

Submission to Flood Enquiry

This disaster showed, as every previous one has, how dysfunctional our agencies, and governments at all level are, at responding to the chaos and complexity of a disaster.

I am not entirely sure why I'm making this submission to the flood enquiry, since – like the enquiries that followed other disasters – it is part of a system that is designed to fail. The enquiry's purpose is to give the illusion of listening to those impacted, to produce a long report that will come out after a significant delay, be read by very few people, and in no way to change the broken systems that failed.

So here is my story, and analysis of what happened in the floods in Byron Shire 2022.

My name is Mitra Ardron, I'm a serial social entrepreneur, co-founded the peak body for digital activism (apc.org); I've lived here since 1996t but travel internationally a lot as I often work in international development. I am an advisor to Resilient Byron and HHUG and several other local groups. Most recently prior to the flood, I was one of the volunteer admins of Flattening the Curve which was the key online source of fact-based information, during the pandemic a group with several thousand members in Byron Shire.

During the immediate aftermath of the flood, I helped with the Community Coordination HQ (at Mullum Civic and then the CWA) on communications and logistics and also coordinated the creation of the Repair Café – one of the larger disaster responses in the shire (averaging 30 volunteers all day for 3 weeks)..

I'm writing this as an individual, in part because many of the people from whom I got the stories have jobs that depend on their not critiquing the system that employs them, or are part of organizations dependent on that system for grants.

Individual failure or systemic ?

This submission is explicitly NOT about blaming individuals - from the community, from the agencies, or from government. Most of the people involved in this were:

- Untrained for the role and situation they were in (especially the volunteers, but also agency staff) - this is expected given the disaster in front of you is never the disaster you trained for.
- Acting within broken systems - one that discourages initiative even when it is working, and was, of course, failing badly as we'll document below.

- In many cases, working long long hours; pumped up on the adrenaline; not sleeping well
- Often dealing with personal loss - for example flooded homes or lost cars
- In some cases dealing with personal trauma from what they had experienced
- Importantly many were as frustrated at the systems they worked in as we were, but unable to speak out because of their jobs, and position in the hierarchy.
- I see these staff as much as victims of a broken system as the rest of us.

If we look at the high level, the system failed because, as with all disasters, the reality was nothing like the disasters that had been planned for, and the controls and safeguards built into the system by institutions to stop them failing in “peace” time, caused many of the failures in a disaster. The rigidity of these systems was the complete opposite of what was needed for a rapidly evolving, information poor, situation, and unfortunately the systems weed out anyone who has a disposition to challenge them. It is simply not good for your career to point out when a government system you are part of is broken.

Pre disaster – Community Resilience Network

The problems with this disaster started well before the floods, I was a member of Byron’s Community Resilience Network (CRN), a body set up by council with membership by agencies and community groups. During the Covid pandemic I was fairly critical of the CRN because in the midst of a disaster with somewhere around 30% of the shire actively sick with Covid, and half the businesses shut with staff shortages, the CRN continued to hold it’s planned disaster (ironically flood) preparation meetings rather than recognizing the disaster we were experiencing.

On Monday 28th there were two CRN meetings at which it’s flaws became apparent. The CRN is intended to be a top-down structure, communication flowing to and from the council staff who chair it, and from them to the LEMO (Local Emergency Management Officer), and from him to the LEMC (Local Emergency Management Committee) and from them to the lead agency (which during the pandemic was the ineffective NSW Local Health District and I think was supposed to be the SES for the floods).

This of course, is useless in an actual disaster, when people need to efficiently, and quickly communicate with each other. So during the meeting, Jean Renouf, and I rebelled and I setup a public facebook group for immediate requests and we used Resilient Byron’s facebook group to disseminate important information, we also setup a group for the coordinators of various disaster efforts, however the agency members didn’t join it because as one pointed out – they needed to get approval to join any such group in an official capacity.

Council CRN failure: We have a council operated Community Resilience Network but it is ineffective.

1. The council staff facilitating the CRN didn't appear to have the authority to change the system quickly in response to an obvious flaw and an impending disaster.
2. We need lateral communication not just top-down and information gathering.- There was simply no mechanism for the participating groups to communicate with each other, no email list, whatsapp or facebook group, not even a contact list (using the excuse of privacy).
3. The LEMO doesn't even bother attending the meetings, so everything is third hand.
4. By the second or third day, most of the groups doing the actual work had given up on the CRN and weren't even bothering to attend the meeting.
5. Key agency people (mostly) don't join the groups where real communication is happening – in this case the Facebook groups mentioned above.

