

Multicultural Communities Experience of the 2022 Victorian Floods

Joint submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into
the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

June 2023



Contents

Introduction	2
About this submission	3
About us	3
Key Issues	4
Recommendations	10

Thank you

We humbly acknowledge this submission relies heavily on the insights, observations and experiences volunteered by multicultural community leaders.

The burden on these leaders is often far greater than most can appreciate, especially during emergencies.

For their time with us and for their tireless and regularly unseen work in keeping communities safe we are deeply grateful.



We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.

Introduction

In October 2022, a low-pressure system travelled east over Australia, bringing torrential rain and storms and causing one of the most devastating floods in Victoria's history ¹. This submission documents the experiences of our regional multicultural communities during the flood event and the subsequent clean up.

Some flood-affected areas such as Melbourne's west and Shepparton are home to large newly arrived communities, and these communities faced substantial challenges during the floods, often due to a lack of timely information and communication.

In other locations, such as Rochester, Swan Hill, Castlemaine and Echuca, smaller, often very newly arrived communities were also affected. Across the state, multicultural community leaders played a critical role in communicating safety information, supporting communities and informing authorities of issues faced on the ground.

While multicultural communities often have a high level of resilience, ability to adapt to change and bring a range of strengths to emergencies ², they are also more vulnerable than others to the impacts of emergencies and disasters.

This is due to a range of factors including unfamiliarity with Australia's physical and social environment, low English proficiency, low awareness of local hazards, low access to emergency and other services, and the impacts of previous traumatic experiences ³.

As well as these heightened vulnerabilities, Australian research suggests that a lack of planning for the needs of multicultural communities and minimal partnerships and engagement between local emergency services, multicultural organisations, and community leaders puts multicultural communities at even higher risk during emergencies ⁴.

All these issues came to the fore during the 2022 Victorian floods.

¹ [Six months on from one of Victoria's worst flood disasters on record \(deeca.vic.gov.au\)](https://deeca.vic.gov.au).

² Steenvoorden K, Arashiro Z, Vincent R (2021) Valuing strengths, building resilience: Improving emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities in Victoria, ECCV & VCOSS, Melbourne.

³ Chandonnet, A (2021) Emergency Resilience and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities, Challenges and Opportunities, Australian Red Cross, Brisbane.

⁴ Lakhina, S et al (2019) 'People from refugee backgrounds contribute to disaster-resilient Illawarra,' Australian Journal of Emergency Management, April, 34 (2): 19–20.

About this submission

This submission details the key issues faced by multicultural communities in relation to the October 2022 Victorian floods and makes recommendations for planning, preparedness and response to future flood events and other emergencies. This submission is based on interviews and focus groups with a total of 31 multicultural community members living in flood effected regions. This included:

- Interviews with 12 multicultural community leaders
- Interviews with four CEOs/senior staff from multicultural organisations
- Three focus groups with a total of 16 multicultural community members.

Interviewees lived in Boort, Brimbank, Castlemaine, Hoppers Crossing, Maroopna, Mildura, Pyramid Hill, Rochester, Shepparton and Swan Hill. Countries of birth included Afghanistan, Burma, India, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, South Sudan and Vanuatu.

Additionally, this submission is informed by the flood response work undertaken by Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, Neighbourhood Collective Australia and Regional Victorians of Colour between October 2022 and May 2023, which was predominantly funded by the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

This submission was prepared by Kate Steenvoorden Co-CEO of Neighbourhood Collective Australia, in partnership with Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) and Regional Victorians of Colour (RVOC).

About us

Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV) is a member-based peak body for migrant and refugee communities in Victoria. ECCV has more than 230 organisational members, including ethnic associations, multicultural service providers, and eight regional ethnic communities' councils across the state. Since 1974, ECCV has been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for multicultural communities, and for the building of a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community.

Neighbourhood Collective Australia is a not-for-profit organisation building stronger, resident-led communities where everyone belongs. Working in partnership with multicultural communities, community organisations and government, we provide community development, training, applied research and consultancy to better engage, connect and support communities. In addition to our Australia-wide work, we're the founders and managers of the Old Church on the Hill, a community hub in Bendigo that's been operating for 10 years.

Regional Victorians of Colour is a collective of people of colour living in regional Victoria. We support communities through a range of community development projects and partnerships that centre the experiences and aspirations of people of colour. Our aim is that people of colour belong, are valued and contribute to regional communities.

Key Issues

Key Issue 1: Newly arrived communities were not prepared for floods

While there are a range of factors that lead to multicultural communities being more vulnerable during emergencies, those who were newly arrived (under 10 years in Australia) had little knowledge of the existence of floods in Australia and were not prepared. As well as being newly arrived, other characteristics correlated with a lack of knowledge and preparation:

- Low levels of written and spoken English proficiency
- Those who had come to Australia as refugees
- Those on temporary protection and temporary work visas.

