



ACFID's Humanitarian Reference Group: Australia's Humanitarian Policy, 12 months on

The ACFID Humanitarian Reference Group (HRG) is the independent voice of humanitarian agencies in Australia. It provides a mechanism for ACFID members working in international humanitarian assistance to engage in policy dialogue and advocacy to strengthen humanitarian response.

Executive Summary:

It has been 12 months since the Australian Government released its new Humanitarian Policy, which provided strategic direction to Australia's humanitarian investments and engagement. The period that followed its release has seen significant and ongoing upheaval with direct and consequential impacts on millions of people in crisis and the humanitarian system.

Australia's role as a global middle power continues to be critical. Providing ongoing commitment to its international development objectives and humanitarian policy, where this has been lost by others, is an essential part of that role. Considering the rapidly changing humanitarian context, and the global humanitarian reset, it is also essential that the Humanitarian Policy is delivered through action that is recalibrated to meet the moment.

Advancing this should include:

- Multi-year and flexible financing which strengthens local capacities and delivers more responsible, equitable and impactful assistance
- Leadership in championing locally led action
- A whole of government approach which promotes inclusive and principled humanitarian responses that reflect the realities of today's crises

What's changed in 12 months?

Drastic aid cuts in early 2025 have made humanitarian reform urgent and essential. The system was already chronically underfunded. At the end of 2024, only 51 per cent of global humanitarian responses were funded.¹

As of end-September, the 2025 Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) presents consolidated funding requirements of \$45.34 billion to assist 181 million of the 300 million people in need across 73 countries. To date, 21 per cent of current financial requirements have been committed. This marks a 41 per cent decrease compared to the \$16.21 billion provided by donors at the same time last year. Total global humanitarian funding has also decreased this year - \$16.09 billion compared to \$22.49 billion last year, a 25 per cent decline.²

As of August 2025, the United States funded just 14 per cent of global humanitarian responses, compared with 45 per cent in 2024.³ They weren't alone. Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Sweden are amongst those who will also make cuts to their aid budgets.

We are still only beginning to see the direct human impact of these funding cuts. For instance, forced returns from Kakuma refugee camp to South Sudan due to cuts in food rations. Another example is in Cox's Bazaar, the world's largest refugee camp, where the US had funded 50 per cent of the Joint Response Plan in 2024, rations are being reduced.

In addition to funding cuts, in a time of an increased movement of people due to conflict, climate impacts and other drivers, there has been a rise of social and political movements against migration in multiple countries around the world, an increase in the detention of migrants in some countries, and a move by the US to 'reframe' global agreements on the refugee and asylum system.

Sitting above it all is an erosion of respect for and adherence to international laws and the institutions which uphold them. For example, genocide has been declared by United Nations experts in Gaza, gender-based violence has been used as a weapon of war in Sudan amongst widespread famine, systemic war crimes have been perpetrated across Myanmar following the 2021 military coup and women's rights have been eroded in Afghanistan. As a solid and passionate defender of international laws and norms, Australia's leadership now remains essential.

¹ <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-gha-report-2025-e-report/the-humanitarian-funding-landscape/>

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-september-update-snapshot-30-september-2025>

³ <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-cruel-math-aid-cuts-hyper-prioritized-report-june-2025>

Implications for delivery of Australia's Humanitarian Policy

Accountability and transparency

We note and appreciate the focus on transparency and accountability across Australia's international development policy frameworks, including the International Development Policy and the Humanitarian Policy. However, there are key areas for improvement that would both support DFAT's delivery of the Humanitarian Policy in such a dynamic external environment and measurably improve the transparency and accountability of Australia's humanitarian assistance.

Primarily, this should focus on the **consistency of reporting** of Australia's official humanitarian assistance to enhance transparency and accountability to the Australian public and demonstrate the value of Australia's humanitarian program, including but not limited to through the AusDevPortal and the annual Performance and Development Cooperation report.

