

Submission to DFAT Humanitarian Strategy Consultation

December 2023



Introduction

Caritas Australia and Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations (CAN DO) welcome the opportunity to participate in the consultation on DFAT's new Humanitarian Strategy. This submission was led by Caritas Australia and it presents comments and recommendations from Caritas Australia as well as from other CAN DO agencies.

Caritas Australia is the international development and humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church, committed to tackling poverty in Australia and overseas since 1964. We support local organisations and communities across the Pacific, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Australia to be architects of their own development. We are a member of Caritas Internationalis, the world's second largest humanitarian network. We are a member and lead agency of the CAN DO consortium.

CAN DO is a consortium of nine Australian Church-based humanitarian and development agencies. CAN DO was formed in 2016 to strengthen the members' global humanitarian, disaster management and resilience building work, and operates through its extensive network of global churches and NGO partners. CAN DO is a partner of the DFAT-funded Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP), however, CAN DO and its agencies also operate outside the AHP with non-DFAT funding.

In recent years the COVID-19 pandemic, violent conflicts, climate change-related disasters and ecological degradation have driven unprecedented increases in poverty, food and fuel insecurity, displacement and forced migration. These interlinked crises continue to have reverberating impacts on global health systems, economies, livelihoods, education and debt levels. Combined, these intersecting factors have created a 'polycrisis' that has reversed years of development gains and exacerbated inequalities for those who were already facing marginalisation. This is placing growing demands on the world's humanitarian response now and in coming years. In this context, there is a pressing need for Australia's new Humanitarian Strategy to have a vision, scale and resourcing that is commensurate with these global needs.

Prioritising local leadership

Local leadership is a prerequisite for effective and sustainable humanitarian action. It involves prioritising mechanisms and approaches that help local partners to build their capacity to lead inclusive humanitarian programs, to transfer skills to local communities and to access direct funding. Australia's Humanitarian Strategy should prioritise support and empowerment of local leadership in every aspect, consistent with the OECD DAC Recommendations on Enabling Civil Society and our commitments under the Grand Bargain.

An example of why supporting local leadership and existing networks is effective comes from our own region. Over 90% of people in the Pacific identify as Christian, and churches are the backbone of civil society. They are highly respected and influential members of society and are often key providers of essential services to communities. The reach of churches into local communities means they often play a central role in preparedness, response and recovery in the context of humanitarian crises. Investment in further building the capability of church-based actors to prepare, respond and support recovery in affected communities will ensure more effective and wider reaching impact.

We encourage the government to direct humanitarian funding in line with Grand Bargain principles and our Grand Bargain commitment of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible. We also urge DFAT to ensure that local civil society organisations are included as a core component of funding packages for protracted crises.

We also ask DFAT to advocate for local NGO participation in UN OHCHR meetings. In humanitarian contexts, currently only international NGOs participate in UN OHCHR meetings but a localisation approach would see local NGOs participating as well. We encourage DFAT to advocate for their inclusion.

Recommendations for DFAT on localisation:

1. Commit to policy that requires direct humanitarian funding to and through local civil society; and ensure that local civil society organisations are a core component of protracted crises funding packages.
2. Advocate for local NGO participation in UN OHCHR meetings.

Prioritising inclusion

The increased risks experienced by women, children, people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people in humanitarian contexts have been well documented^{1 2 3}. Inclusion should underpin every part of the Humanitarian Strategy to ensure that humanitarian programs are delivered without distinction to race, religion, ethnicity, indigeneity, disability, age, displacement, caste, gender, gender identity, sexuality, sexual orientation, poverty, class or socio-economic status. Ensuring that local humanitarian partners are supported to mainstream the inclusion of vulnerable groups in every aspect of design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian programs is essential.

Recommendations for DFAT on inclusion:

3. Increase support and funding for institutional capacity-building of local humanitarian partners on mainstreaming the inclusion of vulnerable groups in all aspects of humanitarian programming.
4. Include the details of intersectional goals in all humanitarian projects when publishing annual reports of humanitarian funding.

