you get back. When do you return?... If Rural Fire Service, local police know the ins and outs of your business and how important it is to save the 50,000 chickens you've got in that shed or to save the livestock because the fences are now down or the plant stock or the cotton crop, they need to know how to treat your business and how critical it is for you to restore the irrigation, restore the gas feed back to the chickens, the importance of that.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [24 March 2026][83]

These experiences underscored the importance of ensuring that decisions about the exercise of emergency powers are informed by an understanding of the potential impacts on human rights, including freedom of movement, family life, and dignity.

6.2 Emergency powers and human rights

While laws governing emergency powers may be necessary to protect life and safety, they can affect a wide range of rights and their broader consequences for individuals and communities must be carefully considered.

Limitation of rights in emergencies

Some human rights are recognised as being absolute, which means that they cannot be limited for any reason (including during an emergency). Examples of absolute rights include freedom from torture, freedom from slavery, freedom from imprisonment for inability to fulfil a contractual obligation, the prohibition against the retrospective operation of criminal laws, and the right to recognition before the law.[84]

Other rights may be limited for a legitimate purpose, provided that the restriction is lawful, necessary, and proportionate. For example, the rights to movement,[85] peaceful assembly,[86] and privacy[87] may be restricted where this can be justified by a legitimate objective and is necessary and proportionate to achieving that objective.

International human rights law also recognises a distinction between derogable and non-derogable rights. Under article 4 of the ICCPR, States may, in limited circumstances, derogate from certain obligations during a public emergency that threatens the life of the nation.[88] However, some rights are non-derogable and cannot be suspended or restricted, even during such an emergency. Non-derogable rights often overlap with absolute rights and include the:

- Right to life
- Freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment and freedom from medical or scientific experimentation without consent
- Freedom from slavery and servitude
- Freedom from imprisonment for inability to fulfil a contractual obligation
- Prohibition against the retrospective operation of criminal laws
- Right to recognition before the law
- Freedom of thought, conscience and religion.[89]

Derogation under article 4 of the ICCPR is only allowed 'in times of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation' and where the existence of that emergency has been officially proclaimed. Any derogation must be strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, consistent with the State's other obligations under international law, and must not involve discrimination solely on the ground of race, colour, sex, language, religion or social origin.

State parties seeking to rely on article 4 must also follow a formal notification process. They are required to immediately inform other States parties, through the Secretary-General to the United Nations, of the provisions from which they have derogated, the reasons for doing so, and when those measures have ceased to operate.[90]

Australia has never formally exercised its derogation power under article 4 of the ICCPR.[91] Accordingly, emergency measures adopted in response to disasters in Australia must continue to comply with Australia's international human rights obligations, including the requirement that any limitations on rights must be lawful, necessary and proportionate.

Emergency declarations

An emergency declaration is a tool used by governments to respond to disasters. There are different terms for the legal mechanism of declaring a state of emergency in Australia, such as a state of emergency, a state of disaster, a natural disaster declaration or a national emergency declaration.

States of emergency in Australia are primarily activated by state governments in their role as primary responders to disasters in their jurisdiction.[92]

The Australian Government may also exercise powers and functions under Commonwealth laws to support and coordinate with state and territory responses.[93] Under the *National Emergency Declaration Act 2020* (Cth) the Governor-General may (on the advice of the Prime Minister) declare a national emergency, where an event is likely to cause significant harm to Australia. This allows the Australian Government to streamline some administrative requirements, access information more quickly and use certain emergency powers to support preparedness, response and recovery.

Emergency declarations trigger expanded powers for governments and authorities, including the ability to direct movement, access private property, deploy resources, coordinate large-scale response efforts and activate financial assistance frameworks.

Formal declaration of an emergency

There are different terms for the legal mechanism of declaring a state of emergency in Australia, such as a state of emergency, a state of disaster, a natural disaster declaration or a national emergency declaration.

Across both federal and state levels, these declarations trigger expanded powers for governments and authorities, including the ability to direct movement, access private property, deploy resources, coordinate large-scale response efforts and activate financial assistance frameworks.

Some examples include:

Federal:

- A 'National Emergency Declaration', under the *National Emergency Declaration Act 2020* (Cth), can be made by the Governor-General if the Prime Minister is satisfied that an emergency (either domestically or internationally) is causing harm of national significance.[94] The Governor-General made the first National Emergency Declaration on 11 March 2022 in response to widespread flooding in NSW, and this has been the only emergency declaration made to date.[95] The main function of a National Emergency Declaration is to allow for Ministers to modify administrative requirements in relation to relevant matters.[96]
- The COVID pandemic was declared a biosecurity emergency under the *Biosecurity Act 2015* (Cth) by the Governor-General on 18 March 2020.[97] This allowed for measures including mandatory testing and mask wearing for international flights, restrictions on the entry of cruise vessels and restrictions on outbound international travel for Australians.[98] These measures were discussed extensively in the Collateral Damage report, which considered their impacts on human rights.

State:

- When a state or territory declares an event a 'natural disaster', it means that the incident has met a financial threshold (usually a minimum of $240,000 worth of damage) in addition to other criteria. A natural disaster declaration by a state activates a range of Commonwealth assistance measures through Australia's Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.[99]
- On 10 January 2026, a State of Disaster was declared in response to significant bushfires in Victoria. In addition to facilitating the coordination of resources, the State of Disaster allows for the Victorian Government to take possession and make use of any person's property to respond to the disaster, control movement in and out of the disaster area and compel evacuations of persons from the disaster area.[100]
- On 3 March 2025, the NSW Government announced a Natural Disaster Declaration in response to Tropical Cyclone Alfred.[101] The declaration unlocked various government support resources including emergency accommodation, grants to replace essential household items to maintain a basic standard of living, grants to undertake essential structural repairs to a damaged home and loans for businesses and not-for-profit organisations.[102]

Emergency measures may affect the enjoyment of human rights, including the right to privacy. During emergencies and disasters, personal information may be shared between government agencies and non-government organisations to identify people at risk and facilitate the provision of assistance.[103]

Emergency powers can also affect a range of other legal rights and interests. For example, private land may be used for emergency purposes, and normal government decision-making and approval processes may be expedited to enable urgent work or faster delivery of goods and services.

At the same time, emergency measures can also determine the provision of assistance and services that support not only the right to life but also realisation of rights including, for instance the right to an adequate standard of living.

Emergency Power	Description/example	Human Rights impact
Deploying emergency personnel and resources	Rapid mobilisation of personnel such as rural and urban firefighters, police, state emergency service volunteers, defence forces and medical teams. Deployment of equipment such as aircraft and temporary housing.	Deployment of personnel and resources in support of right to life, right to health, right to safety.
Enforcing curfews	Imposing curfews in disaster affected areas to maintain public safety, prevent looting and allow emergency services to operate efficiently	Restriction on freedom of movement and right to liberty in order to protect right to security and right to safety.
Evacuation orders	Evacuation powers are among the most significant and frequently used emergency measures during disasters. Emergency services personnel (including police, firefighters, SES, paramedics) may direct evacuations and, in some circumstances, use reasonable force to enforce lawful directions. Evacuations are used to protect life where there is imminent danger, such as during bushfires, floods or cyclones.	The use of evacuation powers limits rights of freedom of movement and right to liberty in order to protect right to life and safety.

Emergency Power	Description/example	Human Rights impact
Controlling access to certain areas	Closing roads to stop people from entering emergency zones such as firegrounds or flooded areas, also limiting freedom of movement. Authorities may restrict access to disaster-affected locations by closing roads, establishing exclusion zones and limiting entry to authorised personnel only.	Freedom of movement
Taking control of land, buildings or vehicles	Authorities enter private property or assume control of a building for emergency operations	Home and private life
Demolition of property to remove danger	Buildings demolished or vegetation cleared, such as to create a firebreak	Home and private life Right to property
Collecting and sharing personal information	Agencies share personal details to locate people needing assistance or coordinate support.	Privacy rights Home and private life Right to property
Grants	Emergency declarations can trigger the provision of financial assistance, including grants for emergency accommodation, replacing essential household items, repairing damaged homes, and supporting businesses and community organisations.	In support of right to an adequate standard of living, social security and right to housing.

A human rights-based emergency response balances the need for swift and effective action to protect life, health and safety with the obligation to ensure that any restriction of rights is lawful, necessary, proportionate, non-discriminatory and for no longer than required. The rule of law is fundamental to human rights protection because it requires emergency powers to have a clear legal basis and be exercised within defined limits. Emergency situations create opportunities for the misuse of power or the creation of unintended harm especially when decisions are being made in high-pressure situations with limited information. Clear and predictable rules that are limited in scope help guard against arbitrary or excessive action, enable decisions to be scrutinised and challenged, and hold decision-makers accountable. They also help communities understand how emergency powers may be used, supporting meaningful participation, public trust and effective emergency action.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS: Rule of law in emergencies

The rule of law is a cornerstone of democratic government. It requires that everyone, including governments and public authorities, is subject to the law, and that decisions are made through lawful, transparent and accountable processes. It is also closely connected to the protection of human rights, helping to ensure that the exercise of public power remains fair, justified and open to scrutiny.

