

**Submission from The Australian Redcross
Carlton, VIC**

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Australian Red Cross
THE POWER OF HUMANITY

**Drought Policy Review
Expert Social Panel Submission**

Submission lodged on behalf of:

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Organisation	Australian Red Cross
Position in Organisation	Chief Executive Officer
Have you also attended an Expert Social Panel public consultation forum?	No

Red Cross is happy for this submission to be made publically available.



1. Introduction

Australian Red Cross is part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the largest humanitarian organisation in the world. The vision of Red Cross is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilising the power of humanity. Red Cross Societies operate without any political, religious or cultural affiliation. All services are underpinned by seven Fundamental Principles: Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality.

Since 1914, Red Cross has been responding to the needs of people of all ages in suburbs and towns right across the country. Through the delivery of over 130 support services throughout Australia, and an extensive international development programme, Red Cross provides a variety of support to the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Red Cross has extensive experience of the effects of drought on Australian communities due to its significant presence right around Australia. Red Cross has 863 branches, 100 offices, 30,000 members, 29,000 volunteers and 2000 staff spread across Australia. The feedback from these extensive networks as well as the first hand experience we have gained in working in drought affected communities has informed our response to this submission.

2. Red Cross Drought Response

In 2002 Red Cross, in partnership with the Farmhand Foundation, launched the Farmhand Appeal to provide an immediate and practical response to families and communities struggling with the effects of drought across Australia. This appeal distributed almost \$24 million across six drought affected States, providing very real support to families.

Since this time smaller financial appeals have been conducted by Red Cross, mostly in NSW, but have failed to harness the public outpouring of support seen through the Farmhand Appeal. Further appeals of this scale are unfortunately unlikely to be viable given the prolonged nature of this drought. However since this time considerable government financial assistance has been distributed to meet some of the needs first addressed through the Farmhand Appeal.

In 2006 Red Cross developed a drought response plan. The plan was developed to enable Red Cross to strategically respond to the needs of vulnerable communities. It acknowledged the continuous nature of this drought, its close proximity to previous droughts and the increasing number of vulnerable individuals, families and communities that Red Cross was supporting.

Key elements of the drought response plan include:

- Expanding the Talk Out Loud Program which is a peer education initiative for young people who may be feeling the effects of drought in their communities
- Entering into partnership arrangements with selected organisations to better support drought affected communities
- Introducing Good Start Breakfast Clubs into most vulnerable drought affected communities/towns
- Supporting young people to develop projects within drought affected areas
- Utilising the extensive network of Red Cross volunteers and members to respond locally to identified needs



Since initiation of the Drought Response Plan there has been an expansion of relevant programs across drought areas. Some State and Territory Red Cross Divisions affected by drought have also proactively implemented local Drought support initiatives. However Red Cross' ability to reach the number of vulnerable communities it would like to is limited by people and financial constraints.

3. General Observations

Before responding to the specific questions raised by the Inquiry, Red Cross would like to offer some general observations about the social impacts of drought and the related government and non government social support services that have been provided. These comments have been gleaned from Red Cross experience in delivering programs in drought affected communities.

3.1 Increased pressure on existing services

Red Cross, as with many community based service providers, has seen a sharp increase in the number of vulnerable people and communities seeking help. In times of drought, the most vulnerable people in affected communities become even more vulnerable and the number of people considered vulnerable dramatically increases.

While Red Cross is willing and able to assist many of these people, the reality is services, staffing and resources are stretched. Red Cross, like many organisations is limited in what assistance it can provide without additional resources. Despite this, Red Cross now places greater emphasis on drought affected communities wherever opportunities arise to expand services.

3.2 Coordination

There continues to be a large and very diverse number of government and non-government agencies providing a range of drought support services throughout drought affected communities. In some areas the coordination and collaboration of drought services tends to be ad-hoc and minimal, whilst in other localities it appears more structured and effective. Red Cross is consistently told that it is very difficult for people who are not used to accessing welfare and support services to know who to call or where to start when trying to locate and access services. Red Cross is also aware that it is difficult for organisations to keep track of who is offering which program, to whom and for how long.

Red Cross recommends further development of existing clearing house and coordinating mechanisms. A clearing house facility that also captured research and evidence on effectiveness of drought interventions could be used by organisations and local communities to design more effective interventions. This facility would also enable further expansion of knowledge regarding service deficits and a more refined prioritising of vulnerable communities.

