

# Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and disaster response

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**Lisa Ewenson** 

HowWeSurvive, Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture, UNSW, Australia

**Christine Corby**

Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, Australia

**Vanessa Hickey and Wendy Spencer**

Dharriwaa Elders Group, Australia

**Peta MacGillivray**  and **Ruth McCausland** 

Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership, Division of Societal Impact, Equity & Engagement, UNSW, Australia

## Abstract

Relevant international frameworks, government policy and academic discourse about disaster response and recovery claim that it should be community-centred. Walgett, New South Wales, has recently endured a number of disasters including floods, COVID-19, and water and food security concerns. The experience of recent disasters in Walgett revealed that the Walgett Aboriginal community is disproportionately negatively impacted at times of such crises. Changes to disaster governance arrangements are required and adequate resources are needed for the Aboriginal community within the town and surrounding areas to support appropriate disaster response and recovery, and to strengthen long-term community wellbeing overall.

## Keywords

Legislation, environment, Indigenous legal issues, human rights, disasters

Walgett is a township in the far north of New South Wales (NSW) at the confluence of the Namoi and Barwon rivers in the northern Murray-Darling Basin. Walgett, and the nearby Aboriginal communities of Gingie and Namoi, has a population of approximately 2500 people; around half are Aboriginal.<sup>1</sup> Walgett is set within a landscape of stark beauty and its Aboriginal community has significant strengths founded on cultural beliefs,

connections to Country, family and community loyalty, with effective and longstanding Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).<sup>2</sup> Walgett, however, has been reported to be one of the most disadvantaged areas in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Walgett is a Stolen Generations community, still enduring the intergenerational consequences of traumatic forced child removal policies.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Loretta Weatherall et al, 'Measuring Food and Water Security in an Aboriginal Community in Regional Australia' (2025) 33(1) *The Australian Journal of Rural Health*.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Tanton et al, *Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and Multilayered Disadvantage in Australia* (Jesuit Social Services, 2021); Tony Vinson et al, *Dropping Off the Edge 2015: Persistent Communal Disadvantage in Australia* (Jesuit Social Services, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG), Submission No 29 to the General Purpose Standing Committee No 3, Parliament of NSW, *Inquiry into Reparations for the Stolen Generations in New South Wales* (19 October 2015); Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (April 1997).

## Corresponding author:

Dr Lisa Ewenson, Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture, UNSW Sydney, Kensington, NSW 2052, Australia.

Email: [lisa.ewenson@unsw.edu.au](mailto:lisa.ewenson@unsw.edu.au)

Aboriginal people in Walgett experience particularly high rates of poverty, overcrowded and inadequate housing, poor physical and mental health, high rates of disability, high costs of living, low employment participation, poor educational outcomes, and high rates of contact with the criminal justice system.<sup>5</sup> Walgett also has a long history of Aboriginal community members engaged in political activism, advocacy and research, and local ACCOs, including the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service (WAMS), and the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG), play a lead role in initiatives to create positive change for long-term community wellbeing amid significant systemic challenges.<sup>6</sup> WAMS and DEG have worked over many years to progress community members' concerns about the quality of the drinking water in Walgett due to impacts from climate change and systemic water mismanagement, leading to high sodium impacts which have profound health implications.

Walgett has recently endured a number of disasters including floods, COVID-19, and both acute, and long-term, water and food security concerns.<sup>7</sup> Bushfires, floods, cyclones, pandemics and droughts are indisputably increasing in frequency and ferocity in this Anthropocene era.<sup>8</sup> Disasters can be defined as situations where the human community is impacted in a way that exceeds its capacity to adequately recover without outside assistance.<sup>9</sup> The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) defines a disaster as:

A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts.<sup>10</sup>

In any environment, the multiple elements of disaster response and recovery are complex.

The experiences of recent disasters in Walgett revealed that the Walgett Aboriginal community is disproportionately negatively impacted at times of such crisis. Changes to disaster governance arrangements

are required and adequate resources are needed for the Aboriginal community within the town and surrounding areas to support appropriate disaster response and recovery, and to strengthen long-term community wellbeing overall. DEG and WAMS are seeking to progress this through a research project with colleagues at the University of New South Wales (UNSW); this Brief is co-authored by community and university investigators of that project.

First, this Brief will provide a concise overview of the legislative arrangements relevant to Walgett in times of disaster. Secondly, it will discuss recent DEG and WAMS submissions to public inquiries and other literature important to disaster response and recovery in Walgett. Broad and specific recommendations aiming to improve disaster governance arrangements for the Walgett Aboriginal community are then presented.