Flood Rescue and the SES.

Monday night we had the big floods, and the “Byron Shire Urgent Flood Assistance” facebook group became where people with boats volunteered and those in need requested help with evacuations and safety checks.

SES Failure – The SES was unable to actually do the rescues or coordinate others to do so.

Specifically:

1. The SES's phone system was overloaded and people couldn't get through
2. The SES wouldn't take requests except from the people in need – and of course many of those people didn't have working phones, or couldn't get through.
3. The SES wouldn't check the Facebook group – someone had to write out requests from the group and walk them across the street to the SES HQ with the obvious communication failures that involved.
4. The SES is under-staffed in part due to a policy that is so heavy with bureaucracy and training requirements that it puts off most people from volunteering. I understand there are only 8 around Mullumbimby.
5. Most of those SES vollies couldn't get to the HQ because they were also flooded in. (I heard only 2 out of 8 trained vollies made it)
6. At least one of the SES vollies reported they weren't allowed to participate because they weren't “flood trained” - well neither were the volleys in their tinnies and kayaks !

7. I believe this latter was one of several people across different agencies that removed their uniforms and helped as a “civilian” because helping as part of the official agencies was impossible.
8. The SES has no capacity to coordinate non-SES performing roles they can’t get to (e.g. the SES could, but didn’t pick up the role Zali Springer assumed of matching boats and rescues)

Evacuation Centers – Department of Communities and Justice

There are two evacuation centers in the affected area, Ocean Shores Country Club, and Mullumbimby RSL,

DCJ Failure: an official evacuation center isn’t allowed to open without Department of Community & Justice (DCJ) staff onsite.

1. In the middle of a disaster, isn’t it obvious that physically getting DCJ staff to a centre might be impossible or hazardous, and getting evacuees to alternative centres even more hazardous.
2. There was an elected councillor (Sara Ndiaye) present at the RSL, shouldn’t the system have been flexible enough that they could take on the role of the absent DCJ staff.
3. The DCJ staff were unable to take the only open road to Mullum (Saddle Road) because their insurance didn’t cover them using unsealed roads. (what country do they think we live in? And why is the system so inflexible that DCJ staff couldn’t use their intelligence to use that road after locals had told them it was safe. In particular, if Saddle Road was too unsafe for one DCJ vehicle to use, how could it be safe enough to evacuate the hundreds of people to get to Ocean Shores which is where DCJ wanted them to go.
4. Luckily the manager of the Mullum RSL opened to evacuees anyway rather than leave people on the flooded streets.

Communications – Telstra & NBN

On Wednesday the Internet went down – luckily after most people had been rescued or checked on.

Telstra Failure I’m sure that the failings of Telstra to ensure connectivity will be addressed elsewhere in the inquiry, but as a former communications professional...

1. It would seem obvious that it is not a good idea to have both generators and remote power susceptible to the same issue (flooding).
2. It should also be obvious that having all the NBN traffic go through one or two choke points is a bad idea, clearly the system is not designed for resiliency.
3. Even several weeks after the disaster the lines were still so bad that it was impossible to call Telstra’s customer support since their voice activation

system couldn't recognize voices distorted by the poor quality lines, you had to call Telstra on an Optus phone to get through to anyone.

4. Call backs from Telstra's system never happened because only maybe 1 in 5 calls (to any Telstra phone) went through the first time.
5. Telstra's procedures didn't adapt to the disaster – customer support people (based where?) had no real idea, and kept running standardised scripts, insisting on providing documentation that in many cases was on lost paper, or flooded computers, or the person on the account was in a location with no service. it took me around 6 or 7 hours wasted on the phone just to get the ADSL password for a school that I had provided a replacement modem to!
6. The NBN turned up with a satellite truck, but didn't provide any support to the community groups, and said their rules didn't allow them to help with the effort to bring remote isolated communities hubs online, and this was the job of the various NBN satellite retailers (none of whom of course had any presence, nor interest in solving disaster problems).

Coordination – council

Thursday 3rd I was finally able to get through the flood and get my flood-affected car going and drive into Mullum to see how I could help. I had had no information for two days (internet and phone down), and I guess I shouldn't have been surprised the agencies we pay taxes to, were pretty much nowhere to be seen, nor did council have any significant presence, and that it was the community – with coordination by people from Resilient Byron and HHUG that were leading the effort. Multiple organizations, existing or ad-hoc were figuring out how to cooperate together, how to get stuff done, how to create order out of chaos, whether it was the Neighbourhood Center with trauma counseling, or the collection and distribution of donations; or the helicopter rescue pilots; or a massive volunteer cleanup effort, of the people who cooked meals to keep volleys fed.