3.3 Specific vulnerable groups

The long-term climate change prognosis may mean that many rural communities are becoming increasingly vulnerable to ongoing dry seasons, inconsistent rainfall and extreme weather events. The term 'drought' could become redundant as rural communities accept the longer-term climate change forecast.

Imminent adjustments will be required for farmers and rural communities to adapt to long-term drought and climate change. These changes may include exiting from farming and modifying productivity methods and capacity. A different demographic profile of rural communities is emerging and communities are becoming increasingly prepared for extreme weather events.



As a result of the above changes occurring in rural communities, Red Cross has identified a number of specific vulnerable groups who need special consideration in any response initiatives. Specific vulnerable groups include farmers exiting farming, aged farmers, young people (particularly young people who are early school leavers) women and rural and remote Aboriginal communities. Red Cross recommends identification of the most vulnerable groups and planning to support those groups through a place based approach to service delivery, with the capacity for a long term commitment.

One particular concern held by Red Cross is that there is an apparent lack of knowledge about the impact of drought and climate change on rural and remote Aboriginal communities. This is viewed as a serious gap and greater understanding, knowledge and commitment by government and service providers is required.

A specific effect of extended drought conditions in rural and remote Aboriginal communities is the impact on native flora and fauna. Many rural and remote Aboriginal communities have a high degree of reliance on bush foods to supplement their household consumption. It is believed that the drought has negatively impacted upon the environment and depleted the availability of edible native flora and fauna thus contributing to food insecurity.

The drought is also compounding other issues already being faced by rural and remote Aboriginal communities including:

- Geographical isolation and vulnerability to seasonal weather conditions;
- Lack of basic infrastructure and services, including the absence of emergency and related services;
- High comparative levels of socio-economic disadvantage;
- Increased risk of seasonal events such as cyclones, flooding and adverse events as a consequence of climate change (for example extended wet seasons and storm surges); and
- Additional risks associated with these changes in weather (for example vector borne diseases such as Dengue Fever and Ross River Encephalitis).

3.4 Access to water

Many communities now perceive their future may consist of a permanent loss or reduction of livelihood, continued lack of water and ongoing saline water supply. For example in Adelaide, SA Water has contingency plans in place as there are major concerns about the sustainability of water supplies. Several communities along the Murray are not able to use the Murray water (their only source of water) for anything other than toilet flushing, due to its high salinity levels. In Victoria several communities who are dependant upon tank water and have limited money to purchase water are experiencing significant difficulty in accessing drinking and cooking water. This issue is increasingly being raised by agencies as a gap in current services. Red Cross recommends that the panel includes the issue of access to drinking water in its considerations.

3.5 Long term funding

Red Cross would like to emphasise that funding for drought support services needs to be provided on a long term basis. Short term funding creates its own set of anxieties and pressures in communities. Organisations in receipt of short term funds or funds for part time positions often find it extremely difficult to recruit staff. Short term funding does not allow organisations time to plan and implement programs effectively. Many programs and services take a while to become established and known about and for workers to build trust in rural communities. Often the funding for programs ceases before real benefits can be realised or real differences made. This then means communities and individuals affected by the drought can become disillusioned and reluctant to engage with programs and services again.

Accordingly Red Cross recommends that any funding provided for drought recovery is provided for at least three years.



Red Cross would also like to emphasize that communities will require long term support to respond to impacts of climate change more broadly including drought. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some people and communities are managing to 'hold it together' and that it is not until the toughest times pass that the true effects of the drought are evident and that people seek out support.

Red Cross recommends that funding provided to communities needs to address both 'out of the ordinary' events (declared droughts) as well as ongoing support to communities to adapt to the longer-term implications of climate change.