## Frameworks relevant to disaster response and recovery in Walgett

Relevant international frameworks, government policy and academic discourse claim that disaster response and recovery should be community-centred.<sup>11</sup> This extensive discourse recognises that each community is unique and that all have distinct local knowledges, experiences and networks which are best placed for shaping the most appropriate response and recovery actions in times of crisis.<sup>12</sup>

In NSW, the *State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989* (NSW) (SERM Act) governs the formal relationship in times of disaster between state and local governments, local emergency services and community organisations. The SERM Act establishes State, Regional and Local Emergency Management Committees, whereby the Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) is

responsible for the preparation and review of plans in relation to the prevention of, preparation for, response to and recovery from emergencies in the local government area for which it is constituted.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Weatherall et al (n 1).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Weatherall et al (n 1); Samantha Rich, *Housing in Walgett: Yuwaya Ngarrali Briefing Paper* (UNSW, 2023); Dharriwaa Elders Group and Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service, Submission No 27 to the Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning, Parliament of NSW, *Inquiry into Food Production and Supply in NSW* (28 February 2022) (DEG & WAMS Submission).

<sup>8</sup>Douglas Paton and Petra Buergetl, 'Risk, Transformation and Adaptation: Ideas for Reframing Approaches to Disaster Risk Reduction' (2019) 16 *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2594; Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Report, 28 October 2020); Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (2023).

<sup>9</sup>Marie Aronsson-Storrier and Rasmus Dahlberg, *Defining Disaster: Disciplines and Domains* (Edward Elgar, 2022).

<sup>10</sup>United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), *Disaster Risk Reduction Terminology* (online) <https://www.undrr.org/terminology/disaster>.

<sup>11</sup>UNDRR (n 10); National Emergency Management Agency, *Australian Disaster Recovery Framework* (2022); NSW Reconstruction Authority, *State Disaster Mitigation Plan 2024–2026* (2024); NSW Reconstruction Authority, *NSW Recovery Plan: Supporting Plan of the NSW State Emergency Management Plan, updated December 2023* (February 2024).

<sup>12</sup>Margot Rawsthorne, Amanda Howard and Pam Joseph, 'Normalising Community-led, Empowered, Disaster Planning: Reshaping Norms of Power and Knowledge' (2022) 12(3) *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 506; Louise Morley and Stuart Robertson, 'From the Fire into the Frying Pan: Reflections on Enhancing Resilience and Adaptive Capacity in Bush Fire Recovery' (2023) 6(2) *Social Work & Policy Studies: Social Justice, Practice and Theory*; Lisa Ewenson, 'Learning From Disaster Inquiries and Other Reporting: How Top Down Responses Erode Community Recovery' (2024) 49(4) *Alternative Law Journal* 306.

<sup>13</sup>SERM Act s 29(1).

A Local Emergency Operations Controller (LEOCON) must be assisted by the LEMC,<sup>14</sup> and the LEOCON must be a police officer stationed within the local area, or region,<sup>15</sup> and someone who has adequate emergency management experience in the view of the Regional Emergency Operations Controller.<sup>16</sup> The LEOCON has overall control in emergencies,<sup>17</sup> unless particular agencies have delegated responsibility.<sup>18</sup> If necessary, the LEOCON also establishes and controls any local emergency operations centres.<sup>19</sup> The SERM Act further dictates that: 'A council is to provide executive support facilities for the Local Emergency Management Committee and the Local Emergency Operations Controller in its area.'<sup>20</sup>

Section 28 of the SERM Act outlines the composition of the LEMC. This includes the General Manager of the local council, who is designated as the Chairperson of the LEMC,<sup>21</sup> a senior representative of each emergency service organisation in the local government area (LGA),<sup>22</sup> a representative of each organisation that provides services in the LGA, which is to be further determined by the local council,<sup>23</sup> the LEOCON,<sup>24</sup> and finally, representatives from other organisations are allowed to be represented on the committee, if this is determined to be appropriate by the Minister for Emergency Services.<sup>25</sup> Following Schedule 2 of the SERM Act, further subsidiary committees may be established under the LEMC to assist with their functions,<sup>26</sup> and members of these subsidiary committees do not need to be members of relevant organisations as prescribed by s 28 of the SERM Act.<sup>27</sup>