Emergencies can make these principles harder to uphold. Decisions often need to be made quickly and in uncertain circumstances, creating pressure to prioritise speed over process. Yet it is during emergencies that safeguards such as transparency, accountability and oversight are often the most important. These safeguards help ensure that emergency powers are exercised appropriately and remain subject to review.

The experiences shared throughout this project highlight the importance of public trust during disasters. Maintaining that trust depends in part on communities understanding how decisions are made, why they are made, and how those affected can have confidence that emergency powers are being exercised fairly and consistently. Adherence to the rule of law helps support that confidence, strengthens the legitimacy of emergency responses, and can contribute to greater community cooperation and resilience during times of crisis.



Image: Police tape blocks street, Brisbane Floods 2011.

7. Trusted information and communication

People have a right to receive the information they need and to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Access to timely, trusted information about hazards supports everyone to make informed decisions and take action to reduce risks before, during and after emergencies. Effective communication and decision-making is most successful when it is reinforced through multiple channels, tailored to community needs and informed by local knowledge.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS: Right to information



The right to receive information about natural hazards and disasters is supported by article 19(2) of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, which protects the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.[104]

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is also particularly important in disaster contexts.[105] Article 11 requires States to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including natural hazard disasters. Article 21 requires public information to be provided in accessible formats and technologies, and in a timely manner, so that persons with disabilities can exercise their right to freedom of expression and access information on an equal basis with others.

These provisions are highly relevant to issues such as accessible warnings and communication channels.

7.1 Access to trusted information throughout the disaster cycle

Access to timely, trusted information enables people to make informed decisions and stay safe. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has said,

> ...information is as essential as food, water and shelter. It guides people to safety, connects them to loved ones and gives them the knowledge to safeguard themselves and their communities.[106]

The UNDRR has recognised that poor communication can, 'fuel rumour, erode trust, hamper solutions and even increase risk.'[107] A common theme across major Australian disaster inquiries is that failures in communication and information dissemination contributed to increased risk to life, safety and the environment, delayed action, confusion, poor coordination, and reduced trust in emergency authorities.[108] A 2025 review of Australian disaster inquiries concluded that communication failures remained a recurring issue across two decades of disaster inquiries and investigations.[109]

These observations were borne out in our survey data. Responses showed that lack of information is one of the most common and significant impacts of disasters.

More than half of respondents (55%) reported being negatively impacted by poor communication or information quality, making communication one of the most widespread concerns identified across the study. This included 32% who experienced poor communication about support available, 32% who had difficulty finding the information they needed, and 25% who experienced unclear or misleading information. Anxiety, lack of certainty, and difficulty finding information were ranked the most significant impacts Australia-wide – having a greater negative effect than difficulty accessing essential services and food. As one survey respondent explained, 'Timely, accurate and understandable information, delivered through multiple channels can give people more time to be prepared, evacuate safely, and protect property, ultimately reducing stress, confusion and danger.'[110]

In our conversations with people about their experiences of disasters, they emphasised that access to timely, trusted and accurate information is important before, during and after major hazards. Some people said that poor early communication and inconsistent messaging undermined trust in government agencies. People described how failures in telecommunications and other essential infrastructure had left people without the information needed to make decisions about evacuation in an emergency or accessing recovery support. Unclear communication about recovery assistance, housing and funding support also created barriers to people accessing the help they needed contributing to long-term distress. Recovery was also impacted by misinformation and scams, particularly where people were experiencing trauma, uncertainty and heightened vulnerability.

> **'Because that's what causes the most distress is just people not knowing... And then kind of just being in a limbo phase of not having all the information available to them and then not being able to make the best decision for themselves because they don't have the information available to them...'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [16 May 2025][111]

Trust is a significant factor influencing whether people believe communications and take action.[112] Trusted information is fundamental to protecting life and safety in emergencies because people are more likely to understand risks, make informed decisions and respond appropriately when they trust both the source and the content of the information they receive.[113] Research indicates that people rarely rely on a single warning message and often seek confirmation from multiple sources before deciding what action to take.[114]

Although trusted communication matters throughout the disaster cycle, Australian inquiries that have followed major disasters have tended to focus primarily on warnings and operational communication during response. Attention should also be given to building trust before disasters and maintaining information, participation and accountability throughout recovery.

Trust is built over time through clear communication, listening and community involvement. Trust should not be viewed as a secondary outcome of disaster management. It is itself a capability that supports community resilience. People are more likely to prepare for risks, act on warnings, seek support and contribute to recovery when they trust the information they receive and the people or institutions providing it. Each stage of the disaster cycle builds on the last, so trust developed before a disaster can support an effective response, while people's experiences during response and recovery can strengthen or weaken trust in the future.

‘You can’t just have an emergency happen, go to the evacuation centre and say, right, you’re going to be our trusted person. You actually need to build that over time beforehand.’

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [23 March 2026][115]

7.2 Listening sharing and learning

Community participation is an important aspect of effective communication about disasters. Building trust is not just about sharing information. It is also about listening to people and involving them in decisions that affect their lives. People bring valuable local knowledge, experience and perspectives that can strengthen disaster planning, preparedness, response and recovery. Ongoing conversations between individuals, community, industry and government help ensure that decisions are informed by the people most affected.

Major Australian disaster inquiries have consistently found that effective emergency management depends on coordinated action across governments, emergency services, community organisations, industry and individuals.[116] These inquiries emphasise that disaster resilience is built through shared responsibility, clear governance arrangements, strong partnerships, community participation, and effective coordination before, during and after emergencies.

Among our survey respondents who had experienced disasters, there was limited feeling of being understood during and after the event, particularly by government. Only around one in five respondents felt the federal government had at least a very good understanding of the issues facing those affected at the time of the event, with little improvement in the weeks that followed. People were more likely to feel understood by state government but perceptions of being understood were strongest for local government.

During our consultations, we similarly heard that a feeling of disconnection arose when community members felt their experiences, knowledge and concerns were not adequately recognised. For example, one person described that local people reported rapidly rising floodwaters, but felt their warnings were not heard: ‘people, the community, farmers, locals who live there were saying it’s really high here, it’s really high, but that information wasn’t accepted or got through.’[117] Failing to listen to local knowledge can undermine trust and lead to less effective emergency responses.

‘Older people have been the backbone of what this community’s been for a very long time and they were sidelined to a large degree from my point of view.’

– Stakeholder Consultation [19 February 2026][118]

‘They come into the recovery centre and they’re immediately in an absolutely foreign world. One language that side for the bureaucrats, one language this side for the people. And it didn’t work.’

– Stakeholder Consultation [19 February 2026][119]

'And it was great the recovery centre was there, but it could have been done so much better if more local people, and there were local people who were, I'm pretty certain, willing to help.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][120].

People emphasised that effective disaster communication depends on strong relationships and community participation. Trusted local leaders and community organisations were viewed as essential for sharing accurate information and helping people interpret official advice. We consistently heard that people are often more likely to trust information that comes through existing community networks and peer relationships. People highlighted examples of communities self-organising communication processes before formal systems were established and observed that the best outcomes occur where networks, governance arrangements and trusted community voices are established before disasters occur. Building these relationships in advance was seen as a key factor in ensuring effective communication during emergencies.

'....it's the proactive stuff from government to go, oh, we can see the people are gathering there. Let's make sure that they have what they need to be able to provide that information.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [9 May 2025][121]

Contemporary disaster management frameworks increasingly recognise communication as exchange of information, rather than a top-down transmission of information. While governments have primary responsibility for reducing disaster risk, effective disaster communication is a shared responsibility involving communities, civil society, media and other stakeholders.[122] Local knowledge, experience, resources and commitment is required. Communities are active partners in disaster risk reduction rather than merely passive recipients of information. Partnerships are crucial between all levels of government, emergency services organisations, the community, industry and business, and the media, to ensure communities receive, share and act upon warnings in an emergency. The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience handbook underlines the need for coordination and leadership from authorities, working with a wide range of groups who are trusted by individuals and communities.[123]

> Prior to any emergency, community engagement will often identify local community groups or leaders who can act as dissemination channels during an emergency. Community radio stations, Facebook groups, local emergency service units and brigades, or local clubs, are just a few examples. During an emergency, it is not uncommon for individuals to emerge as key dissemination points for warnings.[124]

7.3 Reaching people in different ways

Multiple communication channels are not only important for enabling people to verify information but also essential to ensure information reaches people with different communication needs and circumstances.

