

ACFID Submission to the Defence Strategic Review

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is the peak body for Australian non-government organisations involved in international development and humanitarian action.

Founded in 1965, ACFID has over 130 members working in 90 developing countries. With our members and partners, ACFID seeks to be an influential policy voice, a catalyst for change, and a standard bearer for good practice in the international development and humanitarian sector.

ACFID is grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the Defence Strategic Review.

Introduction

“Threats to human security – such as pandemics, and growing water and food scarcity – are likely to result in greater political instability and friction within and between countries and reshape our security environment, including in the Indo-Pacific. These threats will be compounded by population growth, urbanisation and extreme weather events in which climate change plays a part. Within Australia, the intensity and frequency of disasters – such as the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires – will test Australia’s resilience. ***Disaster response and resilience measures demand a higher priority in defence planning.***”

- Defence Strategic Update, 2020

“One of the biggest concerns we hear is the threat of climate change. It’s a threat from which no one and no country is immune. And it is a threat that demands action. The Albanese Government wants to make climate change a pillar of the Alliance. Because it is clear climate change is a national security issue. When you stand on the shores of our Pacific neighbours, as I have, you understand the intense vulnerability felt by those living on small islands.”

- Hon Richard Marles MP, Center for Strategic and International Studies
Address, July 2022

Climate change is the greatest threat to global, regional, and national security – at traditional and non-traditional levels. Now and in coming decades, as climate change exponentially accelerates, we will see its impacts drastically exacerbate existing social, economic, and environmental challenges. Insecurity in food, water and energy, increased competition over natural resources, the loss of livelihoods, increased and intensified natural disasters, and forced migration and displacement are new realities of our time. The impacts of climate change will both create new security challenges, such as increase migration and micro aggression's as well as exacerbating existing political, social, economic and environmental factors that can lead to conflict. Across the globe we will see new disasters hitting before societies can recover from or adapt to the impact of previous ones. Climate change will bring unprecedented security challenges to the threat matrix, many of which remain under-researched and not properly understood.

In the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, all members of the Pacific Islands Forum (including Australia) affirmed that “climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific”. Further, this declaration recognised the importance of understanding of security as “inclusive of human security, humanitarian assistance, prioritising environmental security, and regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change, including through regional cooperation and support¹. This is the context of which Australia’s Defence Force, at its partners, must operate within our region.

As the 2021 World Climate and Security Report² highlighted, the global governance system is currently ill-equipped to deal with the security risks posed by climate change and militaries will be increasingly overstretched as climate change intensifies. Within our region, the New Zealand Defence Force has already identified that they will be faced with more operational commitments for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and stability due to the impacts of climate change³ and that they must do more to enhance their own environmental awareness as well as play a role in efforts to curb the impacts of climate change.⁴

¹ [Boe Declaration on Regional Security \(forumsec.org\)](https://forumsec.org/boe-declaration-on-regional-security)

² [World-Climate-and-Security-Report-2021.pdf \(imccs.org\)](https://imccs.org/world-climate-and-security-report-2021.pdf)

³ [Climate-Change-and-Security-2018.pdf \(defence.govt.nz\)](https://defence.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Climate-Change-and-Security-2018.pdf)

⁴ <https://www.defence.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/66cfc96a20/Climate-Change-and-Security-2018.pdf>

The impacts of climate change already have significant repercussions for how governments, militaries, police, and humanitarian agencies prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters and complex emergencies. The World Risk Index highlights Oceania as the most at-risk region and Vanuatu as the most at-risk country in the world, with Solomon Islands ranking second, Tonga is third and Papua New Guinea number nine.

As the scale, scope and frequency of disasters increases there will be more response operations where civilian humanitarian agencies and militaries will be operating in the same space. There are additional challenges that will stretch the readiness of responders including sea level rise, intensifying, and compounding hazards, damage to electricity and telecommunications infrastructure, elevated social tension, mass migration, water scarcity, and depleted food security. These conditions will stretch the resources and capability of responding agencies as well as complicating the operating environment.

Coordination among military, police and humanitarian agencies will be even more critical as climate change stretches resources beyond capacity and renders current capabilities less effective.

ACFID calls on the Department of Defence (Defence) to take the sentiment from the 2020 Defence Strategic Update and address by Hon Richard Marles MP and further it to action. Operating in the development and humanitarian sector, ACFID brings a perspective to preventative action, grounded in the lived reality and challenges faced by Australia, our region, and the globe.

Further, given our organisational status as a bearer for good practice in the international development and humanitarian sector, the recommendations below centre on how Defence can incorporate long-standing sector practices into its planning. These will ensure the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will be better able to develop their humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) capabilities as demand increases.