DFAT should:

- Develop a public-facing **implementation plan** to sit alongside the Policy with tangible key outcomes and timelines to ensure the Policy's commitments and 'future directions' are translated into actions which realise the ambition set out in the Policy.
- Utilise disaggregated data to improve the transparency of Australia's humanitarian program through publishing an annual official humanitarian assistance report to provide clear information to the public about how much humanitarian assistance Australia has provided, where and to whom the funding has gone, and its overall impact on the lives of people affected.

Local leadership and supporting system redesign

The "Humanitarian Reset" being undertaken by the UN must go beyond simply doing *less with less*. It must shift the default response model, from one that centres international actors, to one that **prioritises and enables locally led action**. In the context of global aid cuts, Australia cannot replace or fill the gaps left by larger donors, but it can maximise its impact by investing where it has deep relationships, contextual understanding and long-standing presence. We are encouraged by the Government's decision to continue supporting local leadership as part of their policy.

DFAT's continued recognition of the importance of **local leadership**, including in the Humanitarian Policy and Guidance Note on Locally Led Development is welcome. We also acknowledge the new performance indicators related to local partners supported through the Australian Humanitarian Partnership and the establishment of systems to track the proportion of humanitarian funding to local and national partners that come into effect in 2025.

Now, it is a critical moment to act on the repeated calls for a more localised humanitarian system. If this Humanitarian Reset is to be meaningful, we must empower local actors as equal partners (in coordination, response design and implementation) and publicly recognise their leadership and contributions.

Three key areas for action:

- **Let local actors lead:** Ensure they have a seat at the table in coordination and decision-making, and are recognised in communications, project documents and public platforms.
- **Increase quality funding to local organisations:** Expand access to quality, flexible funding (including through improved and diverse pooled funds and ANGOs as trusted intermediaries) that covers core costs and strengthens institutional capacity. Ensure funding and contracting models are tailored to crisis type and multi-year funding is prioritised for protracted crises to adequately support locally led response.
- **Value and protect local humanitarian workers:** In 2024, more than 95 per cent of the 374 humanitarian workers killed were local staff.⁴ Their safety, recognition, and support must be non-negotiable. We commend the Declaration for the Humanitarian Personnel and look forward to the tangible and pragmatic action that follows.

A next step in delivering on these commitments in practice should be the further stepping out of **a plan for the gradual transfer of responsibility to local organisations**, supported by improved funding mechanisms and the utilisation of ANGOs as trusted intermediaries. Crucially, the value of Australia's investment will be greatest when funding flows to local actors: to those embedded in communities, working with service providers, and delivering impact on the ground. This is how we move from commitment to change.

⁴ <https://www.redcross.org.au/stories/2025/protecting-humanitarian-workers/>

Preparedness and risk reduction

Saving lives in today's humanitarian landscape means addressing the drivers of risk and vulnerability.

The Asia-Pacific is one of the region's most vulnerable to extreme natural events, driven by exposure and societal vulnerability to such events, and exacerbated by climate change.⁵ The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States in response to Climate Change, released in July this year, makes clear that states - including Australia - have an obligation to prevent and provide remedy for Loss and Damage caused by the climate crisis.⁶

In this context, the Humanitarian Policy's focus on disaster preparedness and anticipatory action is important, as is the recognition of the crucial role of local communities in preparedness. To be truly effective, anticipatory action should be locally led, informed by those most at-risk and marginalised, rooted in accessible early warning systems and national disaster risk management plans.

Given the global context of decreasing funding, increasing instability and escalating climate impacts, a **continued and deepened focus on preparedness and anticipatory action is essential**. This must include:

- Continued growth in DFAT's delivery of cash-based humanitarian assistance projects.
- Systematically embedding disaster risk reduction and climate change into programming, which links to or aligns with local and national mechanisms, including social protection systems.
- Explicitly prioritising adaptation in the design of relevant humanitarian and international development investment.
- Ensuring underlying risk factors are addressed and reduced through long-term development assistance.

⁵ https://www.misereor.org/fileadmin/user_upload_misereororg/publication/en/worldriskreport-2025.pdf

⁶ <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204175>

Protection, Gender-Based Violence & Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

With conflict, instability and disasters on the rise and respect for and adherence to international law in decline, the protection of people, particularly the most marginalised groups caught in conflict will become even more essential.