People we spoke to highlighted the importance of using multiple communication pathways to ensure information reaches and engages diverse communities. They identified gaps in reach and accessibility of communication for people experiencing telecommunications outages, disability, language barriers, low digital literacy, limited access to technology or other vulnerabilities and trauma.

> **'And to be fair, as well as you can plan and execute, communications systems get broken. People are isolated in trauma, you don't absorb and retain information as well too. So we could say it seven times in seven different ways, and someone still says, I haven't heard anything. So there's those intersecting sort of challenges with trauma. And, you know, trauma informed communications and care is something that we're adapting to as well' -**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [12 June 2025][125]

For example, people experiencing homelessness may not have a mobile phone, phone credit, internet access, or a way to charge devices. We heard that people sleeping rough may be completely unaware that a flood, cyclone or other hazard is approaching until it is already occurring.[126] As one person explained, 'They don't have the know-how that there's even a storm, they just think it's another rain thing where they're going to lose stuff anyway'.[127] This example, and others like it, highlights the importance of understanding how different people receive information in practice. It can't be assumed that everyone can access digital alerts and online updates. Communication approaches that work well for many people may not reach others, such as those facing social or economic disadvantage. Effective disaster communication therefore requires a range of channels and tailored approaches to ensure warnings and information reach everyone who may be affected.

Lack of information in accessible formats can cause anxiety for some people with disability, particularly when they are unable to access timely and reliable information about risks to their safety. People with disability may feel less able than others to make informed decisions and take steps to reduce their exposure to harm.

During our consultations, people described feeling that inclusive communication was treated as optional rather than a core requirement. For example, one person explained that no Easy Read versions of essential health advice relating the South Australian algal bloom were released until six or seven months after information had been made available to the broader community.[128] This caused anxiety, with one person explaining how her son with intellectual disability was affected:

> **'My son was highly, highly anxious … he was told that it's safe to go, but however he [had] seen pictures of dead marine life, which really told him that it was not safe'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [4 March 2026].[129]

Inclusive communication is not only about providing information in accessible formats. It is also about creating opportunities for people with disability to be involved in discussing the issues that affect them. As one participant noted, people with disability often identify barriers that others have not considered. In some cases, these barriers were relatively simple for councils to address, improving inclusion and helping build stronger community resilience.[130]

Digital literacy can also be a barrier to receiving, understanding and sharing information.[131] People told us that emergency communications including emergency warnings, websites, maps and alerts are often designed for people with high levels of literacy, digital literacy and cognitive capacity. These communications also assume everyone processes information in the same way, which is not the case.[132] People who lack digital and media literacy skills can also be more vulnerable to deception and disinformation, making them less able to engage confidently throughout the disaster cycle.

Language and culture also shape communication needs when preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural hazards and disasters. Some people told us that information and support are most effective when delivered by people who are recognised and trusted within culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Without these trusted channels, ability to access recovery programs or understand what assistance is available may be limited.

While barriers can be particularly acute for people where English is not a first language, we heard that effective communication requires more than simply translating information into different languages. Communication barriers for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities are not just about language. Distrust of government, difficulties navigating support processes, and weaker connections to local networks can also make it harder to access information and assistance.

For example, one person described a long-term resident from a migrant background who lost important documents in a disaster and struggled to prove eligibility for support. Feeling disconnected from both government services and community recovery efforts, he found it difficult to access the help he needed.[133]

People also highlighted the importance of working through trusted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and organisations. People may feel a lack of trust in institutions, including police, because of past experiences. In addition, information about disaster impacts and support does not always reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture including connections to Country. Trusted local people were seen as important for helping communities access information, support and services during disasters. As one participant explained, 'To be able to have somebody that is recognised by mob and is culturally safe going into those spaces is really what works best.'[134]

Another person described adapting their approach following their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. They described how government, service providers and community leaders worked together to adapt information into accessible, culturally relevant forms before sharing it with communities. This collaborative approach helped ensure that communication was not only translated, but also understood and trusted.[135]

Another message that came through our conversations with people was that effective communication and engagement requires different approaches for people of different ages and experiences.

'It's about doing the education and making it just standard that young people learn about what can happen and that they can have a role. It was one of the hardest things I always had to keep hearing about was the impacts on children and how they were being retriggered when they would hear the siren on the level CFS for their training or just seeing a truck or if it was a hazy day, just feeling like it was all going to happen again. So we actually worked with Emerging Minds and looked at their content for preparing children for emergencies and how to build that specific sort of resilient skill set.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][136]

These experiences highlight how intersecting needs and social connectedness influence not only access to information during emergencies, but also people's ability to participate in recovery and other processes. Consistent with disaster and risk communication literature,[137] these experiences demonstrate the importance of multi-channel communication strategies of broadcast, digital, community-based and face-to-face approaches to reach diverse audiences effectively.

Among the different ways information is shared, social media plays an increasingly important role in disaster communication and community engagement. Recent Australian research highlights the growing role of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Reddit, to share information, seek assistance, maintain social connections and support decision-making during disasters.[138]

People use social media to receive information from government agencies and emergency services, and to communicate with family, friends and local communities during disaster.[139] Research has examined the role of social media across all phases of disaster management. Social media can support disaster risk reduction through community engagement and relationship-building, facilitate warnings and information-sharing during emergency response, and enable support, coordination and communication during recovery.[140] Social media is one mechanism for meeting an increasing expectation for highly localised, specific and up to date information.[141] There are however some limitations with over reliance on social media, as described further below.

'Look, most of the communities, because telecommunications are pretty poor, everything gets communicated via social media.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [25 March 2026][142]

Case study: Social media

The 2010-11 floods in Queensland and Victoria demonstrated how social media can expand opportunities for people to access and share information during emergencies. Alongside official warnings and updates, local residents and people travelling through the area used social media to share local observations, seek and provide assistance, and exchange real-time information about changing conditions, road closures and flooding

Media outlets also relied on information posted through the Queensland Policy Service social media sites, broadcasting what had been posted, allowing information to be rapidly shared with large numbers of people. Research found that these interactions enabled more active participation in the flow of information during the disaster and helped communities remain connected during a rapidly evolving emergency.[143]

Social media has become so important in disaster management and response internationally that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), with support from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has published a guide on how to use social media to better engage people affected by crisis.[144]

In Australia too, there is increasing investment in understanding and strengthening social media practices.[145] The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience guidance *Public Information and Warnings* recognises social media as one component of a multi-channel communication system.[146]

At the same time, there are some concerns about relying on social media for information. There can be problems with access, inconsistent or inaccurate information, information overload, and platform algorithms that weaken visibility of official messages.[147] These issues reinforce the importance of maintaining multiple communication channels and avoiding over reliance on social media as the primary source of communication.

'I'll tell you what else is a really big problem is social media and extremist views for want of a better word - everyone wants to grab a headline, or everyone wants to be perceived as the expert...'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [7 May 2025].[148]

Information integrity is an ecosystem in which reliable and accurate information is available to everyone and emphasises that strengthening information integrity involves both protecting access to information and enabling people to navigate information spaces safely.[149]

The United Nations Global Principles for Information Integrity highlight what this requires in practice: building trust in credible information and helping communities discern false or misleading content; giving people the skills to judge whether information is reliable; supporting independent media that provide trusted reporting; ensuring online platforms do not encourage the spread of harmful or sensational content; and improving transparency and research so emerging risks can be identified and addressed.[150]

Because people access, understand and trust information in different ways, a mix of channels helps include more people, ensuring everyone has the information they need to make decisions that are critical to safety and wellbeing.

8. Coordination, participation, and fairness

Australian people and communities experience disasters in markedly different ways, shaped by factors such as age, gender, location, income, disability, race, cultural background and connection to Country. Vulnerability is rarely explained by one characteristic. Disaster impacts emerge through the interaction of multiple forms of advantage and disadvantage, together with the accessibility and responsiveness of disaster systems.

Strong social networks and connections between communities and government agencies can reduce these risks. They support meaningful participation in decision-making, improve equality of access to assistance, and strengthen collective capacity to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

'People, when you do get those cumulative impacts, the people that, again, bear the biggest brunt are the people who have the fewest options in terms of how they can respond to those events and, I suppose, the changed environment around them.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [21 April 2026][151]

HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS: Protection against discrimination



The right to equality and freedom from discrimination is recognised in several international human rights treaties to which Australia is a party. The ICCPR requires Covenant rights to be protected without discrimination under art 2(1), guarantees equal rights for men and women under art 3, and protects equality before the law and equal protection of the law under art 26.

The ICESCR requires rights such as health, education, work, housing and social security to be enjoyed without discrimination under art 2(2) and guarantees equal rights for men and women under art 3.

Other conventions address particular forms of discrimination. The *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (ICERD), especially art 2 and 5, requires governments to eliminate racial discrimination and guarantee equality before the law. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) particularly art 1 to 3, defines discrimination against women and requires governments to eliminate it. The *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) protects equality and non-discrimination under art 5, accessibility under art 9 and participation in public and political life under art 29. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) requires its rights to be protected without discrimination under art 2.