Ordinary people were willing to get out and do stuff 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, and they did this with essentially no funds, while people from agencies and government departments had resources (Not enough, but lots more than community groups) but were ineffective because they always looking over their shoulders to check it was ok by insurers, lawyers, or their supervisors, or checking the clock to see if their shift was over.

Agency & council coordination failure: Where were the agencies, council (staff and elected), and if they couldn't do the job, why weren't they supporting the people who were ?

1. It's a top-down system, but where was the mayor – we were told he was flooded in, with phone and internet down, so why wasn't it a priority to airlift him to somewhere he could coordinate from, or at least get him a satellite phone (and why didn't he already have one)?

2. There were two councillors actively working on the ground (Mark Swivel and Sarah Ndiaye, I heard Sama Balson was also active elsewhere) but the council didn't meet to make decisions so we were devoid of leadership from that direction.
3. Justine Elliot (or federal member) only turned up for a photo-opportunity– why wasn't she or one of her staff on-site full-time making sure that needs got handled at the federal level. (I should say Tamara Smith (state representative) was great).
4. When council staff were present, they often couldn't take initiative without checking with lawyers, insurance or managers, none of whom were reachable. There needs to be a blanket approval for staff to take initiative in an emergency, to make their own judgment calls, knowing their supervisors will back them up.
5. With volunteer crews working 7 day 8am-8pm, council staff who are willing need to be able to automatically extend their hours to match.
6. When Facebook groups are more useful, more accurate, and more up to date than council's emergency dashboard you know something is wrong. Council's emergency dashboard was essentially useless, it was essentially not a resource any of us were referring people to since it had none of the time-dependent info, for example there was no way to tell whether the evacuation centres were open when there were incorrect rumours of the Mullum RSL itself being evacuated. Council needs to be able to activate a 24*7 info team with the ability to do live updates and be flexible about pushing information out to the public from trusted sources.

I should say of course, that none of this was surprising – it was the same few people from our elected representatives who provided leadership during the pandemic, with council essentially AWOL.

Repair Café and massive waste

Seeing the massive piles of stuff on the roadsides, one of the tasks I personally took on was to get the Repair Café up and running at Shedding Community Workshop. Shedding had been flooded, so I organized volunteers and we opened the next morning to fix appliances, power tools, furniture etc. For three weeks with a great core team, we averaged 30 volunteers each day – crews picking stuff off roadsides; cleaning it; electrical and functional testing; and a online free marketplace. Over three weeks we diverted over 1000 items from being tipped, and got them back into their original owners hands, or re-gifted to the flood affected, that is at least \$200,000 of savings. Our repairs had around a 50% success rate with washing machines and fridges; and better with power tools or furniture.

Failure to avoid waste

1. We could have saved far more if we weren't racing against the garbage trucks picking stuff up for the tip.
2. By the third week council were sending us appliances, but for two weeks we received no messaging support to let people know that their appliances etc did not need to go to the tip.
3. One reason insurance rates are going to be unaffordable in previously flooded areas is the huge amount of money that is wasted in unnecessarily replacing fixable stuff.
4. This whole effort was done with zero funding, at the start we were scrounging for a \$100 to put petrol in a delivery crew's tank; or to buy drill bits; sandpaper; glue; cleaning fluids etc. We weren't unique in that, The council should have some way to support with small immediate grants work that has such huge leverage.
5. We were lucky – we heard of people in Lismore being arrested for salvaging stuff that had been put on the street for the garbage truck.
6. Our electricians were seriously worried that their own insurance wouldn't cover them for the volunteer work, as with other parts of the recovery effort there needs to be a "Good Samaritan" legislation that protects people who are volunteering to help, and provides insurance.

Australian Defence Force.

One day, driving back from the Repair Café, I watched in amazement as about 15 ADF personnel waited in line to put stuff into a garbage truck while their supervisor sat watching them. Either no-one had the intelligence to realize they were wasting their time (only 2 people at a time could get to the truck), or any initiative must have been knocked out of them. When I shared this story of wasted resources back at the HQ, and it's contrast to the way the volunteers were working, a lot of other stories came out. We joked that we were lucky they weren't trying to defend against an invasion!