“When a disaster like this happens, we have to think about the most vulnerable communities. Those on temporary work visas and temporary protection visas often live on farms and orchards. We are dealing with very socially isolated people, who haven’t connected with services, have had no settlement process, have little English. How do they know it’s not safe to drive in flood water? How do they know it’s not safe to move back into a caravan with mould and rising damp?”

- Multicultural community leader

With the last Victorian floods 10 years ago, newly arrived migrants had no first-hand experience of floods in the Australian context and reported having little prior information about floods in Australia.

When the floods started, community members largely relied on their experiences in countries of origin. Some had no experiences of floods, while others had experienced floods as catastrophic disasters killing hundreds of people. This led community members either to have a false sense of optimism or to be very afraid.

“We didn’t know about the floods until we saw the water on our street. We didn’t know floods existed in Australia; and we don’t have floods back home. The kids were crying, we didn’t know what to do or who to call.”

- Multicultural community member

“In Burma if there’s a flood, you’re dead.”

- Multicultural community member

Key Issue 2: Newly arrived communities faced significant and unique hardships during the floods

Newly arrived communities reported a range of significant and unique hardships. These were predominantly reported by newly arrived refugee communities, temporary protection visa holders and temporary work visa holders, including a number of community members who are in Australia as part of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.

Hardships reported by newly arrived community members interviewed for this report:

- High levels of fear and anxiety caused by lack of information and pre-arrival experiences of floods and natural disasters.
- Community members being unaware of evacuation directives, being trapped in houses with rising floodwaters and not knowing to call 000.
- Community members driving through unsafe floodwaters, including one family whose car stopped in floodwaters with water reaching up to the windows who were rescued by a passer-by in a ute.
- Community members on temporary working visas being evacuated from caravan accommodation to an unused factory with no showers, cooking facilities or heating. They reported that they were moved there, rather than to an evacuation centre, so that their employer wouldn't have reduced staffing during the floods.
- Community members on temporary protection and temporary working visas being asked to ignore road closures and to continue working on farms and orchards, leading, at times, to being stranded in isolated areas when conditions changed suddenly.
- Community members returning to accommodation with mould, rising damp and no clean water, resulting in skin infections and respiratory illnesses. Some community members moved back due to lack of information, while some on temporary visas were directed back into unsafe accommodation by employers.

"We were huddled on the kitchen table with the water rising. It was getting dark; I was terrified, but I was trying not to show it for the children's sake. Thank God we were rescued in time."

- Multicultural community member

"We had to follow our bosses' instructions. We had no choice. We weren't sure if it was safe or no, but we had no-one to ask."

- Multicultural community member

Key Issue 3: Multicultural communities gained information about the floods in very different ways compared to the mainstream community

There were a range of communication methods used by emergency services and residents themselves to communicate safety messages and changing conditions, including the VicEmergency app, emergency services websites, local radio, local newspapers, websites and suburb/town Facebook groups. While international students and those with high levels of English reported using some of these platforms, newly arrived communities did not access any of these. Newly arrived communities almost entirely relied on multicultural community leaders for information.

“Community connectors and community leaders got the message out, they called people, sent voice messages and video messages, through existing networks; they contacted everyone.”

- Multicultural CEO

As with the COVID-19 response, community leaders played a critical role in disseminating information as well as being the contact point between community members and services.

Bilingual and cross-cultural skills, knowledge of local services, strong trust within their communities as well as intimate knowledge of who lived in their region and who would need extra support were all key enablers for community to provide timely and effective information.

Community leaders made hundreds of personal phone calls, as well as interpreting agency messaging into voice and video recordings. These were sent through existing in-language WhatsApp groups and posted on in-language Facebook pages.

Community leaders were also often the first point of contact when someone needed to evacuate or was in a dangerous situation.

“We were interpreting the emergency information, providing reassurance, updates, how high is the water, can we drive? And this could be at any time of the day or night, there was no option to clock off. Then there were phone calls when people realised they needed to evacuate but had left it too late or didn’t know how. Some had tried calling 000 but had not understood, others didn’t know to call 000.”

- Multicultural community leader

“When we got a phone call from a community member who had left it too late and couldn’t evacuate, of course we first called the SES. But sometimes they declined to evacuate because it was too late at night, they said they’d have to wait until morning. People were terrified, the elderly, families with small children. So at times we would get into a 4-wheel drive and evacuate people ourselves.”

- Multicultural community leader

While some community leaders were working for multicultural organisations and were able to play this vital role in their paid capacity, many took time off work to support the community, in some cases working 18-hour days.

Some multicultural organisations reported that while they released staff to support the flood efforts, some had existing emergency-related programs that covered staff wages during this time while others had no funding to cover this expense.

The exception to community-led information sharing was the information channels available to some temporary visa holders. For some, the only information they had access to came from their employer. Those in Australia as part of the PALM scheme reported that they are often moved by their labour hire company (the approved employer) at short notice to a new host employer (meat works, farm) and region.