There are also Commonwealth discrimination laws in Australia. These laws prohibit discrimination based on attributes including race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, intersex status, pregnancy, disability and age in specified areas of public life.[152]

Each state and territory also has its own principal discrimination law.[153] These laws generally cover direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation in areas such as employment, education, accommodation, services and access to premises.

8.1 Everyday differences shape disaster impacts

Disasters do not affect everyone in the same way. The challenges people face before during and after a disaster are often shaped by their circumstances before the disaster. We all have different circumstances, needs, strengths and resources. Income, disability, age, family and community roles, language, location and living arrangements can combine in many ways. These differences are part of everyday life. Disasters can expose and amplify them. Understanding these differences is not about identifying particular groups for special treatment. It is about recognising the practical realities that shape people's ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

Our survey reflected this. Regardless of the type of disaster, our survey found that some people were affected more than others and people were affected in different ways. For example, people with disability and First Peoples were significantly more likely to report negative impacts of disasters than other respondents. These impacts included trouble accessing essential services and support, financial stress, disrupted social connections, and concerns about their health and safety. Those who were unemployed were significantly more likely to rate the impacts of an event as severe and take longer to recover than other survey respondents. People in regional and remote areas were more likely to feel government support was lacking.

These findings show that the impact of a disaster is not just about the event itself. It is also shaped by people's circumstances before the disaster and demonstrates that disaster risk is not distributed equally across communities. Effective disaster governance requires measures to address underlying disadvantages - often through building stronger, more inclusive and more resilient communities over time.[154] Rather than occurring in isolation a variety of factors may interact creating different exposure to risk and outcomes for different people.

'But something that really stands out to me... is people who are dealing with severe poverty don't have the luxury to think about preparedness... And I mean, I think that applies to all of those at-risk groups, because if you're struggling to fit in because you're not from here, or you don't speak the language, or you've got a physical or cognitive disability, like all of those things, people who face intense challenges just in the day-to-day, they just don't have the capacity.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][155]

People face greater risk when warnings are inaccessible, services are interrupted, evacuation options do not meet their needs, or emergency accommodation and recovery support are unsafe or inappropriate.[156] For example, we heard about a person who was without food because she relied on a support worker for her regular grocery shopping and couldn't buy emergency supplies following the Tropical Cyclone Alfred warnings:

> **'Because she relies on a support worker to do her grocery shopping, she wasn't able to prepare because she only gets that person every two weeks.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [26 March 2026][157]

This highlights the broader issue. Preparedness is not simply a matter of receiving information or taking personal responsibility. It also depends on whether services and systems recognise and are adaptable to different needs.

Access to money, secure housing, transport and insurance also shapes people's options. Those with fewer financial resources may have less capacity to make their homes safer, relocate temporarily or absorb losses.[158] Where people live matters too. Regional and remote communities may have less access to services and infrastructure, while also having strong local relationships and knowledge that support preparedness and recovery.[159]

Social expectations, discrimination and exclusion can further influence people's choices, options and vulnerability to disasters. Gender norms may affect caring responsibilities, help-seeking and participation in recovery decisions.[160] Cultural or language barriers, racism and past experiences of government may affect whether people trust warnings or feel safe seeking support.[161] Emergency planning may also fail to recognise First Peoples knowledge and relationships with Country.[162]

Personal and community differences are also sources of strength. People with disability understand their own communication and support needs. First Peoples hold deep knowledge of Country and community. Migrant and refugee communities bring language skills, leadership and strong networks. Local organisations and relationships can help share information, identify people who may otherwise be missed and connect communities with services.[163]

A human rights-centred approach therefore asks not simply whether the same response is available to everyone, but whether people can access and use it in practice. It recognises people's knowledge, capabilities and right to be safe and participate in decisions that affect them while identifying the supports and systemic changes needed to enable that to occur. Involving people in decisions, removing avoidable barriers and building on community knowledge, leadership and connection, can reduce inequality and strengthen disaster resilience across the whole community.

Case study: the Planning Guide to Enhance Resilience and Preparedness in Aboriginal Communities Across South Australia

Developed by the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience program at Monash University in partnership with Aboriginal communities across South Australia, the Planning Guide[164] was co-designed with Aboriginal community leaders and was specifically intended to strengthen disaster resilience and preparedness while promoting safe and effective engagement between emergency service agencies, policymakers and Aboriginal communities. It emphasises protecting community, culture and Country, while recognising Aboriginal people as leaders, knowledge holders and active partners in resilience-building rather than simply as vulnerable populations.

By promoting Aboriginal leadership, community governance and culturally informed engagement with emergency services, the guide demonstrates how disaster preparedness and long-term resilience can be strengthened through genuine partnership and the integration of First Nations knowledge and priorities into planning processes.

8.2 Coordination across disaster arrangements

Unequal experiences of hazards and disasters are influenced by how disaster arrangements are designed, how services are coordinated and whether affected people can participate meaningfully in decisions. Fragmented responsibilities, inaccessible processes and insufficient engagement can compound existing disadvantage. Conversely, effective coordination and sustained relationships with communities can identify challenges early, enable disaster responses to draw on local knowledge and capability and improve equality.

In Australia, state and territory governments have primary statutory responsibility for managing disasters. Agencies such as fire, police and state emergency services operate under state and territory legislation. Local governments generally undertake important local emergency planning, preparedness, relief and recovery functions under state legislation.[165] The Commonwealth's role is largely national coordination, policy leadership and funding support.[166] The division can create a tension: the Commonwealth provides much of the funding, while states hold primary operational responsibility, and local councils and community organisations deliver many on-the-ground resilience and recovery functions.[167]

Disaster inquiries have repeatedly observed that fragmented governance arrangements impede planning and relief for people affected by natural hazards and disasters.[168] The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements called for clearer responsibilities and stronger national coordination and information sharing.[169] The 2022 NSW flood inquiries identified failures of leadership, integration and coordination[170], while the Senate Select Committee report *Boots on the ground: Raising resilience* highlighted pressure on councils, volunteers and community organisations.[171]

As disasters become more frequent and complex, effective coordination increasingly requires sustained collaboration across governments, emergency services, industry and communities.[172]

During our consultations, we repeatedly heard that poor coordination, fragmented systems and limited recognition of local capability can produce confusion, delay and unequal outcomes. People did not suggest that coordination failures resulted simply from a lack of effort or goodwill. They frequently recognised that governments were dealing with complex events, limited resources and difficult decisions. The central concern was that formal

arrangements were insufficiently connected to what communities had already established, difficult for affected people to understand, or poorly aligned with the timing and diversity of recovery needs.

Building on local capability

Participants described councils, community organisations and volunteers as important sources of local knowledge, trusted relationships and practical capability. People also stressed that these relationships must be developed before disasters and maintained throughout preparedness, response and recovery, rather than governments 'just kind of trying to stand it up the day after' an event.[173]

However, government agencies did not always recognise what communities had already established. In one community, we heard that difficulties arose when government agencies arrived and established a recovery centre without, in the community's view, adequately understanding the existing community-led model.

> **'There was a bit of a clash because there wasn't really the understanding of, wow, you've actually coordinated this really quite sophisticated model and there's a lot that's working. And we're still coming in and we're doing it this way.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][174]

The lack of coordination caused confusion about what each recovery centre could offer. Community-led and government-led arrangements should reinforce, rather than undermining or conflicting with each other. This requires clear roles and communication. We also observed the fundamental role that local councils play and the importance of adequate resourcing and joined up support, particularly for small councils.

> **'The poor community engagement officer there who's probably doing sport and rec as well as community development, as well as this is sort of going, my goodness, where do I even start?'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][175]

People repeatedly told us that they strongly valued cooperation between community and government and across boundaries. A combined Queensland and NSW recovery hub, for example, allowed people to access agencies from both jurisdictions in one place.

> **'People don't always recognise the difference between governments.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [1 April 2026][176]

Councils, community organisations and government agencies should be supported to 'join forces' rather than work 'in silos to each other'.

> **'That's what government needs to enable and mobilise and support rather than thinking we can come in and do. And to their credit, locally, emergency management are shifting the dial to improve in that way'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [9 May 2025][177]

Meaningful participation

Participation must occur when and while people are able to engage. We heard that disaster support timelines often failed to reflect the uneven pace of recovery. One person described how quickly relief deadlines arrived while people were still, 'In a muddle and going, 'Oh, but I've got cows loose.'[178]

Meaningful participation is especially important when decisions affect people's homes, identity and connection to place. Following the floods in Lismore, many residents faced having to relocate away from neighbourhoods and communities where their families had lived for generations. One person described feeling that the profound impacts of leaving communities was not well understood by authorities and others involved in developing recovery operations and long-term plans. Reflecting this experience, one person described feeling pressure to move on before they had been able to process the loss of their community.