3.6 Potential programmatic responses

Red Cross has identified a number of new supports and opportunities that we believe could make a difference to individuals and communities affected by the drought. These programs are not yet established but are ones that Red Cross is considering as part of its ongoing drought response work. Some possible supports that have been identified include:

- Providing farming families with additional skills in First Aid through community safety initiatives such as 'farm safety days'. This service could be provided to address the concern that continued reduction in well-being and increased stress levels of farmers may result in higher incidence of farm related accidents.
- Implementing a 'Telechat' program to provide regular social contact for women by phone. Based on the successful Red Cross Telecross program, that provides a regular reassuring telephone call to people living alone, Telechat would focus on providing social linkages and a connection to the broader world. This program would operate in direct response to the role women within farming families have as the lynchpin that holds the family nucleus together through difficult times. Many women who have maintained this role throughout the extended duration of this drought, coupled with the added responsibility to increasingly work off-farm, are now at a crisis point, physically and emotionally. Telechat would aim to reduce the long-term impact and risk associated with social isolation and assist in restoring emotional wellbeing and community connectedness. Similar to a flood recovery model that was trialled by Red Cross in Mackay, Queensland this model could work in conjunction with crisis phone services to refer people to telephone counselling as required.
- Providing training and support to local communities to enable them to generate funds for support services (for example through training in submission writing). Red Cross is aware that a significant amount of funding is available to communities to run drought support initiatives. Red Cross is however concerned those communities that are more cohesive, skilled and able to work collaboratively are those that have been successful with obtaining funding. To ensure more vulnerable communities and communities with decreased capacity are not further disadvantaged, additional training and support should be provided.
- Provision of a re-establishment service for farmers and their families who leave their farms or communities. The number of farmers who choose to exit their farms is increasing. Individuals or farming families who choose to leave their local area can become dislocated from their support networks. It can take considerable time to establish new networks and support systems for themselves within new communities. Red Cross and other organisations currently provide re-establishment services for clients who have gone through immigration processes and require initial support to facilitate their settlement into the Australian Community. A similar model to support the re-adjustment of farming families could be developed.



4. Response to Issues P

Red Cross offers the following information in relation to the questions posed by the Expert Social Panel.

Education and training

- What is your experience of drought and its affect on educational and training services in rural Australia?
- In what ways could education and training programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?
- What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on education and training?

Red Cross is aware that some families experiencing financial difficulties have had to withdraw their sons and daughters from private boarding schools and they are now considered to have completed their education. Equally some young people have left their local schooling earlier than planned to assist with labour on farms.

These young people are identified as being potentially very isolated with limited social connections. Furthermore there is a reported lack of services and initiatives available that target young people. It is recognised that to engage young people effectively, initiatives and services need to be developed that specifically target them as they are less likely to access general services.

Red Cross is also aware of young people having to move away from farming communities to gain work. An unexpected effect of this being noted by local businesses and community service organisations is that the more young people leave, the greater the pressure experienced by communities. A downward spiral in communities has been noted as services contract and social and community networks become less viable. Red Cross has attempted to address this issue through the Activ8 program in Victoria. Activ8 provides educational support to young people to encourage them to stay within the community and continue to use their skills in the community and could provide a useful basis for future program development.

Red Cross has expanded its Good Start Breakfast Club program in primary schools in drought affected areas. This community based program provides children with a nutritional breakfast to start the day and can act as an immediate 'stop gap' response while other initiatives are developed to respond to food security issues. A key focus of this program is to impart social and practical living skills, along with formal nutrition education to children, their families and the wider community. The demand for new breakfast clubs and attendance rates at existing breakfast clubs in rural drought affected communities has been significant and has been directly attributed to financial pressures experienced by farming families and rural communities. Red Cross has not had the resources to respond to all requests it has received for new Breakfast Clubs.

Community development and sustainability

- What is your experience of drought and its affects on community development and sustainability in rural Australia?
- In what ways could community development and sustainability programs and policies be better adjusted to address the impact of drought?
- What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the impacts of drought on community development and sustainability?

Building resilience and supporting the vulnerable during times of disaster have always been key roles for Red Cross. Red Cross has a long and solid history in providing emotional support and recovery services to people affected by emergency or disaster related incidents, many of whom present to our volunteers and staff with significant grief and loss issues. Red Cross plays a key role in assisting people in these circumstances to deal with the immediate impacts of such events.



Red Cross has identified the need to also build community resilience for drought and climate change impacts. Drought can result in a similar range of community impacts to those seen in more tangible emergencies such as floods and fires.

Red Cross notes there is an opportunity to use an 'Asset Based' approach to community development in farming communities. This approach means starting with the strengths of the community and using them to find solutions to their problems. Research and experience demonstrates that farming communities will not necessarily respond well to 'Needs Based' approaches. It is critical to establish a connection with the community and to create ownership of a process that facilitates solutions from within the community.

