

27 February 2025

Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

Inquiry into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

About the Sydney Environment Institute

The Sydney Environment Institute (SEI) is a world-leading multidisciplinary environmental research institute at the University of Sydney. We bring together experts in climate disaster and adaptation research from a range of disciplines, promoting collaboration between natural and social scientists, and non-academic knowledge holders (some of whom are contributors on this submission). Our work integrates policy analysis and community-focused empirical research to examine the social, political, ecological, and economic dimensions of climate change, highlighting the importance of a holistic approach to climate policymaking.

Submission overview and recommendations

SEI welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for this inquiry. The proposed National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (or 'Climate Army') provides important recognition that the inevitable impacts of climate disasters demand urgency and unified, national-in-scale support. As we have seen time and again, when climate disasters strike, Australians step up for each other in remarkable ways, including scenes of people mobilising to support flood-inundated communities in Brisbane and the Northern Rivers, NSW. The proposed National Volunteer Incentive Scheme channels this commendable spirit. It also admirably emphasises incentivising participation including through material and financial compensation.

However, our research with communities affected by disasters, as well as our analysis of the impact of various disaster responses and policies, offers several insights that could strengthen the proposed policy. As our research indicates, what disaster-impacted communities truly need is greater material and financial support for those *locally* who are already doing the work, including vital coordination and care labour. A national volunteer system should focus on supporting the local, place-based knowledgeable volunteers, to enable them to embrace external actors who are 'in sync' with what local communities are doing. Our findings indicate that an over-riding influx of external actors to disaster impact zones, without material and financial support for local (embedded) organisers has and would magnify logistical, economic, and psychosocial challenges for affected communities.

The concerns and recommendations outlined in this submission are empirically informed by SEI's research across several projects that are conducted from a ground-up, community-based approach that foregrounds local knowledges while integrating it with systemic socio-ecological analysis ([see Appendix](#)). Furthermore, existing models domestically and abroad have informed the submission with the view of redirecting the support for a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme to where it is needed most: local knowledge holders and place-based community networks already engaged in disaster response, recovery, preparedness, and adaptation.

Priority Recommendations

1. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should be re-framed as an incentivised 'Australian Climate Volunteer Service,' rather than as a 'Climate Army'.
2. The governance and structure of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should follow domestic and international precedents in place-based models which:

- a. genuinely harness local knowledges in planning design
 - b. build community trust through co-governance arrangements
 - c. mitigate the economic, logistical, social, and mental health burdens created by influxes of external actors entering disaster-affected communities.
3. The incentives and compensation built into the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should prioritise strengthening and bolstering existing community actors, networks, and organisations who are already active before, during, and after climate disaster events.

1. Structure and Governance

(f) the structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)

1.1. Alternative Place-based Models

Disaster-affected communities want support, bolstered resourcing, and funding for existing place-based community resilience networks and organisations that are already active before, during, and long after climate disaster events. These community networks and organisations, often led by women, currently rely on thousands of volunteer hours to conduct their relief and preparedness work. Organisations must fundraise within disaster-affected communities to cover basic expenses such as insurance. Our research highlights how this community-led action is often not ‘spontaneous’ but anchored in pre-existing social networks and local knowledges. These foundations can be identified, strengthened, and integrated into disaster adaptation planning in line with the recognition in the research of the trends towards and effectiveness of local- and place-based models.

Disaster-affected communities are also critical of centralised and ‘fly-in/fly-out’ (FIFO) models when they operate in ways that are paternalistic, unattuned to community needs through dismissal of local knowledges or not understanding of local contexts and adversely impact local action. This includes through amplified burdens associated with duplication, lack of cooperation, and the external influx of volunteers which if not adequately planned and resourced and can cause logistical strain and stretched resources (food, water, accommodation).

Another key frustration among disaster-affected communities is the burdensome reporting and auditing requirements tied to securing much-needed funding alongside disaster funding arrangements that pit local organisations against one another. A potential strength of a proposed National Volunteer Incentive Scheme aimed at developing local, place-based capacity in highly disaster-prone areas would be to streamline and mitigate these requirements while also incentivising the growth of local community resilience networks and organisations to strengthen disaster preparation and resilience.