Re-orienting humanitarian funding approaches

Rapid response mechanisms

Rapid response funding in the immediate aftermath of an emergency is crucial to prevent deterioration into a more serious and prolonged crisis. Under the previous Humanitarian Partnership Agreement (HAP) mechanism, the time taken to release funds was typically within 72 hours of a disaster event. Currently, the release of funds through the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) can range from days to a couple of weeks. We urge DFAT to regain its former global leadership in rapid response by revising its processes to enable timely release of funds in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, including through existing vehicles such as the AHP. We also encourage a faster release of funding through other humanitarian mechanisms including Anticipatory Action initiatives and the Emergency Action Alliance mechanism.

Recommendation for DFAT:

5. Enhance its rapid response approach to enable a more rapid release of funds through humanitarian mechanisms such as the Australian Humanitarian Partnership, the Emergency Action Alliance and Anticipatory Action initiatives.

¹ OCHA (2021). Global Humanitarian Overview 2021 – Part 1: Global Trends - Gender and Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Action

² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/issues/disability-inclusive-disaster-risk-reduction-and-emergency-situations.html>

³ King, D (2022). Hearing Minority Voices: Institutional Discrimination Towards LGBTQ in Disaster and Recovery. *Journal of Extreme Events*, 8(4). DOI:10.1142/S2345737622410056

Multi-year funding for protracted crises

Multi-year funding provides humanitarian actors with a level of predictability that enables efficiency and effectiveness gains, sustained capacity building and the ability to respond quickly when an emergency strikes.⁴ An example of how long-term multi-year funding has led to sustainable outcomes, and also enabled a swift and effective response to emergencies, is the Church Partnership Program in Papua New Guinea and the COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Project.⁵ In the past, DFAT provided multi-year funding packages for Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. However, multi-year funding packages are no longer standard practice, and there are no clear policies or guidelines on how funding will be considered. We encourage DFAT to re-engage on its previous work to draft policy guidelines on multi-year funding for protracted crises and to release a recent study into the impact of multi-year funding for the Syrian crisis. We ask DFAT to make multi-year funding for protracted crises a standard approach.

Recommendation for DFAT:

6. Provide multi-year core funding for protracted crises as a standard practice.

Clearer criteria and guidelines on allocation of funding

Opportunities exist in establishing or better communicating policies and guidelines on how various aspects of Australia's humanitarian program are delivered. For example, to the knowledge of the ANGO sector, there is no rationale, criteria or guidelines for how emergency funding is allocated between multilateral organisations and NGOs, nor how emergency activations are triggered. The lack of such guidance fosters confusion and hinders rapid planning in the aftermath of an emergency. There has also been no shared explanation of the rationale or intended benefits of why the AHP program in Bangladesh was made competitive and more restricted, resulting in the loss of significant expertise, knowledge, relationships and institutional capacity with the departure of former partners. Finally, we note that some Posts have capacity to take a leadership role in emergency response efforts and could be encouraged to do so if they had clear guidance.

In addition, we urge DFAT to ensure that there is equitable distribution of resources/funds between UN and non-UN partners as well as ensuring that there is equitable distribution of funds, that is not competition-based, between the 6 AHP partners.

Recommendation for DFAT:

7. Provide guidelines for how emergency funding is allocated between multilateral organisations and NGOs and how emergency activations are triggered.
8. Ensure that the role of the Posts in decision making is clearly defined, consistent and transparent.
9. Consider equitable funding distribution between UN and non-UN agencies as well as reducing the competitiveness of funding processes within the AHP.

Support for indirect cost recovery

The inclusion of indirect cost recovery into program budgets is an important measure to improve sustainability and capacity building of local humanitarian programming⁶. Our local partners incur overheads to fund non-project-specific costs that are essential to their organisational operations and to investing in

⁴ Development Initiatives, 2020. Multi-year humanitarian funding: Global baselines and trend. March 2020.

⁵ The Church Partnership Program (CPP) in PNG is an example of where long-term support and funding has led to sustainable outcomes. CPP commenced in 2004 and is a collaboration between the seven mainline churches in PNG and their Australian faith-based NGO partners. CPP has progressively improved the internal institutional capacity of PNG churches and extended the reach and quality of their programs and services. These established networks and relationships facilitate a quick response to emergencies. A recent example is the COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Project.