Section 12 of the SERM Act authorises the *NSW Emergency Management Plan* (EMPLAN). The EMPLAN aims to guide co-ordinated services in all disaster and emergency response across the state, yet, as last updated in 2023, it does not mandate the involvement of ACCOs in LEMCs.<sup>28</sup> Paragraph 423(h) of the EMPLAN (2023) stipulates that LEMCs need to consider Aboriginal outcomes,<sup>29</sup> and paragraph 423(k) notes that LEMCs need to have ongoing collaboration with Local Aboriginal Land Councils 'to prepare and review plans that sit outside local government

regulation and service provision'.<sup>30</sup> The EMPLAN does, however, encourage agencies engaging in disaster work to 'obtain guidance for engaging with Aboriginal communities, Local Aboriginal Land Councils and Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations from Aboriginal Affairs NSW'.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, LEMCs, under the overarching control of the LEOCON,<sup>32</sup> are thus effectively police-led, with support for their management provided by the local council. Representation on the LEMCs of community organisations, which provide services within the area, is at the discretion of the council, and other organisations (such as ACCOs) may be represented on the LEMC, if this is deemed appropriate by the Minister for Emergency Services.

## Experiences of disaster response and recovery in Walgett and beyond

In February 2022, the DEG and WAMS provided a joint submission to the NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning for the *Inquiry into Food Production and Supply in NSW*.<sup>33</sup> After the closure of Walgett's main supermarket due to fire in June 2019, and because of the ongoing drinking water crisis,<sup>34</sup> the arrival of COVID-19 further worsened the already profound food and water security issues the community was experiencing. This joint submission highlighted that, during this time of crisis, the DEG and WAMS were only invited to be part of the LEMC because of sustained efforts by supporters based within the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet directly lobbying the NSW Minister for Emergency Services to ensure that this occurred under the described provisions of the SERM Act.<sup>35</sup> The joint submission notes that

[t]his is concerning for other communities which might not have the capacity and confidence that strong local Aboriginal community controlled organisations ... in Walgett have built over more than 30 years.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Ibid s 29(1A)(f).

<sup>15</sup>Ibid s 30(2)(a).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid s 30(2)(b).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid s 31(1).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid s 31(1A). See also Annexure 4, NSW government, *State Emergency Management Plan* (EMPLAN) (December 2023) [https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2024-02/State\\_Emergency\\_Management\\_Plan\\_2023.pdf](https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2024-02/State_Emergency_Management_Plan_2023.pdf) for the listed combat agencies responsible to control different types of emergency/disaster. These relevant combat agencies may also relinquish their control of an emergency to the LEOCON: SERM Act s 31(1B).

<sup>19</sup>SERM Act s 31(4).

<sup>20</sup>Ibid s 32(1).

<sup>21</sup>Ibid s 28(2)(a).

<sup>22</sup>Ibid s 28(2)(b).

<sup>23</sup>Ibid s 28(2)(c)(i) and s 28(2)(c)(ii).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid s 28(2)(d).

<sup>25</sup>Ibid s 28(2)(e).

<sup>26</sup>Ibid sch 2 s 10(1).

<sup>27</sup>Ibid sch 2 s 10(2).

<sup>28</sup>NSW government, EMPLAN (n 18).

<sup>29</sup>Ibid para 423(h).

<sup>30</sup>Ibid para 423(k).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid Annexure 12, 'Detailed roles and responsibilities for Aboriginal Affairs NSW' 115.

<sup>32</sup>SERM Act s 31(1).

<sup>33</sup>DEG and WAMS submission (n 7).

<sup>34</sup>Ashleigh Chanel Hart et al, 'Indigenous Community-Led Programs to Address Food and Water Security: Protocol for a Systematic Review' (2021) 18 *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 6366.

<sup>35</sup>DEG & WAMS Submission (n 7) 7–8.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid 8.