ADF Failures:

1. Huge and very visible waste of resources, in contrast to the way volunteers were utilizing scarce resources.
2. Stories emerged of troops who would get to a mildly flooded causeway and say they couldn't cross it without an engineer (not present) checking it. The volunteer guide of course removed boots and waded across to pronounce it safe.
3. Similarly there were stories of it being too dangerous for Army personel to hike up valleys and around landslips leaving civilian volunteers to actually perform the rescues.
4. After a few days of volunteer helicopter pilots flying evac and supply missions the ADF promised to step in with bigger choppers, so the volunteer helicopters were grounded to leave the sky clear for them, however the ADF never showed up, leaving people who desperately needed medicine and fuel

unserved, there was a basic lack of ability in some (but not all) cases to coordinate with the community-led effort.

5. On the topic of helicopters – I am told the civilian volunteer pilots had no flexibility to extend their daily hours-in-the-sky during an emergency,
6. We also heard, from one of the pilots, that the Westpac rescue helicopter was MIA waiting for orders from up the chain.

Community HQ pushed out of Civic Center

As you've seen from above, most of the effective disaster activity was being taken by the community, and coordinated by the Community HQ. The Community HQ ran out of the lobby of the Mullum Civic Hall, many people with varied but relevant professional back grounds, dropped everything to volunteer and coordinate an activity described by local Fire & Rescue NSW Captain, as reported by a Guardian journalist, as the most effective community organising they had ever seen and as organised as military operations. The team was in various degrees of communication and coordination with community members throughout town, surrounding isolated communities and the wider Northern Rivers region. Other parts of the civic hall were used for donations; supplies etc, while the adjacent Neighbourhood center provided mental health support. From the second week after the move, the community-led efforts were for around a month coming under the banner of Resilient Byron, before being hosted by HHUG.

About that move A few days into the process, with emergency evacuations still happening – council and the government decided they needed the building, so – without providing a viable alternative, the HQ was moved three times – to a back-room (with no ventilation, remember this is still the middle of the epidemic) then to another slightly better back-room and then to the CWA building across the yard. No attempt was made to make sure this relocation was smooth and didn't disrupt essential rescue missions, there was no help to re-organize the rest of the activities, for example the previously effective flow between hundreds of volunteers outside at white-boards, through to the core staff inside who could handle more complex issues was unnecessarily disrupted. People literally turned up the next day and had to play hunt-the-office. This was outrageous and shows just how much official agencies disdain being shown-up by more effective community groups. It says a lot about the comparative resilience and flexibility of the crew that they were back in operations far quicker than the government could setup it's own use of the building.

Local Council and Resilience NSW never advertised the move/s of the community coordinators and despite assuring that they would put in public communications (physical signage, online posts) and despite community coordinators repeatedly asking Council and Resilience NSW for this public communication to be honoured, it was never forthcoming.

While the government brought in a NBN truck to ensure it had connectivity, they didn't bother to extend that to the Community HQ who had to scrounge Starlink dishes from members of the public to hook up temporary access.

Miscellaneous Stories

Over those first few days many stories emerged, that showed the failure of a the "disaster" system. A couple of them follow, but there are many more that will never be told, because the people who know them would risk their jobs if they went public with the dysfunctionality of their agency or department.

Several stories, for example, emerged of people who had to remove their uniforms, and participate as civilians because the rules of their employer precluded actually being functional in a disaster.

One that particularly touched me at the beginning of the disaster was a uniformed Marine Rescue Service person who told me how they weren't allowed to bring their boats up-river from Brunswick to Mullum – just a few kilometers – because their insurance didn't cover them above high-water line (see comment elsewhere about the need for overarching disaster insurance). The frustration he had, at a management that wouldn't let them do what they were trained for made me realize the agency people I was angry with for their inaction were probably as much victims of the failed system as we were.

Summary

In summary, this disaster showed, as others have in the past, that the systems designed for peace time fail in a disaster, that the checks and balances; approval processes; insurance; OHS; lawyers and so on make the "system" completely non-functional in dealing with a disaster.

I have zero hope the system is fixable, except in some minor aspects, so I believe we need some comprehensive support that ensures support for communities that are doing the work that we pay the agencies to, in theory, perform. This could be funding, logistics, communications and all the other resources that government and ADF etc have, but are unable to utilize because of their dysfunctional systems.

But I'm dreaming, we've had other enquiries, many of these issues were raised with agencies at the Bushfire convergence last May, but despite many good people in the agencies and council, they are just too rigid to do more than produce a report, with recommendations that will be ignored, if indeed they are even read. People will nod heads, and fail again in the same way next time, and like many before me we'll be writing similar failure stories about Bush Fires 2023 or Floods 2024.