⁶ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2022). Research Report: Overhead cost allocation in the humanitarian sector

institutional capacity building. Without encouragement to build in indirect costs, local and national development partners will often only claim direct project costs. A key recommendation from research and guidance by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee is for agencies to provide overheads and/or share indirect costs recovery with partners, in line with localisation commitments.

Recommendation for DFAT:

10. Have clear guidance and support for indirect cost recovery in humanitarian funding applications.

Enhancing coordination across humanitarian, development and peace-building

We welcome DFAT's focus on ensuring that there are stronger linkages across the triple nexus and offer some suggestions for how they could be strengthened.

Expanding Disaster READY beyond the Pacific

Disaster READY, the ten-year disaster risk reduction and resilience program implemented by AHP partners through their local networks, provides long-term support to build disaster preparedness. Examples of activities under Disaster READY programs include strengthening community-based approaches in community-based disaster risks management; adoption of stress-resilient farming; support for safe and resilient water systems; and prepositioning of relief supplies. For some AHP partners, Disaster READY sits within their humanitarian program, however there are clear links across the nexus with development programming.

A strength of the Disaster READY program is its consortium approach which enhances collaboration, coordination and knowledge sharing amongst NGO partners.

Given the success of the program, we urge DFAT to expand and broaden the Disaster READY program beyond the current five countries in Pacific/Timor-Leste, to South-East Asia. The expansion of this program should be accompanied by a commensurate increase in funding.

Recommendation for DFAT:

11. Scale up and broaden the Disaster READY program to more countries in the Pacific and to expand into South-East Asia with a commensurate increase in funding.

Enhance coordination between Anticipatory Action initiatives

Anticipatory action is an important part of disaster response and resilience. We welcome the anticipatory action pilots that are being conducted through both humanitarian and development initiatives (e.g. ANCP Anticipatory Action Fund). We look forward to ongoing knowledge sharing and learning from these pilots, including a focus on how the linkages between anticipatory action initiatives and other stages of humanitarian and development programming can be strengthened; and a focus on how best to support local partners to build institutional capacity to lead and participate in anticipatory actions.

Recommendation for DFAT:

12. Continue collaborating with development partners on anticipatory action pilots to strengthen linkages across the humanitarian and development nexus and to build local institutional capacities to lead and participate in anticipatory actions.

Improving links with climate resilience initiatives

Climate change resilience projects that build resilience and preparedness for climate impacts (such as sea walls and water tanks as well as climate-resilient infrastructure, farming methods, health, energy and communications systems) have strong links to disaster risk reduction, especially in the most vulnerable communities. Climate change is also linked to humanitarian programming in the area of losses and damages. As work on climate-focused adaptation, mitigation and finance initiatives continues to grow, we ask the Australian Government to provide resources and mechanisms to strengthen linkages between the humanitarian and climate change sectors.

Recommendation for DFAT:

13. Provide resources and mechanisms to strengthen linkages between the humanitarian and climate change sectors.

Strengthening coordination across all humanitarian actors

The multi-faceted, interlinked nature of disasters demands an integrated humanitarian response from the many actors involved, including civil society, relevant government departments, multilaterals, military and the private sector. We encourage the Australian Government to foster coordination, collaboration and knowledge sharing by creating spaces for dialogue.

As the draft Humanitarian Strategy highlights issues of resilience, it would be helpful if, within the strategy, there is a clear indication of how and where there will be engagement between humanitarian and development actors. This is particularly relevant in countries where there is no ANCP funding.

Recommendations for DFAT:

14. Coordinate and resource an annual humanitarian dialogue between representatives from civil society, relevant government departments, military, multilaterals and the private sector representatives to deepen relationships, share expertise and enhance collaboration and coordination.
15. Provide guidelines and resources for coordination and collaboration between humanitarian and development stakeholders.

Scaling up the humanitarian program to responding to global needs

As the growing impacts of climate change, the escalation of violence conflict in fragile states, and the mounting toll of global diseases worsens, the need for humanitarian assistance is increasing across the world. As a responsible and compassionate global citizen, Australia's humanitarian program should be of a size commensurate with these needs and with our relative global income – yet, as noted by the Safer World Campaign, 'As a proportion of the size of our economy, our humanitarian funding is amongst the lowest compared to other wealthy countries: in 2022, Australia gave just 0.01% of GDP to humanitarian aid, half the New Zealand contribution, a quarter of both Japan's and the UK's contribution, and one sixth of the United States contribution'. In one specific example, funding for the AHP response in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh was cut significantly, yet the situation for nearly a million refugees in the camps remains critical.