The DEG and WAMS submission also noted that the police-led response of the LEMC created profound anxiety for Aboriginal families, as the police-led welfare checks during these crises created a fear of unnecessary child protection notifications and removals due to the legacy of the Stolen Generations and enduring problematic child protection practices.<sup>37</sup> Biased differential policing and over-policing leading to disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people being incarcerated has been thoroughly documented, creating further reason for Aboriginal people to be fearful of police-led mechanisms.<sup>38</sup>

The Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW (NSW AH&MRC) recently provided a detailed submission<sup>39</sup> to the *NSW Flood Inquiry*,<sup>40</sup> presenting a comprehensive critique of NSW government support for Aboriginal people across NSW during the 2022 flooding disasters.<sup>41</sup> The NSW AH&MRC notes, as concerning disaster governance arrangements, that:

the State Emergency Management Committee membership is comprised of senior government officials, however, provisions are made for representatives of non-government agencies and such other persons as nominated by the Minister from time to time. It is critical that when these provisions are used, Aboriginal people are represented. This should be through peak bodies such as CAPO [Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations] and not through government agencies. The greatest opportunity, however, is within LEMCs. The 2019 Bushfire Inquiry recommended that to ensure that Aboriginal communities can access appropriate support during emergencies, Resilience NSW [now NSW Reconstruction Authority] work with Local Emergency Management Committees and Aboriginal Affairs to facilitate the inclusion of local Aboriginal communities in emergency planning and preparation. As previously noted, in many areas, LEMC membership is restricted to government agency representatives, with Aboriginal community organisations continuing to be excluded from

critical conversations around preparedness, response and recovery planning.<sup>42</sup>

Aligning with this ACCO commentary, Aboriginal scholar, Bhiemie Williamson, a Euahlayi man from north-west NSW, described how after the 2019–20 bushfires across south-east Australia, Aboriginal people experienced racism in evacuation centres, and from other disaster response personnel, so they became reluctant to access mainstream services while at the same time experiencing extreme distress regarding the extensive damage to Country.<sup>43</sup> Williamson argues that ‘in times of socio-natural disaster, mainstream agencies and organisations present the most significant hazard that Aboriginal people are likely to encounter.’<sup>44</sup> While this finding is deeply troubling, it unfortunately accords with the deep racism that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia face in other domains, such as within the criminal justice system,<sup>45</sup> health system,<sup>46</sup> and education system.<sup>47</sup> Default exclusion of ACCOs from leadership in key disaster governance arrangements leaves a gap where such reported racism can flourish unchallenged. It is relevant to note that the exclusion of community organisations from LEMCs within NSW has also been criticised in other contexts, including during times of bushfire in the Blue Mountains in 2013.<sup>48</sup>

### What change is required?

The commentary from both ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars reveals that change is urgently required in disaster governance arrangements within NSW. In February 2024, the NSW government released a new (and the first) [State Disaster Mitigation Plan 2024–2026 \(SDMP\)](#).<sup>49</sup> The SDMP has 37 priority actions listed, with priority action 30 of particular relevance:

Improve Local Emergency Management Committee (LEMC) capacity and capability to support its increased role in disaster

<sup>37</sup>Ibid; see also Simon Graham et al, ‘A Culturally Responsive Trauma-Informed Public Health Emergency Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities in Australia, Developed during COVID-19’ (2022) 19 *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15626; Megan Davis, *Family is Culture: Independent Review of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care in NSW* (Final Report, 2019).

<sup>38</sup>Amanda Porter, ‘Reimagining Policing’ (2016) 25(3) *Human Rights Defender* 26–28; Chris Cunneen and Amanda Porter, ‘Indigenous Peoples and Criminal Justice in Australia’ in Antje Deckert and Rick Sarre, *The Palgrave Handbook of Australian and New Zealand Criminology, Crime and Justice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 667–82.

<sup>39</sup>NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AH&MRC), Submission to the Legislative Council Select Committee, Parliament of NSW, *Inquiry into the Response to Major Flooding across New South Wales in 2022* (2022).

<sup>40</sup>Michael Fuller and Mary O’Kane, *2022 Flood Inquiry* (Volume Two: Full Report, 29 July 2022) (NSW Flood Inquiry).

<sup>41</sup>AH&MRC Submission (n 39).

<sup>42</sup>Ibid 5.

<sup>43</sup>Bhiemie Williamson, *Aboriginal Community Governance on the Frontlines and Faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires*, ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (2022).

<sup>44</sup>Ibid 17.

<sup>45</sup>Commonwealth of Australia, *Final Report of the Royal Commission and Board of Inquiry into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory* (2017); Sacha Kendall et al, ‘Incarcerated Aboriginal Women’s Experiences of Accessing Healthcare and the Limitations of the “Equal Treatment” Principle’ (2020) 19 *International Journal for Equity in Health* 48.

<sup>46</sup>Kathomi Gatwiri, Darlene Rotumah and Elizabeth Rix, ‘BlackLivesMatter in Healthcare: Racism and Implications for Health Inequity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia’ (2021) 18(9) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 4399.