> **'Stop causing a problem, stop moving slowly, stop feeling bad about your whole community being destroyed, get out of here in a hurry.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [9 May 2025][179]

While people we spoke to recognised that governments were responding to a complex and difficult situation, they emphasised the importance of accessible information, enough time to consider options, and a genuine opportunity to be involved in making decisions affecting their homes and communities. For many people, being involved was not just about deciding what should happen. It was also part of coming to terms with loss, maintaining connections to community and helping to shape recovery in the years ahead.

Locally informed decision-making does not mean every preferred outcome will be possible. It means that people's knowledge, circumstances, relationships and connection to place are considered alongside safety, financial and operational factors.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS: Right to participate



ICCPR art 25 protects the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs. CRPD art 4.3 requires meaningful participation of people with disabilities in developing plans, policies and other decision-making processes about matters affecting their lives.

The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner guidelines for effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs,[180] together with CRPD General Comment No 7[181] and CEDAW General Recommendation No 37[182] support inclusive community participation in public decisions that affect people's lives, which includes disaster management.

Reducing complex bureaucracy and inequalities

Disaster recovery can require people to navigate government assistance, housing, insurance, tenancy, legal services and financial counselling, often with different rules, referral processes, evidence requirements and timelines. One person described the result as like a second disaster.

> **'The administrative and regulatory overwhelm that pushes down on communities' post-disaster. That is like the second disaster.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [4 May 2026][183]

This complexity does not affect everyone equally. People with digital access, professional knowledge, strong networks or the capacity to advocate may be better placed to obtain assistance. Others may struggle to identify the responsible agency, produce evidence or attend repeated appointments. People often need more than information and referrals – they need support to communicate with agencies and advocate for solutions.

People also described unequal assistance between communities. Participants recognised that governments must establish thresholds and allocate finite resources but noted the apparent unfairness where access could depend on the scale or formal classification of an event, even where people had personally experienced similar losses.

> **'So it's a very visible thing for everyone in the district to go, why are these people worth more than those ones that they've had essentially on paper the same loss?'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026] [184]

These differences caused 'division', 'resentment,' 'frustration' and 'genuine pain' among people who felt unseen or less valued. Others also observed that some communities were 'stronger at pushing than others.' Arrangements that rely on persistent advocacy risk favouring people and groups with greater resources and connections.

Promoting equitable arrangements means proactively identifying diverse needs within communities and supporting those with less capacity to advocate. Policies and administrative thresholds should be applied in ways that provide fair and proportionate assistance to all those affected by disaster.

Help with legal problems

Disasters generate complex and often long-lasting legal needs that can remain hidden behind more immediate concerns such as safety, housing, food security and financial survival[185]. As one person in our consultations observed, people affected by disaster are often focused on immediate needs, with little capacity to address broader issues.

> **'I just need to eat. I just need a roof over my head … A lot of those broader issues, there's no space to deal with them until 3/6/12 months after.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [26 March 2026][186]

As recovery progresses, legal problems frequently emerge across multiple areas including insurance, housing, employment, government assistance, debt, property and consumer matters. These issues rarely occur in isolation and can compound one another over time, increasing financial stress, uncertainty and trauma.[187]

Evidence highlights the scale and complexity of disaster-related legal need. The Victorian Law Foundation's public understanding of law survey found that people affected by the 2019-20 bushfires were significantly more likely to experience legal problems than those who were not affected by the fires (57% compared with 41%) and were almost twice as likely to report five or more legal problems. The Law and Justice Foundation of NSW has similarly found that affected people face clusters of interconnected legal problems that can persist well into recovery, particularly for people with existing vulnerabilities.[188]

Insurance consistently emerges as the most significant source of disaster-related legal need because it sits at the centre of recovery. Timely and fair insurance outcomes can determine whether people are able to rebuild, secure housing, meet financial obligations and remain connected to their communities. Reflecting its central role, insurance accounted for almost half (49.9%) of all services provided through Legal Aid NSW's Disaster Response Legal Service.[189] Yet we heard that the complexity of insurance issues can make it difficult for people to recognise when the challenges they face are legal problems, limiting their ability to seek timely and appropriate advice.

> **'But people don't necessarily think about insurance as a legal issue initially either... And it is so complex and probably going to get more complex... And to find your way to even understand an issue with insurance as a legal need and then find your way to the legal assistance around that. There's a lot of steps involved.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [2 May 2025][190].

This highlights the importance of coordinated approaches that integrate legal assistance with broader recovery services, helping people navigate complex systems and participate effectively in decisions affecting their recovery. Consultations with legal assistance providers also consistently noted that legal services can play an important role before, during and after disasters, and that sustained resourcing across the disaster cycle is critical to building the capacity, relationships and community trust needed to support people effectively when disasters occur.

8.3 Volunteers

Volunteers are one of the great strengths of Australia's disaster management responses. Across the country, people contribute their time, skills, and local knowledge to support preparedness, emergency response and long-term recovery. Whether through emergency services organisations, community groups, neighbourhood centres, recovery organisations, sporting clubs, faith communities, or informal local networks, volunteers are often among the first people to offer assistance and the last to leave during recovery.

In our consultations, people consistently highlighted the important role volunteers play in supporting communities before, during and after disasters. Volunteers were often described not only as an operational resource, but as trusted members of the community who understood local circumstances, maintained relationships and helped connect people with information and support. The contribution of volunteers extends beyond response activities. Volunteers help strengthen community resilience by building local relationships, sharing

knowledge, supporting preparedness activities and helping communities remain connected during recovery. In many communities, particularly regional and remote areas, volunteer organisations form part of the social infrastructure that supports resilience throughout the disaster cycle.

However, people also spoke about increasing pressures on volunteers. Disasters are becoming more frequent, recovery periods are often longer, and many communities are experiencing multiple events in quick succession. These pressures can contribute to fatigue, burnout and difficulties sustaining volunteer participation over time.

We also heard concerns about the impact repeated disasters can have on the wellbeing of volunteers and frontline responders. Many volunteers are themselves members of affected communities. At the same time, they are supporting others, they may also be dealing with damage to their own homes, businesses, livelihoods and support networks.

Supporting volunteers is therefore not only an operational issue but an important component of community resilience. Effective disaster management requires investment in volunteer capability, wellbeing and retention, together with recognition of the critical role volunteers play in building trust, strengthening local leadership and supporting recovery. A people-centred approach to disaster management recognises volunteers not simply as an emergency workforce, but as part of the social fabric that helps communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.



Image: Braidwood, New South Wales, Australia, 18 to 21 February 2020. After the destructive fires in the South East of Australia, a group of volunteers help farmers rebuilding fences.

9. Building thriving and resilient communities

Exposure to risk, capacity to respond and ability to recover from hazards and disasters are shaped by housing conditions, the built environment and the strength of community networks. Natural hazards and disasters can cause the loss of homes, displacement and long-term housing insecurity, often with cascading impacts on health, employment, education and community relationships. People who experience housing insecurity before a disaster are typically more exposed to disaster risks and face greater barriers to recovery. Building resilient communities requires attention to both physical and social foundations of resilience before emergencies occur.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS: Right to adequate housing



Art 11 ICESCR recognises everyone's right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing.[191] The right to adequate housing does not require the government to provide a house for everyone, but instead requires action to prevent homelessness, protect against forced eviction, address discrimination, and support secure, adequate housing focusing on the most vulnerable.[192]

The right to housing also forms the foundation for the enjoyment of several other rights including the rights to work, health, security, vote, privacy or education.[193]

Adequate housing should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity. For housing to be adequate, it should meet the following criteria.[194]

Habitability: Housing must provide physical safe space for occupants – protecting them from weather conditions and other threats to health (disease, pollution etc). During disasters, housing can quickly become unsafe due to damage or exposure to hazards such as floodwater or smoke. Ensuring habitability requires both safe emergency shelter and construction that can withstand future hazards.

Affordability: Housing costs (either rent or mortgage repayments) must not compromise the ability of people to afford other basic rights (food, education, healthcare etc). Disasters often increase financial pressure (loss of income, repairs, gaps in insurance etc) making housing harder to afford. Where costs rise after a disaster, people may be pushed into unstable or unsafe living arrangements - slowing recovery.

Accessibility: Housing must be accessible to all and free from discrimination. Barriers to housing access often increase during disasters, especially for people with disability, older persons and those on low incomes. When temporary or permanent housing is not accessible, some groups are excluded from support and recovery.

Security of tenure: People cannot be removed from their home without a reason. Nobody should be evicted into homelessness. Disasters can disrupt housing stability through displacement, leaving people without certainty about their housing situation.

Location: Housing must be in a location which allows reasonable access to employment, healthcare, schools, childcare and other facilities such as accessible transport. Housing in high-risk areas may be repeatedly exposed to hazards such as flooding or bushfires. Relocation decisions must reduce risk while maintaining access to services and community.

Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure: Adequate housing must include facilities essential for health, security and comfort (energy to keep warm, water to drink, bathroom for sanitation etc). Essential services are often disrupted during disasters, which can make housing uninhabitable even where buildings remain standing. Restoring these services is necessary for people to return home and recover.

Cultural adequacy: Ensuring that housing respects and supports the expression of cultural identity and ways of living is essential. Disaster responses can disrupt cultural practices and connection to place, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Housing responses must support cultural continuity and respect different ways of living.[195]

Notably the Special Rapporteur has called for a new element to be added - 'sustainability' reflecting the need for housing to align with our natural world.[196] This sentiment is also supported by General Comment No. 27 which indicates that adequate housing protects people from climate-related risks such as extreme weather.[197]

Resilient communities depend not only on safe housing and infrastructure, but also on the trusted relationships that enable people to share resources, coordinate action and support one another before, during and after disasters. Our survey found that more than half of respondents (61%) experienced displacement or disconnection because of a disaster, including disruption to work, study, family and community ties, and short or long-term displacement from home. The proportion rose to 72% among those who had experienced a major bushfire or flood. These findings highlight that disasters affect both homes and the relationships that help people and communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

9.1 Safe and resilient housing

The right to housing is fundamental to the enjoyment of many other human rights, including rights to security, health, privacy and an adequate standard of living. It is also a critical determinant of disaster resilience. Natural hazards can undermine housing security in a range of ways, from damage and displacement to rising insurance costs and the loss of homes altogether.

Natural hazards create significant housing vulnerability for many Australians. Recent estimates suggest almost half of Australia's residential properties are at risk from bushfire, [198] more than 8% face a flood risk of at least 0.5 metres,[199] and around 160,000 properties are vulnerable to coastal erosion. [200] These risks can affect people's ability to remain safely in their homes, maintain insurance, recover financially after disasters and stay connected to their communities.

Housing insecurity and vulnerability

The right to housing must be recognised on a non-discriminatory basis.[201] However, disaster risk is unevenly experienced. People with economic disadvantage, disability, older age, homelessness or insecure housing are more likely to be exposed to risks of hazards and face greater barriers to recovery from disasters. [202]

Homes that are difficult to cool, poorly insulated or expensive to keep at safe temperatures can increase vulnerability during heatwaves.[203] People with disability face additional challenges in gaining adequate housing and are at heightened risk in the face of disasters.[204] Older people can also face increased risk where housing is poorly suited to extreme weather, particularly heatwaves.[205] Older people are heavily represented in hospitalisation and fatalities during heatwaves.[206] Research has also found that First Peoples are significantly more likely than people who are not from a First Peoples background to require medical care due to excessive heat in their homes.[207] People may find it difficult to leave their home to go somewhere cooler for a variety of reasons including the cost of transport, health or mobility issues.[208] Research has found that heatwaves pose a greater threat to Australian health and mortality than any other natural hazard and that this will likely continue to escalate.[209]

Economic factors and housing affordability also shape disaster risk. Rising housing costs increasingly push lower-income households into hazard-prone locations such as floodplains and bushfire-risk areas. [210] Meanwhile people experiencing economic disadvantage or homelessness often lack access to financial and other resources needed to prepare for, evacuate from and recover after disasters. [211] This was a consistent theme in many of our consultations. We heard about people experiencing pressure to move into low-cost housing in areas at higher risk of natural hazards such as flooding or bushfires, which also increased the challenge of obtaining adequate and affordable insurance. One participant described this as creating 'really significant inequalities.'[212] Concerns were also raised about ongoing development in areas identified as having elevated flood risk, potentially continuing these patterns of vulnerability.

> **'It's a human right to have dignity and safe housing, but it's not the reality of the world we live in for many people.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [8 May 2025][213]

Homelessness amplifies the vulnerability of a community to a natural hazard. Homelessness can also be a direct outcome of a disaster, particularly for people in tenuous housing arrangements before the disaster occurs. Homelessness encompasses rough sleeping, couch surfing, overcrowded housing, temporary accommodation and crisis shelters. [214] People without secure housing may not receive emergency warnings, have nowhere to store emergency supplies and face direct exposure to hazardous weather. [215] We heard from people who highlighted how disaster recovery systems can exclude people who were already homeless before a disaster. During our consultations people told us about the challenges of rough sleepers accessing financial support to replace their belongings that were lost during the 2022 Lismore floods:

> **'If you were homeless, you didn't get anything because you were homeless... that took months of advocacy before homeless people who had lost their sleeping bag, their tent, everything, could even apply for the disaster relief grant.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [7 May 2025][216]

Participants also spoke to us at length about the particular risks to women and children facing with homelessness in the wake of a disaster. For example, one person described the issue of women in disaster affected communities going back into violent relationships because they were unable to secure housing by themselves.

'Seeing women sleeping in cars sleeping with their children, going back to perpetrators, really chronic rough sleeping, women experiencing sexual violence... as a result of being homeless or couch surfing.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [8 May 2025][217]

Evacuation

Temporary accommodation can extend from immediate emergency shelter to transitional housing and, ultimately if people are unable to return to their homes, safe and durable housing. Decisions made during evacuation and early recovery can affect how long people remain displaced, whether they can stay connected to their communities, and whether existing disadvantage is reduced or compounded.

Evacuations are widely accepted to be necessary for saving lives where people face an immediate risk of harm.[218] Evacuation itself can involve complexities such as those associated with disability, age, limited transport, concern for family members or animals, or uncertainty about suitable alternative accommodation. Our survey results showed that around half (49%) of people who lost power and needed to evacuate faced a lack of suitable accommodation. Although intended to be temporary, assuming that people will be able to return quickly can obscure the needs of those displaced. A growing body of research shows that significant numbers of evacuees remain displaced for extended periods.[219]

Evacuation and relief centres are often a lifeline during disasters, providing safety, shelter, information and access to essential services for people who cannot remain safely in their own homes.[220] They are commonly established in schools, community halls, sporting facilities, clubs and showgrounds.[221] As these facilities are generally not designed for accommodation, they may be unsuitable for extended stays.[222]

People we spoke to throughout our consultations frequently raised experiences of evacuation centres. In both Queensland and NSW, people explained that while evacuation centres were established to keep people safe, there were concerns about whether they were adequately equipped to support people with disability, health conditions or complex support needs. One person told us that:

'There was also the issue that the evacuation centres were not fit for purpose for people who have moderate to complex needs in that sort of space, whether they be psychosocial needs or physical needs.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [27 March 2026][223]

These experiences highlight that planning for evacuation centres should consider a diverse range of needs for accessibility, space, sanitation, power, communications, privacy, safety and capacity.

Evacuations are primarily intended to save lives, but they can also mark the beginning of longer-term displacement. While evacuation is often understood as a temporary measure, many people are unable to return home quickly because their homes have been damaged or destroyed, housing is unavailable, insurance claims are delayed, or recovery takes longer than expected. In these circumstances, an evacuation can evolve from a short-term safety measure into prolonged displacement, creating additional challenges for housing, wellbeing, community connection and recovery. Our consultations highlighted the complex and deeply personal decisions people face when asked to leave. One participant reflected on how difficult it can be for people to judge risk and decide when to evacuate:

> **'I personally know family members who were like, we'll stay, we'll stay, we'll stay, until that fire came pretty bloody close … It's a really complicated thing to do.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][224]

Case study: A framework for safe shelter spaces by Gender and Disaster Australia

In 2025, Gender and Disaster Australia and We Al-li released a culture, trauma and gender informed framework for safe shelters. The Framework guides the creation of inclusive, equitable, and healing-centred emergency shelters that responds to the diverse needs of communities. It centres relationships and collective wellbeing in the context of emergency shelters. The Framework was developed in recognition that disasters can amplify existing inequalities and increase risks of violence, exclusion, discrimination, and cultural disconnection. It acknowledges that true safety extends beyond physical protection, emphasising the importance of emotional, spiritual, relational, and cultural wellbeing during times of crisis.[225].

The Culturally Informed Trauma Integrated Healing Approach Framework engages with human rights principles, including the rights to safety, dignity, participation, inclusion and non-discrimination from planning stages through to implementation and recovery.

Temporary housing and recovery

Temporary housing is an essential component of disaster recovery, providing people with an alternative to evacuation centres and enabling a return to everyday routines. [226] In the early stages of recovery, temporary accommodation may include caravans, motels, hotels or demountable homes.[227]

However, accommodation intended as temporary may be prolonged for months or years because of housing shortages, planning delays, insurance disputes and rebuilding challenges. [228] Accommodation that is not designed for long term occupancy may not be adequate.