Key Messages:

- a. Defence will need to continue playing an important role in the future given the increased humanitarian needs that will emanate from climate change. Underpinning our recommendations is a need for Defence to enhance its

engagement with civilian response and leadership to humanitarian crises, both at home and overseas.

- b. Given Defence is increasingly stepping into the role of development and humanitarian agencies in disaster and crisis response, we recommend Defence adhere to established humanitarian principles, and incorporate these into force structure and force posture planning and response where appropriate.
- c. As climate change is a threat faced by all sectors of governance, its disaster and humanitarian response cannot operate in a silo, separate from humanitarian efforts more broadly. We advocate for a whole-of-government strategy that promotes coordination across sectors.
- d. Defence must ensure a locally-led response to humanitarian emergencies and disasters, in line with Grand Bargain commitments. This will strengthen the preparedness of host countries and will support their capacity to respond and recover from crises independently, making humanitarian response more effective.
- e. We affirm the inextricable link between climate change and Women Peace and Security (WPS). We urge Defence to leverage the WPS Agenda framework in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. This is in recognition that women are key actors in addressing the drivers of insecurity and fostering peace - and that women and other marginalised groups are less able to absorb and recover from climate disasters and shocks.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Defence HADR to commit to adhering to humanitarian sector principles where appropriate.
2. Defence to contribute to the creation of a whole-of-government humanitarian strategy to guide Australia's response to international disasters and conflict.
3. Defence to ensure HADR responses align with commitments to the Grand Bargain.
4. Defence to commit to incorporating the Women, Peace and Security Agenda across all HADR activities.

Recommendations

1. Defence HADR to commit to adhering to humanitarian sector principles where appropriate.

The humanitarian sector operates on the following principles:

1. Humanity: human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found.
2. Neutrality: humanitarian aid must be provided independent of sides to armed conflict and disputes.
3. Impartiality: humanitarian aid must be provided on the basis of needs alone.
4. Independence: humanitarian objectives are separate from political, economic, military, or other objectives.

In planning and operationalising HADR, ACFID recommends that Defence be aware of the operating principles of the humanitarian sector, and provide assistance based on these. We note, that while civil society organisations and the military often operate in the same space, they each have different mandates. Compliance with the principles of neutrality and independence, may at times conflict with state objectives of the department more broadly but are central to establishing and maintaining access to affected communities for the purposes of humanitarian assistance.

Therefore, humanitarian and strategic military objectives must be treated separately and the military should actively be engaging with humanitarian actors to ensure that humanitarian assistance is autonomous from military objectives. For example, forums such as the UN Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) provide opportunity for “essential dialogue between civil and military actors in humanitarian emergencies that is necessary to protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, minimize inconsistency, and when appropriate, pursue common goals. Basic strategies range from coexistence to cooperation”.⁵

In settings where Defence has both strategic and humanitarian purposes, risks to the compliance of humanitarian principles should be actively understood and mitigated in consultation with civil humanitarian actors. For example, a tension may arise where military

⁵ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN-CMCoord Field Handbook, 2015

and civil humanitarian actors need to be perceived as distinct for humanitarians to stay independent from military objectives but simultaneously may need to work together to provide assistance. As Defence increasingly steps into the role of the humanitarian sector in climate and disaster relief, we reinforce the importance for the ADF to integrate humanitarian principles into its planning and risk management for HADR, contributing to alleviating suffering where it is found and provide assistance on the basis of needs alone - where possible.

We note that the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative affirms the primary role of civilian organisations in implementing humanitarian action, particularly in areas affected by armed conflict. This is consistent with OECD guidelines, which clearly specify that military aid and the promotion of a donor's security interests do not constitute Official Development Assistance (ODA). Humanitarian response must therefore be principled in both its intent and the way it is perceived. This means that the use of international military assets is best considered as complementary to existing relief mechanisms. We assert that Defence HADR should be used where there is no comparable civilian alternative and where it supports civilian action in achieving humanitarian outcomes.

Critically, this increased crossing of space between civil society organisations and the military means an awareness of humanitarian principles and mandates in Defence planning will better ensure there is no duplication of effort, and that strategic objectives do not subsume humanitarian goals. Through this understanding, Defence will be better able to mitigate climate enhanced risks before they overwhelm national and international capabilities and more effectively assist populations in need.