Australia has the capacity to significantly increase its humanitarian program in response to the urgent needs of our global family and in line with our global counterparts. We call on the government to increase Australia's humanitarian aid to prevent and respond to more frequent and severe crises by immediately doubling the Humanitarian Emergency Fund. The Humanitarian Emergency Fund is the primary flexible mechanism that enables humanitarian response to crisis in our region and in protracted crises globally, yet it

has not been increased since 2018. We call on the government to commit to increasing investment in preparedness and prevention, with set milestones and timeframes over the forward estimates. We also urge the Australian Government to maintain a global focus in its new Humanitarian Strategy in order to respond where the needs are greatest.

Currently the proposed Humanitarian Strategy does not appear to have a timeframe for its operation, and deadlines to achieve transformation and reform of the Humanitarian function. It would help communicate to the sector and the wider public the momentum for change and development within DFAT if there were set milestones and dates for the Humanitarian Strategy.

Recommendations for DFAT:

16. Increase Australia's humanitarian aid to prevent and respond to more frequent and severe crises by:
 - a. Immediately doubling the Humanitarian Emergency Fund
 - b. Committing to increasing investment in preparedness and prevention with milestones over the forward estimates
17. Maintain a global focus in the new Humanitarian Strategy
18. Set timeframes including milestones and dates for the achievement of development and transformation within the Humanitarian function in DFAT as part of the Humanitarian Strategy.

Summary of Recommendations:

We urge DFAT to adopt the following recommendations:

On localisation:

1. Commit to policy that requires direct humanitarian funding to and through local civil society; and ensure that local civil society organisations are a core component of protracted crises funding packages.
2. Advocate for local NGO participation in UN OHCHR meetings.

On inclusion:

3. Increase support and funding for institutional capacity-building of local humanitarian partners on mainstreaming the inclusion of vulnerable groups in all aspects of humanitarian programming.
4. Include the details of intersectional goals in all humanitarian projects when publishing annual reports of humanitarian funding.

On re-orienting humanitarian funding approaches:

5. Enhance its rapid response approach to enable a more rapid release of funds through humanitarian mechanisms such as the Australian Humanitarian Partnership, the Emergency Action Alliance and Anticipatory Action initiatives.
6. Provide multi-year core funding for protracted crises as a standard practice.
7. Provide guidelines for how emergency funding is allocated between multilateral organisations and NGOs and how emergency activations are triggered.
8. Ensure that the role of the Posts in decision making is clearly defined, consistent and transparent.
9. Consider equitable funding distribution between UN and non-UN agencies as well as reducing the competitiveness of funding processes within the AHP.

10. Have clear guidance and support for indirect cost recovery in humanitarian funding applications.

On enhancing coordination across humanitarian, development and peace-building:

19. Scale up and broaden the Disaster READY program to more countries in the Pacific and to expand into South-East Asia with a commensurate increase in funding.

11. Continue collaborating with development partners on anticipatory action pilots to strengthen linkages across the humanitarian and development nexus and to build local institutional capacities to lead and participate in anticipatory actions.

12. Provide resources and mechanisms to strengthen linkages between the humanitarian and climate change sectors.

13. Coordinate and resource an annual humanitarian dialogue between representatives from civil society, relevant government departments, military, multilaterals and the private sector representatives to deepen relationships, share expertise and enhance collaboration and coordination.

14. Provide guidelines and resources for coordination and collaboration between humanitarian and development stakeholders.

On scaling up the humanitarian program to responding to global needs:

15. Increase Australia's humanitarian aid to prevent and respond to more frequent and severe crises by:

a. Immediately doubling the Humanitarian Emergency Fund

b. Committing to increasing investment in preparedness and prevention with milestones over the forward estimates

16. Maintain a global focus in the new Humanitarian Strategy

17. Set timeframes including milestones and dates for the achievement of development and transformation within the Humanitarian function in DFAT as part of the Humanitarian Strategy.