Public Health Association of Australia submission on a disaster resilience strategy for South Australia

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**Resilience** is “the ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate or recover from the effects of a hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration or improvement of its essential basic structure and functions”.”\(^2\)
Introduction

The Public Health Association of Australia

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public’s health in Australia. The PHAA works to ensure that the public’s health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people’s health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.

Preamble

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Disaster Resilience Strategy for South Australia. The reduction of social and health inequities should be an over-arching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. The Australian Government, in collaboration with the States/Territories, should provide a comprehensive national cross-government framework on promoting a healthy ecosystem and reducing social and health inequities. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.

Policies on disaster resilience must focus on the role of government stewardship rather than as an excuse to move responsibility that requires an increase in resilience of individuals. The most effective policies have an appropriate balance between good government stewardship and personal responsibility.
PHAA Response to the consultation

What do the words ‘disaster resilience’ mean?

The practical responses of the disaster management system and the capacity of that system to adapt as climate change affects disasters are intricately linked with the resilience of communities. If the disaster response system is to be at its most effective it will need to adapt to changes occurring, both in terms of the climate and hazards which lead to disasters, and the policy responses that government and individuals apply to such events.¹

Defining resilience

Resilience is “the ability of a system and its component parts to anticipate, absorb, accommodate or recover from the effects of a hazardous event in a timely and efficient manner, including through ensuring the preservation, restoration or improvement of its essential basic structure and functions”.² Resilient socio-ecological systems are characterised by having, among other things, in-depth knowledge, flexible and polycentric governance, diversity, modularity, openness, reserves, feedbacks, monitoring, leadership and trust.³, ⁴ The extent to which organisations and agencies are able to operate in atypical environments with demands exceeding their usual capacities, is an essential predictor of resilience, or the capacity of a society to recover, in this instance from a disaster.⁵

Disaster management is said to have four cyclical elements, related to resilience:

1) Reduce vulnerability and build resilience by mitigating known risks
2) Planning response and ensuring sufficient capabilities are in place
3) Respond effectively by providing basic human needs
4) Recovery from disasters including building resilience against future disasters⁶

Focus on prevention

The disaster management cycle ensures that resilience and response are intricately connected. The ways in which prevention and resilience are addressed or not directly influences the impact of an event becoming a disaster. This in turn, directly impacts the response and recovery actions required.

Completing the loop, the ways in which the response and recovery issues are adequately addressed or not, directly impacts upon the prevention and resilience into the future. The immediate humanitarian response may be able to be extracted from this cycle, since it is short term and targeted. In reality though, the experience of humanitarian response influence perceptions and expectations from all involved, which influences preparation in future.¹

Importance of social capital

Social capital – a sense of belonging, a sense of community, support for collective action, and an attachment to place, have been shown to be important in disaster recovery and resilience.⁷, ⁸ In a flood-affected rural town in Queensland, social connectedness and a sense of place and connection to the place, along with the collective belief that people help each other in times of trouble, and a belief in your own capacity to cope, were found to be important for resilience.⁹ Particular resilience and coping strategies are found in remote places, with some researchers suggesting that the remotest parts of Australia’s north cope with floods and cyclones that would become a disaster in more developed parts of the country.¹⁰

Experience in coping with disasters

Experience is also important. Government response agencies in Australia have noted that people with experience of a particular disaster are better at coping with them.⁹
What ideas do you have that could help South Australia to be more resilient to disasters?

Focus funding on prevention rather than so heavily on response
In the context of disasters, funding is usually directed towards response, rather than prevention. For building resilience, prevention and preparation are essential, since increasing prevention and preparation will help build resilience and decrease the need for response. This has previously been recognised in Australia, but not necessarily acted upon in a practical sense. For example, funding rarely goes to the local level in remote Indigenous communities in Australia, for work to be done and managed by locals according to the local needs.

What roles do you think individuals, community, business, government (Commonwealth, Local and State) and non-government should have in building disaster resilience?

Involving multiple players
There are roles for players at all levels, since there are different types of resilience at all levels. Having both formal and informal systems in place, with multiple levels and players within the systems, provides important elements of flexibility required for adaptive governance and resilience. This can lead to difficulties for Government in terms of co-ordination and control, but the multiple players and systems can and should work together, with good management and information exchange in place.

Local tradition and understanding
For example, the acknowledgement of and respect for local tradition and understandings, combined with relationships between the community and local, state and national bodies were found to be essential to the success of evacuating a remote island community in northern Australia from Cyclone Monica in 2006.

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission.
Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

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31 January 2018
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2. IPCC. Managing the risks of extreme events and disasters to advance climate change adaptation. A special report of Working Groups I and II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA. Cambridge University Press; 2012.