A good example of a community initiative that Red Cross has had considerable success with is the Save-a-Mate (SAM) program. SAM is an alcohol and other drugs, harm minimisation peer education program. It teaches young people how to recognise, prevent and respond to alcohol and other drug related emergencies / overdose. The SAM program also addresses other key emerging health issues such as mental health. SAM empowers young people to promote harm minimisation messages with other young people in their own communities, rather than having this provided from a top-down approach. The demand for SAM in rural drought affected communities continues to grow and Red Cross prioritises these communities for expansion of the program wherever possible (for example the program is about to be expanded to the Wimmera region in Victoria).

Families

- What is your experience of drought and how it affects families in rural Australia?
- In what ways could programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought on families?
- What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on families?

Please refer to comments under the Community development and sustainability and Mental and physical health sections for an overview of issues relating to families that Red Cross is seeing and responding to.

Employment and professional development

- What is your experience of drought and its affects on employment and professional development in rural Australia?
- In what ways could employment and skilling programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?
- What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on employment and professional development?

Red Cross is not extensively involved in direct employment related programs and therefore is not best placed to comment on these impacts.



Mental and physical health

- What is your experience of drought and its affects on mental and physical health in individuals or services in rural Australia?
- In what ways could mental or physical health programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?
- What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on mental and physical health?

In developing the Drought Plan in 2006 the key mental health gap identified by Red Cross was the response to young people in drought affected areas. Red Cross has responded to this gap by expanding the Talk Out Loud Program, which is a peer education initiative for young people who may be feeling the effects of drought in their communities. Talk Out Loud educates young people about mental health issues, encourages help seeking behaviours and above all enables young people to reach out and support other young people in their communities. Talk Out Loud has been expanded with the direct support of beyondblue: the national depression initiative, and with funding from the Department of Families, Housing, Communities Services and Indigenous Affairs. There is capacity to continue expansion of this program as a very tangible response to mental health needs through an approach that builds community capacity.

In addition to the mental health impacts on young people, the duration of this drought has created for many people a constant anxiety about money, family and friends, work, home, their future and the environment. These constant anxieties have reduced the physical and mental health of individuals, as well as the health and wellbeing of families and rural communities. The on-going nature of this drought has created an unprecedented level of social, economic and environmental impact upon the rural and remote communities.

While there is a diverse range of mental health services, supports and programs, Red Cross is being informed anecdotally that the delivery of these services does not appear to be uniformly distributed or equitably accessible throughout drought affected areas. Conversely, the amount of social gatherings offered through many organisations has expanded to the extent that some communities have expressed a sense of feeling inundated with offers. Improved coordination of these responses is clearly needed.

The mental health and physical well being of people affected by drought can be neglected as access to appropriate services and timely support may be limited. Accessibility is a huge problem as many services move to large regional centres or to capital cities. As the population ages and petrol becomes more expensive, it is important that drought affected communities do not become more disadvantaged by not being able to afford to access health and social support services. Transport disadvantage is significant in rural communities and economic and social impacts are magnified in drought affected areas.

Additional Red Cross responses include delivery of Mental Health First Aid and Personal Support training to a variety of communities across Australia. These two training programs aim to improve community capacity to recognise and deal with people socially disengaging as a reaction to high stress emergencies (which drought can be). The Personal Support training in particular is aimed at building and maintaining a specific emergency response capacity however the ability to address broader community recovery capacity is a worthwhile side benefit of the program. This is a program, that given additional resources, Red Cross could extend delivery of and even tailor to the needs of specific local government authorities and local community organisations.



5. Recommendations

Red Cross makes the following recommendations to the Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel:

- That governments recognise and acknowledge the support role which not for profit organisations with a significant presence in drought affected communities play in building social capital and ameliorating the effect of drought on rural communities.
- That additional funding and resources be made available to continue to address the social impacts of the drought as well as the longer-term implications of climate change.

Recommendations contained with the body of this submission are also summarised here for the panel's convenience.

- The further development of existing clearing house and coordinating mechanisms.
- The identification of the most vulnerable groups and planning to support those groups through a place based approach to service delivery, with the capacity for a long term commitment.
- That the panel includes the issue of access to drinking water in its considerations.
- That any funding provided for drought recovery is provided for at least three years.
- That funding provided to communities addresses both 'out of the ordinary' events (declared droughts) as well as ongoing support to communities to adapt to the longer-term implications of climate change.