Australia has long been recognised as a global leader in humanitarian protection, with a strong track record of championing the rights and safety of displaced and crisis-affected populations. The Humanitarian Policy identifies a focus on protection to reduce the risk of harm and reaffirms protection at the centre of Australia's humanitarian efforts. Given the regional and global context, DFAT must move this commitment beyond the Policy and into focused, strategic delivery.

Protection investments should prioritise locally led interventions that are responsive to the specific risks and coping mechanisms emerging in crisis contexts. This includes addressing the recruitment of children and youth into armed groups, and the adoption of negative coping strategies such as early marriage, transactional sex, and unsafe migration. These risks are often exacerbated by the erosion of community structures and the lack of access to essential services, particularly for women, girls, and other marginalised groups.

Key actions to realise the Policy's commitments on protection include:

- Rather than channelling funds through large multilateral pools, **Australia should scale up direct support to local organisations and community-based interventions, working with service deliverers on the ground who are best placed to deliver context-specific protection outcomes.** This approach not only enhances impact and accountability but also reinforces Australia's commitment to localisation and inclusive humanitarian action.
- **Given the commitments in the Policy to Deepening Australia's investment in protection,** continue to place particular emphasis on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), and the prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV), which remain among the most urgent and underfunded areas in humanitarian settings.⁷

⁷ <https://www.unfpa.org/news/underfunded-and-overlooked-neglected-crises-unfpa%E2%80%99s-radar-2025>

International Humanitarian Law and a rules-based order

The past 12 months have underscored both the importance and fragility of the international rules-based order. Conflict-induced protracted crises in Myanmar, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Ukraine, the Sahel and Yemen, along with escalations in the Middle East, have led to catastrophic civilian suffering. The erosion of respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) has had horrific consequences for civilians and impacted the ability of aid agencies to deliver life-saving services.

Upholding IHL is critical to protect civilians and to ensure unimpeded and safe access of humanitarian personnel to affected communities. While the existing international legal framework regarding these protections is comprehensive, political commitment is needed to translate these into practice and to support accountability and justice.

The Government deserves recognition for its leadership on the Declaration on the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, its pragmatic approach and focus on practical steps emphasizing much needed protections for local humanitarians. We are particularly encouraged by the inclusion in the Declaration of the commitment to ensure that humanitarian activities consistent with international law are not criminalised.

Accordingly, more must be done by the Government to align domestic frameworks with international obligations. The lack of humanitarian carve-outs in Australia's sanctions regime continues to hinder humanitarian organisations' ability to operate in high-needs areas. To ensure Australia's sanctions regime is implemented in conformity with IHL and the humanitarian principles, we urge the Government to **adopt a standing and well-framed humanitarian exemption across both autonomous and UN-mandated sanctions frameworks, using a comprehensive legislative approach.**

Following the launch of the Declaration and its broad endorsement, the Government should maintain the momentum to reinforce its role as a leading advocate by spearheading the coalition of likeminded states to deliver tangible improvements in the protections of aid personnel and humanitarian access. In doing so, the Government should ensure the Group of Friends is engaging with humanitarian organisations to inform the Group's priorities for action.

If Australia is to remain a credible advocate for the rules-based order and international humanitarian law, it is imperative now to back its global commitments and leadership with coordinated, principled, and practical action - both at home and internationally.

Conclusion

The Humanitarian Reference Group applauded the release of the new Humanitarian Policy and similarly, Australia's global leadership for practical action to implement international rules on the protection of humanitarians. Given the ways in which the world has changed since the release of the Humanitarian Policy, we urge the Australian Government to increase the pace and scale of its implementation of the Policy, focused on those areas where it can have the most impact in a rapidly changing context. For Australia to uphold its commitment and ambitions as a strong middle power, the Policy must be transformed into action and adequately resourced to ensure its successful delivery.

We look forward to working with DFAT throughout the implementation of the Policy and the creation of an accountable, transparent and measurable implementation plan.