This meant they had no contact with anyone outside the workplace and community leaders, services and local councils were unaware of this vulnerable cohort residing in a flood-affected area. These issues were compounded by low English levels and no formal settlement process. According to those interviewed, information shared by employers was often focused on keeping employees working through the floods.

Key Issue 4: The emergency response was not always culturally responsive

Multicultural communities reported both positive and negative experiences with the emergency response, with some actions having a negative effect on community.

Community leaders and multicultural organisations reported that even where relationships existed, it took a few days for their role to be recognised by authorities and for them to be included at Incident Control Centres, Evacuation Centres and to be invited to and included in relevant meetings. This extended to areas such as being given a semi-formal role, for example being provided with high-vis vests.

Where relationships didn’t exist, community leaders and organisations needed to undertake significant advocacy, and were often still not included.

“After a few days I was invited to sit at the Incident Control Centre, I was the multicultural representative. We are so grateful that we were invited to be part of that, it meant we were getting the information straight away and could relay it in-language to community, and also relay back the issues communities were facing.”

- Multicultural community leader

Similarly, some translated information (written) was made available, but not always in the right languages, some of the links didn't work, and authorities didn't appear to understand that for some communities, there are very low levels of literacy in mother tongue languages.

Additionally, information was changing so rapidly that written translations were often out of date and not effective.

“Emergency management need to know their community better they were providing us with information in Vietnamese, Tamil, those communities don't live in our region. We needed Dari, Hazaragi, Malay,”

- Multicultural CEO

Communities reported a lack of cross-cultural skills and the limited use of interpreters, volunteers and on-the-ground staff was also an issue in some regions.

Some community members reported that door-knockers were confused and didn't know what to do when they couldn't communicate with them in English.

In some regions, multicultural community leaders offered to door-knock alongside volunteers from the Australian Defense Force.

While this offered a more culturally appropriate response and was a less fear-inducing experience for community, it also put community leaders themselves at risk given they had no training in emergency response.

Key Issue 5: Some regions had a level of prior planning and engagement between emergency services and multicultural communities while others had none.

“SES here can tell you how many people called for assistance about fallen trees but not how many people called needing an interpreter.”

- Multicultural CEO

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of including targeted responses for multicultural communities was evident, and new partnerships, connections and forums were created.

These included a DFFH-funded project to set up Multicultural Emergency Management Working Groups across regional Victoria, the establishment of the state-wide Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP) and multicultural organisations being invited on to their local Municipal Emergency Management Committees for the first time. Where these platforms and relationships existed, multicultural communities were better informed and safer during the floods.

However, these mechanisms were not in place everywhere, and some authorities were entirely unaware that newly arrived residents with low English lived in their region. Neither the Victorian State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) or most Municipal Emergency Management Plans provide guidance on the needs of multicultural communities during emergencies or how those with low English will be communicated with.

As part of this submission seven Municipal Emergency Management Plans in flood-affected LGAs were reviewed (metropolitan and regional) and only one gave any direction around multicultural communities. This was Greater Shepparton, which lists relevant local community organisations to be contacted. Some plans did not even provide demographic data of cultural and language groups in their LGA.

“We can’t have a strategy that relies on ad hoc support. We need to reach people who don’t read or write in any language. Climate change is real, we don’t know what’s going to happen in 5, 6 years. We need a working group to develop a strategy so we reach everyone.”

- Multicultural community leader

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Develop emergency management plans that reflect the diverse needs of multicultural communities

The Victorian State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) as well as all Municipal Emergency Management Plans, require specific information and strategies to address the needs of multicultural communities. Demographic data, such as which communities are newly arrived, languages spoken, and levels of literacy in mother tongue languages, should be included in Municipal Plans. Targeted communication and engagement strategies are needed for emergency preparedness and response.

Recommendation 2

Strengthen multicultural community engagement at local and statewide level

Both at a state-wide and regional level more, and better planned engagement is needed. Existing mechanisms such as the [Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership](#) and regional Multicultural Emergency Management Working Groups should be strengthened. All Municipal Emergency Management Committees should include representatives from multicultural communities in their area, with a focus on newly arrived communities. Relationships with communities and representatives need to be established prior to emergencies.

Recommendation 3

Invest in training and support for multicultural community leaders and organisations

Strengthen, equip and enhance the skills and capacity of multicultural community leaders to respond to emergencies. Invest in partnerships between multicultural community leaders, multicultural organisations and emergency services to educate and equip communities to prepare. Ensure multicultural organisations are appropriately funded to be able to support emergency response.

Recommendation 4

Improve the cultural responsiveness of emergency agencies and services

All emergency services agency and departmental staff and volunteers should undertake cultural responsiveness training tailored to the emergency management sector. For on-the-ground staff this should include when and how to use interpreters. Recruitment, induction and retention processes should be reviewed and adapted to increase workforce cultural diversity. Data on workforce cultural diversity should be regularly collected and reviewed.