Recommendations:

- 1.1.1. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should incentivise participation in local community resilience networks and organisations including through financial compensation, funding, and upskilling programs.
- 1.1.2. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should be a nationally coordinated and funded model that prioritises the distribution of resources to and labour in already existing community resilience networks, groups, and organisations based on locally identified needs.
- 1.1.3. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should implement meaningful community consultation and co-governance processes and arrangements based on existing domestic and international place-based models. Examples include:
 - a. The draft [Disaster Adaptation Plan \(DAP\) Guidelines](#) developed by the New South Wales Reconstruction Authority alongside [feedback](#) provided to hone consultation and governance procedures.
 - b. The [American Climate Corps](#) which is centralised but features people working for local organisations when they have communicated the need for support.

- c. The [US Inflation Reduction Act \(IRA\)](#), which provided financial support to community organisations without overwhelming them with accounting and reporting requirements – putting those responsibilities on local universities or private sponsors.
- 1.1.4. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should initiate a place-based series of trials in disaster prone areas focused on building local capacity rather than a national-in-scale launch to troubleshoot and refine issues that may emerge.
- 1.1.5. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should provide bureaucratic and administrative assistance alongside streamlined reporting and auditing requirements for participating local community resilience groups, networks, and organisations.

1.2. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme Framing

The ‘Climate Army’ framing for the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme is not appropriate for what is needed. What is useful about the military metaphor is that it correctly identifies climate disasters as emergencies of the same gravity that has traditionally only been associated with war and acknowledges that responding to them is a national responsibility. We appreciate this recognition and believe this would be well received by disaster-affected communities. However, calling it an ‘Army’ suggests that the work required is best carried out by people external to the impacted communities. Our research found that the most effective responses to disasters are ones that build on and increase the local communities’ capacities, including strengthening social networks, and community services and resources. This means that the work needs to take place in and with communities before, during, and after disasters.

Moreover, the Army framing suggests that the work required is solely physical, involving corporeal labour or hard infrastructure. This ignores the mental, emotional, interpersonal, and social forms of work that are critical to communities preparing for, dealing with, and recovering from such disasters. Our research has found that these important tasks are often undertaken by women volunteers yet remain largely invisible and unsupported and the language of an army would reinforce this invisibility.

Rather than an additional militarised agency, what is needed is a nationally coordinated and resourced agency which recognises, supports, and funds the essential care work performed by community members across identity groups who are not already engaged in the formal combat agencies or likely to join in future due to cultural, physical, or social preferences or needs.

Finally, the Army framing suggests that the work required is temporary, short term, and mostly needed after a disaster happens. We found that the comparatively weak attention to preparedness as opposed to reaction is a key concern for disaster-affected communities, and that this undermines the effectiveness of disaster responses. As such, we recommend reframing this from a ‘National Climate Army’ to the ‘Australian Climate Volunteer Service’. This framing effectively conveys that the service is one where diverse Australians can be engaged to lead and support their own local communities through the multiple forms of work required for disaster preparation, response, recovery, and adaptation.

Recommendations:

- 1.2.1. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should adopt an alternative name and framing, such as the ‘Australian Climate Volunteer Service’, rather than ‘Climate Army’.
- 1.2.2. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should prioritise supporting essential, place-based care work being undertaken by local knowledge holders, groups, and organisations.

2. Upskilling, Training, and Qualifications

(b) exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture

(d) creating a nationally recognised qualification scheme that provides tangible benefits to volunteers and formally acknowledges their skills and contributions across sectors

We welcome the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme's explicit reference to the need to compensate, incentivise, upskill, and recognise those skills through training and qualification schemes. But these need to be oriented to ensure benefit and support to those already on-the-ground doing the work in line with the recommendations above. Moreover, these need to be balanced to avoid creating barriers to participation, as disaster-affected communities often report, such as when individuals want to volunteer for firefighting services but are hindered by required skills and qualifications.

Our research has identified areas in which formal training and qualifications would be helpful. Upskilling and training must include understanding what trauma is, because for many people, disasters create trauma. It must ensure trauma-informed principles are adhered to, especially for those engaged in providing external assistance to disaster-affected communities. The principles are safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (for more see Longman et al., in press with BMJ Global Health).

Our research also found that effective disaster response needs to be attentive to different groups within communities, particularly those already experiencing vulnerability, such as people with disabilities. As such, we would recommend that people being trained or supported by the Scheme receive specific capacity building to attend to humans who may have specific needs and vulnerabilities.

Finally, our research found that communities affected by disasters care deeply about how disasters impact other animals, including companion, large domesticated, and wild animals. It should not be assumed that care for animals can be solely undertaken by specialists such as veterinarians. Therefore, we recommend that general volunteers be trained and empowered to support preparatory, rescue, and recovery for companion, domestic, and wild animals.