> **'You can make temporary accommodation nice, but it's temporary for a reason.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [7 May 2025][229]

Temporary accommodation must be connected to a clear and supported pathway to suitable and secure housing. Housing located near affected communities can preserve access to services, employment, schools and social networks.[230] Poorly designed or located accommodation can deepen isolation and prolong displacement. Some research has identified that temporary housing arrangements can amplify social and economic disparities. For instance, renters may face barriers accessing temporary accommodation close to their community while support programs are directed towards owner-occupiers.[231]

The experience of squatting in buyback properties in Lismore demonstrates the interaction between lack of secure accommodation and a constrained housing market. Some people occupied vacant homes because rising rents, loss of livelihood and inadequate insurance left them with few alternatives. Although some described these arrangements as safer than sleeping rough, the dwellings often failed basic habitability standards.

> **'I do remember hearing about people living in their houses that they had all the walls stripped out and they were putting cardboard on the walls and things like that. They couldn't afford to get different accommodation because their prices just increased like within a week.'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [8 May 2025][232]

The experience of the Lismore Temporary Housing Village illustrates both the benefits and limitations of post-disaster temporary housing. Established after the 2022 Northern Rivers floods, the village provided secure accommodation, utilities and support services for flood-affected residents.[233] However, it has remained operational beyond its intended timeframe because of lack of suitable alternatives and barriers to secure housing. During our project we heard how this prolonged displacement can undermine housing security and community wellbeing and safety.[234]

Case study: Lismore Pod Village

In November 2022, following the 2022 Northern Rivers Floods, a temporary housing village of 52 dwellings was set up in East Lismore for residents who were unable to return to their homes.[235] The temporary pod village program was intended to end by June 2025, however it is still operational due to a shortage of affordable and available housing in the region.[236]

From a human rights perspective, the Pod Village has played an important role in supporting the right to housing, safety and dignity. For many residents, the Pod Village provided secure accommodation after prolonged periods of displacement, allowing individuals and families to move out of evacuation centres, temporary hotel accommodation or unsafe living conditions. The villages also provided access to utilities, community support services and onsite housing assistance, helping residents begin the process of recovery and stabilisation.

While designed as an emergency solution, many residents have remained in the Pod Village for several years because of the lack of suitable alternatives and barriers to secure housing. This creates uncertainty and can undermine housing security, community wellbeing and long-term recovery. There have also been reports of drug use and mental health challenges for some residents of the Pod Village, impacting on the right to safety of other residents.[237]

Image: Temporary housing pods at the Lismore Pod Village.[238]



Property buyback schemes similarly illustrate the tension between risk reduction and housing security. Navigating administrative processes and eligibility requirements can compound the trauma people experience in losing their homes. While programs such as the NSW Resilient Homes Program aim to reduce future exposure to extreme flood risk, stakeholder consultations highlighted concerns about delays, lack of transparency, inadequate support and prolonged uncertainty.[239] While there were many criticisms, there was also recognition and appreciation from some that the buyback program was rectifying historical planning decisions that had allowed people to live in flood vulnerable locations.[240]

'I talk a lot to the community and some have said like, this, the actual buyback, this process is worse for us than the flooding. So because there's so many factors that they don't understand or they can't emotionally or physically or financially cope with and so that's been really challenging for them.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [8 May 2025][241]

Images: A property in Lismore that has been bought-back after the 2022 Lismore Floods (AHRC, 2025).





The challenge for disaster recovery is not only to move people out of harm's way, but to support them to rebuild their lives. Temporary housing, relocation and buyback programs can reduce future risk, but they can also affect people's sense of home, connection to community and longer-term wellbeing. Recovery measures are therefore most effective when they balance safety with housing security, provide clear and accessible pathways forward, and give affected communities a meaningful role in decisions about their future. In this way, disaster recovery can strengthen both resilience and the realisation of the right to adequate housing.

Insurance and disaster recovery

Adequate insurance is an important factor in determining how a person recovers from a disaster. Insurance is important in enabling people to rebuild their lives and communities. Insurance also affects whether people can move from temporary accommodation to more secure housing. Those without sufficient insurance face significant expenses in the repair or rebuilding of their homes and livelihoods, leading to serious financial hardship.

Insurance is becoming more costly or difficult to obtain in some high-risk areas.[242] The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute acknowledges that there is an increasing number of people who do not have sufficient housing disaster insurance.[243] Some insurers raise their premiums or refuse to insure properties in high-risk areas.[244] Insurance premiums are already unaffordable for many people.[245] This trend can be expected to worsen the impact on housing in the coming years.

Following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, 13% of affected homes were uninsured and 80% were underinsured.[246] More recently, during the 2022 Rochester floods in regional Victoria, only 40% of affected people reportedly had adequate insurance.[247]

However, it is not cost alone which is causing these levels of inadequate insurance levels, other factors can include:

- Lack of information about hazard risks to enable people to make informed decisions about insurance coverage.
- Complicated insurance terms and conditions meaning that people did not understand their coverage.
- Insufficient understanding of the actual expenses in reconstruction.[248]

What we heard in our consultations demonstrated the significant hardship people experience because insurance is becoming more complex, less accessible and, in some areas, less affordable, even as the cost of insurance payouts continues to rise. Despite challenges with insurance coverage, insurance disbursements are reportedly increasing with $5.47 billion paid out across 300,000 claims in the summer of 2019-2020.[249] In 2022 almost 302,000 disaster-related claims accounted for $7.28 billion in damages.[250] This highlights that while insurance plays an important role in meeting the increasing costs of disaster recovery, many may find it hard to maintain adequate insurance to protect their homes, increasing the risk of underinsurance or non-insurance and shifting a greater share of recovery costs onto governments, communities and other support systems.

9.2 Risk-resilient infrastructure

The built environment can play a critical role in protecting people from disaster risk and supporting recovery. Land-use planning, housing location, critical infrastructure and building standards can either reduce or exacerbate exposure and vulnerability to hazards such as floods, bushfires and storms.

Land-use and infrastructure planning should, as far as reasonably practicable, reduce foreseeable exposure to hazards.[251]Avoiding development in high-risk locations can prevent harm,[252]but complete avoidance is not always practical. Approximately 90% of Western Australia, for example, has been identified as bushfire-prone. [253] In areas with limited housing supply, efforts to discourage development or occupation in high-risk locations may conflict with the immediate need for affordable housing. As one participant from Lismore City Council observed:

> **'if you're on a floodplain, you don't want to be encouraging people to live there, but by the same time when you have a housing crisis and absolutely people need somewhere to go, how do you balance those things out?'**
>
> – Stakeholder Consultation Session [8 May 2025] [254]

Planning must therefore combine avoidance with mitigation, adaptation and preparedness. This includes ensuring adequate building standards, accessible evacuation routes, reliable communications and capacity to restore services. Natural systems such as wetlands, forests and vegetation should also be recognised as protective infrastructure because they can reduce flooding, erosion and landslide risks.[255] Prescribed burning (or hazard reduction burning) is another proactive measure which, alongside other land management measures, is used to help reduce the intensity and impact of bushfires.[256]

Recovery also provides an opportunity to improve long-term resilience by building back better. Rebuilding should not simply restore what existed before. Housing, infrastructure and settlement planning should be coordinated so that reconstructed communities have reliable services, transport, schools, healthcare and community facilities that account for changing climate conditions and disaster risk over the expected life of homes and infrastructure.[257]

9.3 Community connection and collective resilience

Community resilience is shaped not only by physical assets, but by the strength of relationships, trust and social networks. Connection within neighbourhoods, between community groups, and with government agencies can strengthen individual and community resilience. These connections play a role in across all phases of the disaster cycle, from prevention and preparedness through to response and recovery.

Neighbours, cultural groups, local organisations, volunteers and service providers often share local support networks can help reduce vulnerability, provide warnings, and immediate assistance, and help people navigate recovery. People and communities without these connections may find it harder to respond and recover from disasters.[258] Informal social ties – particularly neighbours, family members, and friends – often act as the true first responders.[259] Greater community ties can help increase awareness of disaster management roles, volunteer opportunities, and shared responsibilities. This can in turn strengthen disaster preparedness, coordinated response and recovery, and collective decisionmaking.[260]

> When bushfires, floods, or unexpected disasters such as pandemics hit, it's not just emergency alerts, helicopters or sandbags that protect lives and livelihoods – it's people. Neighbours who check in. Community groups who organise. Volunteers who step up. Local leaders who understand what matters most. Familiar faces in familiar places.[261]

Connections beyond close family and friends are also important. Relationships between different community groups can foster cooperation and help people access a wider range of information, services and resources.[262] Trusted relationships with governments and other organisations can help communities obtain support and take part in recovery decisions.[263]

'...one of the ways we overcame that is we created a tug of war where we had the police and people from all different parts of the world together. It was hilarious. But it was one activity that showed – it's not that hard.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [19 February 2026][264]

Strong local relationships can build trust and help people work together before, during and after disasters. However, community connections cannot replace effective services and government support. Whole communities may be affected by the same disaster and have limited resources to share.[265] Absorbing complex recovery responsibilities can increase financial and psychological stress.[266] Close-knit networks may also exclude people who are isolated, new to the area or not part of established groups which can deepen existing inequalities during disasters.[267]

Community facilities and spaces are also important in strengthening disaster resilience.[268] Places such as libraries, neighbourhood centres, schools, sporting clubs and places of worship are important in bringing people together helping to build meaningful relationships.[269] They are also places for sharing information services and support before, during and after disasters.[270] Social infrastructure of this kind helps build more connected and resilient communities by fostering inclusion, a sense of belonging, shared purpose, social cohesion, and mutual support.[271]

Communities with strong relationships and well supported local organisations are often better able to respond and recover from disasters. However, access to these spaces is not equal. People who have experienced disadvantage may face difficulties being included.[272] Supporting participation helps protect their rights and wellbeing throughout the disaster cycle.