Pathways for action:

- a. Defence to be sensitive to and adopt humanitarian principles in HADR activities and apply these where operational in consultation with humanitarian actors.
- b. Defence to use HADR capabilities only when there is no comparable civilian alternative and where it supports civilian action in achieving humanitarian outcomes.
- c. Defence to contribute to the establishment of a forum for humanitarian organisations and military actors to come together for strategic discussions.
- d. Defence to include the humanitarian community in evaluation and after-action review.

2. Defence to contribute to the creation of a whole-of-government humanitarian strategy to guide Australia's response to international disasters and conflict.

Increased sharing of space between the ADF and civil society in humanitarian activities must be guided and managed proactively; failure to do so could weaken civil society capabilities and distort the role of the military institutions. The impacts of climate change will not happen in a silo, and neither will disaster response. Defence, therefore, has an important role to play in promoting whole-of-government, cross-sector coordination in its humanitarian strategy, noting that in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, the department declared commitment to engage with the region in both traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

We note that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) leads the Australian Government's responses to humanitarian crises and is currently designing a New International Development Strategy to set the long-term direction for Australia's international development engagement and help achieve a peaceful, stable and prosperous region. We encourage Defence to work with DFAT to re-establish its Humanitarian Strategy as part of this process. This strategy should enable a whole-of-government response and create a common framework that ensures all government and non-government capabilities are utilised in a coordinated and complimentary way and in pursuit of shared humanitarian objectives. This strategy should also provide visibility to civil society about how government agencies work together to implement humanitarian priorities across the disaster cycle; prevention, preparedness, repose, and recovery. An effective approach to prevention and risk reduction also means a reduction in residual impact which in turns means less damage and costs for Defence and other humanitarian actors. The strategy should also make clear how Defence works to align with, and implement, international humanitarian policies and obligations.

We understand that the ADF has well-developed policies and operational guidance for military assistance to civil authority domestically. The ACMC's Interagency Taskforce Leadership Guide and Same Space - Different Mandates highlights the importance of developing understanding of roles, cultures and perspectives as well as relationships prior to engagement in the field. These documents provides useful principles for engaging within the between civil, military and police actors, however more needs to be done to invest in their implementation.

Given this robust domestic framework, we encourage the department to develop similar military-civil society frameworks for national, bilateral and multilateral activities. This should encompass policies, operational guidelines, and capabilities that support the humanitarian sector's work.

We encourage the Australian Government to continue investing in the Australian Civil-Military Centre (ACMC). Since its establishment, the ACMC has been a key partner for ACFID and its members in enhancing dialogue and coordination between Government, including Defence and Police, and the humanitarian sector in Australia. ACFID, with the assistance of the Australian Government and the Humanitarian Reference Group (HRG), have been supporting secondments to the ACMC since 2009. The ACMC's program of training, exercises, dialogues, stakeholder engagement and research has been a key enabler in improving engagement between civil, military and police actors in Australia.

Pathways for action:

- a. Defence should play a leadership role in advocating for a clear whole-of-government humanitarian approach, recognising that it is in Defence's self-interest for Australia to have coordinated capabilities that invest in reducing humanitarian suffering.
- b. Continue to invest in ACMC, a unique capability in supporting whole-of-government and civil society to respond more effectively to disasters overseas and at home.
- c. Create a bilateral and multilateral military-civil society framework to manage HADR activities across the region. This framework should be created in close coordination with, and complement the work of, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian Federal Police, Home Affairs, and non-government humanitarian actors.
- d. Invest in developing understanding and relationships with humanitarian organisations and the local communities they work with to prepare for engagement in disaster management.
- e. Engage more humanitarian civil society organisations (both in Australia and regionally) within relevant military training exercises and share learning events.

3. Defence to ensure HADR responses align with commitments to the Grand Bargain.

Along with the established humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, the humanitarian sector operates on the basis of 'Do No Harm'. This recognises that humanitarian actors are part of the context they operate in. Do No Harm is an attempt to monitor the unintended impact of their activities to avoid contributing to instability and violence.

One area the humanitarian sector has increasingly paid attention to with regard to the Do No Harm mandate is in ensuring a locally-led response to disaster. This is in recognition of past practices that have contributed to structural dependence between host countries and donors, undermining host country agency, need and capability.

As the 2021 World Climate and Security Report⁶ highlighted that proposed climate security adaptation and resilience solutions that do not account for local dynamics or integrate perspectives from local communities risk inadvertently contributing to other security risks or exacerbating underlying conflicts.

Additionally, Climate and security challenges cannot be addressed by individual countries alone. Regional and inter-regional approaches will be need to consider the threats posed by climate change⁷. "The dominant presence of Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Island Forum, under the watchful eye and guidance of the US, is unlikely to engender regional cooperation on security issues that will lead to lasting solutions⁸." The Australian Government should support, and be careful not to dominate, regional cooperation on security issues.