Recommendations:

- 2.1. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should provide accidental counselling/mental health first aid training, and training on trauma-informed approaches.
- 2.2. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should provide training in understanding and engaging differential vulnerability across different community groups in disaster scenarios.
- 2.3. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should provide training to support preparatory, rescue, and recovery for companion, domestic, and wild animals in disaster scenarios.

3. Role of Educational Institutions

(c) integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations

Educational institutions can play a key role in local disaster preparedness and response. There is a need to expand the responsibilities of universities and educational institutions to the communities they sit in. For example, Southern Cross University in the Northern Rivers provided support during the 2022 flood responses with its campus functioning as an evacuation centre. However, attention should be paid not only to physical infrastructure or the obvious forms of labour that educational institutions can provide, but to the full set of skills, connections, and capacities that they can offer. Such collaborations are most effective when they are formed and operate at the local level.

A key service that universities could provide is administrative support to overburdened community resilience networks in disaster-affected areas. Universities could also consider offering dedicated disaster volunteering leave for staff, similar to existing leave entitlements such as jury duty or firefighting service.

It is important to note that any encouragement of student participation in volunteer organisation must be accompanied by specialised psychological support and debriefing opportunities. A study by [Bailie et al. \(2024\)](#) on the 2022 Northern Rivers flood events found that medical students showed high levels of prosocial behaviour, often self-organising to volunteer despite experiencing personal distress. However, volunteering exposed students to trauma, leading to feelings of 'survivors' guilt and distress. Furthermore, about one quarter of students reported ongoing distress six weeks after the flooding events. These findings highlight the critical need for universities to provide tailored mental health support for student volunteers.

Recommendations:

- 3.1. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme should engage with local educational institutions to leverage administrative support to assist overburdened community resilience networks in disaster-affected areas.
- 3.2. The Scheme should support educational institutions in providing dedicated disaster volunteering leave for staff.
- 3.3. The National Volunteer Incentive Scheme, in collaboration with education institutions, should provide psychological support for students during and after volunteering.

We trust that our submission and recommendations assist the Australian Government, and we remain available for further consultation where required.

Yours sincerely,

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Appendix

This submission draws on research conducted by SEI researchers in collaboration with community organisations and individuals through various projects including:

- The *[Self-Organising Systems to Minimise Future Disaster Risk](#)* project, conducted in partnership with the University Centre for Rural Health (UCRH) in Lismore, which investigated how disaster-affected communities across New South Wales self-organised before, during and after recent disaster events. This project was funded under the joint Australian Government – NSW Government National Partnership on Disaster Risk Reduction. Read the findings report [here](#) (April 2024).
- The *[Developing Systems and Capacities to Protect Animals in Catastrophic Fires](#)* project, conducted in partnership with the Shoalhaven City Council, investigated how community members in the Shoalhaven region acted before, during and after the 2019/2020 bushfires to care for domesticated, wild, and farmed animals. This project was funded by the Australian Commonwealth Government through the Bushfire Recovery Grant from the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources. Read the findings report [here](#) (November 2024).
- The *Community Risk Assessment* project, funded by Natural Hazards Research Australia, integrated top-down and bottom-up approaches in the development of community risk assessments. The research improved the knowledge base of community risk assessment approaches by considering social and physical dimensions of local community vulnerabilities to disasters. Read the findings report [here](#) (August 2024).
- The *Mapping Climate Disaster Response Networks* project, funded by SEI's Collaborative Grants Scheme and conducted in partnership with UCRH, investigated the evolution of the relationships between formal disaster management agencies and informal community groups prior to, during and after the catastrophic Northern Rivers floods and landslides of February/March 2022. The findings are under review to be released in 2025.
- A study by [Bailie et al. \(2024\)](#) explored the prosocial behaviour of medical students during and after weather-related disasters, focusing on their willingness to volunteer and the psychological impacts of such activities. The study found that while students often self-organised to volunteer despite personal distress, their efforts were largely independent of university objectives and sometimes led to ongoing psychological impacts, including distress and survivor's guilt. The study recommends that educational institutions provide structured support, including psychological debriefing, and ensure volunteering remains a voluntary and well-supported activity.
- The doctoral dissertation 'The role of collaborative local governance in transitioning to climate and disaster resilient development in the Pacific region' by Dr Rebecca McNaught from UCRH.