

21 April 2020

Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements
Locked Bag 2000
Manuka ACT 2603
Via online submission form

Dear Commissioners,

Children's experiences and needs in the 2019-20 bushfires

Save the Children appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission (**attached**).

Our submission sets out our key insights and recommendations relevant to the Royal Commission's inquiry, as well as to other major inquiries currently under way into the 2019-20 bushfire season and associated arrangements.

It draws on our experience responding to the fires on the ground in the most affected communities, and on what we have heard from children and their communities about their experience of the bushfires and the response to them.

In the 2019-20 bushfire season, we established Child Friendly Spaces in evacuation and relief and recovery centres across NSW, South Australia and Victoria. These spaces are designed to meet children's unique needs in an emergency, in the hours and days after children's and families' evacuation from their homes and communities. Across 2019-20, our Child Friendly Spaces supported around 800 individual children through a total of over 1000 child visits.

At the request of local authorities, we have also mobilised to provide outreach psychosocial support in communities across NSW and Victoria that have been hardest hit after relief centres closed, until longer-term recovery programs commence and local supports return to capacity or are rebuilt. From January to March 2020, these outreach services reached around 750 individual children.

Most recently, we have begun working with affected communities and with government and other service providers to understand how we can best support the slow process of recovery. In NSW and Victoria, we had begun offering access to our in-school post-disaster recovery program, *Journey of Hope*, which was first implemented after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and has since been delivered worldwide, including an adaptation in New Zealand following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. We are now working with communities to assess what role we can play in light of COVID-19's spread, which will severely limit face to face support for recovery and resilience-building for the foreseeable future.

In our submission, we make recommendations about how to avoid the mistakes of the past in addressing future bushfire hazard, adopting a holistic approach to disaster risk reduction and resilience-building. It is clear that children's rights, needs and views were systematically misunderstood and overlooked in the response to the 2019-20 bushfires.

Our submission emphasises the importance of focusing on children's unique needs and vulnerabilities in bushfires. We urge that children's voices be heard before, during and after bushfires – including as part of community recovery and rebuilding, and in decisions about prevention and mitigation of bushfire risk. And we highlight that climate change is making extreme disasters like the 2019-20 bushfires increasingly

likely to occur. This has enormous implications for children's rights and welfare, as well as more broadly, and must be urgently addressed.

Save the Children also observes that 'natural disaster' is not the most appropriate term when referring to events such as the 2019-20 Australian bushfires. A natural hazard becomes a disaster when it impacts on society or communities. Disasters are not natural, and the term 'natural disaster' too readily suggests that devastating events such as the recent fires are beyond our control. The truth is there is a great deal we can do to prevent and mitigate bushfires and other disasters, about which this Royal Commission is sure to hear significant evidence. We should recognise this by breaking the myth of 'natural disasters' and instead referring, more simply, to disasters.

Thank you for considering this submission. If we can provide further detail, or to discuss anything in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact myself or:

- Howard Choo, our Australian Social Policy and Advocacy Adviser, at howard.choo@savethechildren.org.au, or
- Catherine Harris, our Director – Southern Region, at catherine.harris@savethechildren.org.au.

Kind regards,



Matt Gardiner
Executive Director – Australian Services
Save the Children Australia
Direct Tel: +61 3 7002 1788
Email: matt.gardiner@savethechildren.org.au

Attached: 'Children's experiences and needs in the 2019-20 bushfires: Consolidated submission to inquiries into the 2019-20 bushfire season (April 2020)'