We urge Defence to undertake localisation work in responding to disasters under the guidance of civil society and humanitarian actors and in coordination with whole-of-government to better engage local and national actors in all phases of humanitarian response. This is critical, as most local and national actors who deliver assistance are closely linked with local and national development and peacebuilding. Strengthening their preparedness and supporting their capacity to respond and recover from crises

⁶ [World-Climate-and-Security-Report-2021.pdf \(imccs.org\)](#)

⁷ [121.finding-a-regional-process-fry.pdf \(toda.org\)](#)

⁸ [121.finding-a-regional-process-fry.pdf \(toda.org\)](#)

independently will make humanitarian response more effective, and protect development gains.

In particular, we encourage Defence to align HADR responses with the international commitments of the Grand Bargain. This is a unique agreement between large donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need, strengthening the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.

In order to Do No Harm, promoting locally led adaption and response will be critical in addressing the impacts of climate change; local communities, citizen groups, local government, and local private sector entities must be key decision-makers in interventions that affect them as they will always understand local contexts and needs better than any foreign actor.

Humanitarian and peacebuilding actors, including the Defence Force, must ensure they do not become part of the problem. In engaging in humanitarian assistance and climate related conflicts it is important to support an adaptive and community centred approach, which values the indigenous knowledge, practice and governance within each community. Across the Pacific, there already exists local cultural conflict resolution and peacebuilding mechanisms that are embedded within community governance and land and resource management⁹.

Pathways for action:

- a. Defence to understand and feed into existing forums and coordination structures for humanitarian response better under the guidance of DFAT and humanitarian agencies in order to support locally led HADR.
- b. Defence to ensure HADR activities do not generate ongoing dependency for host countries on the military, leaving local actors better able to deal with risks and consequences of disasters and protracted crises.
- c. Defence to ensure they undertake community level gender-sensitive conflict analysis and follow a do-no-harm approach in any interventions
- d. Defence to increase transparency around humanitarian resource transfers to local and national actors.

⁹ [Climate Change and Conflict Risks in the Pacific.pdf \(amazonaws.com\)](#)

4. Defence to commit to incorporating the Women, Peace and Security Agenda across all HADR activities.

The Women Peace and Security (WPS) framework advocates for the rights of women and girls during conflict and crisis, affirming the importance of a gender perspective in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and resolution, and disaster and crisis response. While WPS and climate change are often viewed separately, we affirm their inextricable link in humanitarian response. Just as the impact of conflict are not gender neutral, neither are the impacts of climate change. Pre-existing vulnerabilities and structural inequalities generate disproportionate impacts for women and other marginalised groups less able to adapt, absorb, and recover from climate induced disasters and shocks. WPS also recognises that women are key actors in addressing drivers of insecurity and fostering peace. It is therefore in the interest of Defence to leverage the WPS framework in HADR activities. Investment in Defence's capacity to implement the WPS Agenda must be a priority for the department.

By embedding the WPS Agenda in Defence's HADR response, the department will be better able to ensure analysis and strategies advance women's rights, peace, and security through response efforts. We affirm that civil society (including women's rights organisations) - in Australia and overseas - can contribute significant expertise and grounded experience to this pursuit. The Australian Government should commit to priority countries for promoting the WPS Agenda. These include, but are not limited to, Myanmar, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste, and Indonesia.

We urge the department to support local leadership of the WPS Agenda. Utilising women's organisations and local civil society, Australia should establish and support a regular dialogue mechanism between civil, military, and police stakeholders on WPS. These should focus on improving understanding and coordination between different stakeholders and promote women's roles and leadership in peace and stability building in the context of humanitarian relief.

Pathways for action:

- a. Ensure Defence is mandated to fully resource, implement, and report on commitments part of the National Action Plan, and to work to improve whole-of-government coordination on WPS.
- b. Support local leadership of the WPS agenda, including by supporting local civil society and women's organisations with direct core funding.

- c. Fund and support a regular dialogue mechanism between civil, military and police stakeholders on WPS.
- d. Resource and enable collaboration with civil society for ongoing, collaborative, and action-oriented contribution to the deliverables of National Action Plan and the broader Women Peace and Security agenda. This collaboration must include resourcing to engage with diverse groups to strengthen implementation and support government accountability and responses to emerging crises.

ACFID thanks the Department of Defence for the opportunity to contribute to the Defence Strategic Review.

We would be pleased to elaborate on issues raised in this submission, and provide a briefing to the relevant policy makers at your convenience.