9.4 Mental health and wellbeing

Personal and community resilience are closely connected. Disasters bring uncertainty, loss and disruption, which can increase anxiety and psychological distress for individuals and communities. Strong community infrastructure and support networks help communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters, while also helping people cope and access support.

Our survey found that anxiety and lack of certainty was the most common and most strongly felt impact of natural hazards and disasters. This finding was consistent with wider research. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements similarly found that recovery is often prolonged and that mental health impacts can emerge or intensify well after the initial event.[273] A significant Australian longitudinal study that found people whose homes were damaged by floods, bushfires or cyclones experienced measurable declines in mental health, emotional wellbeing and social functioning.[274] Importantly, impacts were worse for people already experiencing housing affordability stress or living in poor-quality housing before the disaster.[275] Research on post-disaster shelter in Australia notes that displacement and loss of housing can have long-term consequences for social connectedness, health and wellbeing.[276]

Disaster mental health recovery depends not only on the availability of clinical services after an event, but also on sustained investment in community capacity, workforce development and coordinated local support systems. The National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework identifies workforce planning, service coordination, trauma-informed practice and strengthening local community capability as critical components of effective disaster recovery.[277] Research from Phoenix Australia similarly highlights the importance of building the capability of local practitioners, recovery workers and community organisations to support long-term wellbeing, recognising that mental health impacts often emerge or persist years after a disaster.[278] Consistent with findings of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, this evidence suggests that resilient communities require enduring and accessible mental health supports integrated with broader recovery systems, rather than short-term responses that conclude once the immediate emergency has passed.[279]

This was reinforced by what we heard during our consultations. Disasters can strengthen community connections, but recovery often becomes more challenging as ongoing stressors emerge. People told us how the trauma of an event can have lasting impacts on residents, volunteers and other responders, with some describing a reduced sense of safety long after the immediate danger had passed. We also heard about secondary stressors such as underinsurance, delayed rebuilding, financial pressures, displacement and housing problems that can become significant sources of ongoing stress. These cumulative pressures can strain relationships, affect psychological wellbeing, and weaken the social fabric that supports recovery. While immediate assistance is often available, many people continue to need psychological and practical support for years afterwards, highlighting the importance of sustained and accessible support.

'there's always been an unrealistic goal to rebuild collective mental health within a two-year post-disaster period. Often the mental health impacts don't show until at least two years afterwards.'

– Stakeholder Consultation Session [24 March 2026][280]

Glossary

This glossary draws on a range of international and domestic frameworks, policies and literature that inform the field of disaster management. We recognise that some definitions are contested and continue to evolve over time, and that certain terms may be used differently or interchangeably by different stakeholders. The glossary is intended to support a consistent understanding and application of the terminology used throughout this report.

Term	Definition
Critical infrastructure	The physical structures, facilities, networks and other assets which provide services that are essential to the social and economic functioning of a community or society.[281]
Disaster	A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts[282].
Disaster risk governance	The system of institutions, mechanisms, policy and legal frameworks and other arrangements to guide, coordinate and oversee disaster risk reduction and related areas of policy.[283]
Disaster risk management	Disaster risk management is the implementation of DRR policies and strategies to achieve the same goal of minimising existing risk, stopping new risks from emerging and strengthening overall resilience.[284] Disaster risk management translates strategic DRR frameworks into operational systems such as emergency plans, early warning systems, coordination of response efforts and land-use planning.
Disaster resilience	Disaster resilience is the ability of a system, community or society to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard within a reasonable amount of time.[285] Disaster resilience is the result of successful DRR and DRM, and it requires shared responsibility between governments, businesses and community leaders, the not-for-profit sector and individuals.[286]
Disaster risk	The potential loss of life, injury, or destroyed or damaged assets which could occur to a system, society or a community in a specific period of time, determined probabilistically as a function of hazard, exposure, vulnerability and capacity.[287]
Exposure	The situation of people, infrastructure, housing, production capacities and other tangible human assets located in hazard-prone areas[288].

Term	Definition
Extreme weather events	Refers to weather phenomena that are at the extremes of the historical distribution and are rare for a particular place and/or time, especially severe or unseasonal weather. Such extremes include severe thunderstorms, flooding, cyclones and high winds, and heat waves.[289]
Funding cliff	Term used to describe when emergency funding that is made available is suddenly revoked post-crisis.
Preparedness	The knowledge and capacities developed by governments, response and recovery organizations, communities and individuals to effectively anticipate, respond to and recover from the impacts of likely, imminent or current disasters.[290]
Prevention	Activities and measures to avoid existing and new disaster risks.[291]
Response	Actions taken directly before, during or immediately after a disaster in order to save lives, reduce health impacts, ensure public safety and meet the basic subsistence needs of the people affected.[292]
Recovery	The restoring or improving of livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets, systems and activities, of a disaster-affected community or society, aligning with the principles of sustainable development and 'build back better', to avoid or reduce future disaster risk.[293]
Disaster Risk Reduction	Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) is the collective policies, strategies and actions taken to reduce existing disaster risks while preventing new risks from emerging and increasing overall resilience. DRR requires a shift from reactive emergency response to proactive preparation and hazard mitigation. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction emphasises how effective DRR creates disaster resilient communities. The concept of DRR recognises that catastrophic disaster is not the inevitable consequence of a hazardous event. Decisions made by governments, businesses, organisations and individuals can help reduce how exposed and vulnerable communities are to hazards.
Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction	A global agreement that aims to reduce disaster risk and increase resilience by focusing on three dimensions of disaster risk; exposure to hazards; vulnerability and capacity, and hazards' characteristics. Adopted by the United Nations member states in 2015 at a conference in Sendai, Japan.

Term	Definition
Social capital	The connections or social ties between people, communities and institutions that help build trust and enable mutual support in times of need. In the context of disasters, social capital shapes how individuals and communities access resources, share information, coordinate responses and adapt to challenges, thereby strengthening disaster resilience. There are three main types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking.[294]
Social infrastructure	The shared places and spaces that provide opportunities for people to connect, build trust and participate in community life. It includes physical facilities such as schools, libraries and community centres; open spaces such as parks and playgrounds; commercial premises such as cafés, gyms and hairdressers; cultural and faith-based places; and virtual spaces such as online community groups, forums and social media networks. During disasters, social infrastructure serves as critical support hubs, strengthening the social networks that enable mutual aid, information sharing and community recovery.[295]
Vulnerability	The conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards.[296]

Acronyms and abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
ACT, NSW, NT, Qld, SA, Tas, Vic, WA.	Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia
ADRF	Australian Disaster Recovery Framework
ADPF	Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework
AGCMF	Australian Government Crisis Management Framework
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission, also referred to as the Commission in this report.
CAT	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERD	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination
Collateral Damage Report	The AHRC's 2025 report examining gaps in Australia's COVID-19 response and recommending measures to protect human rights.
COMDISPLAN	Australian Government Disaster Response Plan
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Acronym	Definition
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual and/or aromantic
NDRRF	National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework
NEMA	National Emergency Management Australia
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPCAT	Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
PPRR	The four-phase prevent, prepare, respond, recover disaster cycle model
QHRC	Queensland Human Rights Commission
The Sendai Framework	The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030)
UN	United Nations
UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
2020 Royal Commission	The Royal Commission into National Disaster Arrangements (2020)

Appendix

Appendix A: International human rights law and disaster frameworks

The following international human rights treaties, which Australia has ratified, contain obligations that are relevant to managing disasters:

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention)
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
- Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The following international and national frameworks guide disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery, alongside legislation, plans and arrangements specific to each Australian state and territory.

- International:
  - Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030
  - Gender Action Plan to support implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (Sendai GAP)

- National:
  - Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF) (2026)
  - Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN) (2025)
  - Australian Disaster Recovery Framework (ADRF) (2022)
  - Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework (ADPF) (2018)
  - National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework (2018)
  - National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (2011)

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