<sup>47</sup>Nikki Moodie, Jacinta Maxwell and Sophie Rudolph, ‘The Impact of Racism on the Schooling Experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students: A systematic review’ (2019) 46 *Australian Educational Researcher* 273.

<sup>48</sup>Valerie Ingham et al, ‘Issues of Disaster Justice Confronting Local Community Leaders in Disaster Recovery’ in Anna Lukaszewicz and Claudia Baldwin (eds), *Natural Hazards and Disaster Justice: Challenges for Australia and its Neighbours* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) 221–38.

<sup>49</sup>NSW Reconstruction Authority, *State Disaster Mitigation Plan 2024–2026* (Web Page) [https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2024-02/State\\_Disaster\\_Mitigation\\_Plan\\_Full\\_Version\\_0.pdf](https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2024-02/State_Disaster_Mitigation_Plan_Full_Version_0.pdf).

mitigation. Explore options to enhance LEMC governance and operations including increased community and Aboriginal representation.<sup>50</sup>

The NSW Premier's Department is the lead agency in implementing this priority action, as supported by the NSW Reconstruction Authority.<sup>51</sup> The NSW government is currently in the process of establishing a collaborative disaster governance Aboriginal working group.<sup>52</sup> In September 2024, the DEG wrote to both the NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and the NSW Minister for Emergency Services requesting

that the Premier's Department and the NSW Reconstruction Authority ask the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations how to stand up this Aboriginal Working Group. We request that you ensure that local Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations on the ground who are already engaged and knowledgeable re disaster responses and preparedness for their communities, are resourced to make useful inputs into the Aboriginal Working Group.<sup>53</sup>

The SDMP notes that this endeavour of improving collaborative governance arrangements for Aboriginal communities stems from recommendations arising from the 2022 *NSW Flood Inquiry*,<sup>54</sup> *Parliamentary Flood Inquiry*,<sup>55</sup> and the *Bushfire Inquiry*.<sup>56</sup> As these inquiries found, Aboriginal communities themselves are best placed to inform and direct disaster response and recovery processes in genuine collaboration with other government agencies and community organisations.

Drawing on the experience and expertise of Walgett ACCOs, we recommend that the SERM Act be amended to ensure the mandated inclusion of ACCOs in LEMCs in any disaster response or recovery context, but with the option for the ACCO to opt out, if they so choose. Adequate resources must be available to the ACCOs to both ensure effective participation in this disaster governance arrangement, and to tangibly support their communities. We provisionally propose an additional subsection within s 28(2) of the SERM Act to mandate the inclusion of relevant ACCO(s) for representation on the LEMC.

In the context of disaster, governance arrangements which become primarily or effectively police-led are not

appropriate for Aboriginal communities where the impacts of settler colonisation, in many forms, remain profound. Power and resources in the context of disasters must be shared with ACCOs to enable positive relationality, through growing collaborative and respectful relationships, between all people and agencies involved in disaster management – an arrangement which will undoubtedly have beneficial outcomes for the community across other domains of life into the long-term.

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### ORCID iDs

Lisa Ewenson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7242-9864>

Peta MacGillivray  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8341-5903>

Ruth McCausland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7323-0358>

**Lisa Ewenson** is a Research Associate in HowWe-Survive, Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture, and an Associate in the Australian Human Rights Institute, at UNSW Sydney.

**Christine Corby** is the CEO of the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service.

**Vanessa Hickey** is the Community Response Lead at Dharriwaa Elders Group, and a member of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Walgett team.

**Wendy Spencer** is the General Manager and Water and Country Co-Lead of Dharriwaa Elders Group, and a member of the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Walgett team.

**Peta MacGillivray** is the Yuwaya Ngarra-li Senior Research Fellow at UNSW Sydney.

**Ruth McCausland** is an Associate Professor and Director of Yuwaya Ngarra-li at UNSW Sydney.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid 16.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid 157.

<sup>53</sup>Letter from DEG to NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and to NSW Minister for Emergency Services, 17 September 2024.

<sup>54</sup>NSW Flood Inquiry (n 40).

<sup>55</sup>Legislative Council Select Committee, Parliament of New South Wales, *Response to Major Flooding across New South Wales in 2022* (Report No 1, August 2022).

<sup>56</sup>Dave Owens and Mary O'Kane, *NSW Bushfire Inquiry* (Final Report, 31 July 2020).