



The Fred Hollows
Foundation



The Fred Hollows Foundation Submission to The Joint Standing Committee inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific Region

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The Fred Hollows Foundation submission to The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and The Pacific Region

The Fred Hollows Foundation (The Foundation) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

The Foundation has a long and proud history in the Pacific region¹. Our locally led work delivered in partnership with governments, local health authorities, academic institutions and civil society organisations promotes lasting, equitable health and development outcomes by restoring sight and building stronger, more sustainable and resilient health systems.

The Foundation fully endorses the submissions of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and The Global Health Alliance (GHA). We agree that the Australian Government should build on its strong development program foundations in the Pacific by listening to Pacific civil society organisations and other local actors, addressing climate change impacts with increased support, providing sustainable and flexible funding for Pacific CSOs, prioritising development investments targeting the most marginalised populations, and promoting inclusive development encompassing gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, disability equity, and children's rights².

We also support ACFID's call to increase Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) to 0.5 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) by 2033-34 with a clear trajectory and commitment to subsequently reach the UN target of 0.7 per cent ODA/GNI.³

In our response, The Foundation focuses on areas where we can offer the greatest and most practical benefits to this inquiry.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prioritise listening to Pacific actors, including civil society organisations (CSOs), in shaping Australia's response to the region.
- Support Pacific Island Countries to scale up actions on the Pacific NCD Roadmap.
- Support Pacific Island Countries in scaling up eye health research by enabling resources and in-country capability.
- Evaluate the health impacts of the Falepili Union, PALM scheme, and Pacific Engagement Visa, particularly on nurse migration and invest in long-term strategies to address the loss of skilled healthcare workers, including nurses, from Pacific nations.
- Strengthen investment, capability, and collaboration to build sustainable, people-centred health systems that are resilient to future shocks and changing population health needs.
- Provide core, flexible, and multi-year funding to local civil society organisations to enhance planning and implementation of health programs and build long-term, trust-based partnerships.
- Increase funding to the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) by \$20 million per annum to scale up existing investments across the Pacific, and establish a \$15 million pilot adaptive response pool, utilising DFAT-accredited NGO partners, to support high-impact health programs, including eye health.

- Support locally led initiatives by providing financial support, strengthening capacity and infrastructure, fostering partnerships, assisting in policy development, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation frameworks.
- Support Pacific Island countries to eliminate or control the eight debilitating NTDs that remain prevalent in the region.
- Invest in climate-resilient healthcare infrastructure across the Pacific region to strengthen healthcare systems, mitigate climate impacts, and enhance community resilience.
- Make health systems more responsive to women, girls and the most marginalised by supporting systemic women's leadership in the health sector.
- Extend support for Assistive Technology (AT) initiatives beyond school-aged children to include older adults in the Pacific, addressing accessibility barriers and promoting inclusivity across all age groups.
- Support initiatives that integrate eye health into DFAT's broader economic and social development programs, ensuring that people with vision impairment are not left behind.
- Foster healthy ageing in a rapidly ageing region by investing in the four interconnected action areas of the Decade of Healthy Ageing.
- Expand efforts to boost First Nations trade and investment and enhance collaboration between First Nations communities and partners across the Pacific.
- Provide increased funding to Australian development organisations to enhance their capacity for community engagement and outreach and showcase successful projects and partnerships delivered by Australian NGOs
- Promote partnerships between government, the private sector, and civil society organisations to amplify the reach and effectiveness of development communications beyond traditional donor bases.

Key priorities for Pacific island countries and the Pacific region

The Blue Pacific is united in its aim to lead its own development⁴, ensuring all Pacific people, including those with disabilities like vision impairment or blindness, can live free, healthy, and productive lives⁵. The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific commits to "securing the wellbeing of our people" by working "together to strengthen national and regional efforts to ensure all Pacific peoples benefit from enhanced education, health, and other services." It also emphasises the increased urgency for the region to act collectively on significant issues, including health epidemics⁶.

The Healthy Islands vision⁷, established in 1995, remains pivotal for addressing the unique health challenges in the Pacific region. By promoting holistic and integrated approaches, it emphasises clean environments, health-promoting schools, community participation, and universal health coverage. Whilst Pacific nations have made headway in tackling some of the most pressing challenges, the WHO recently noted that "there is still a lot more to do."⁸

For example, countries in the Pacific region face increasing non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including diabetes⁹, which leads to diabetic retinopathy—a major cause of avoidable vision loss¹⁰, climate change-related health risks, rising elderly populations, and challenging economic conditions.

NCDs account for around 70-75% of all deaths in the Pacific and are a major threat to health and development in the region¹¹. Many of these NCD-related deaths are premature (before age 60 years) and are preventable.¹² The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific identifies the challenge of addressing

high levels of NCDs as an issue that require attention¹³ and the region has collectively adopted the Pacific Framework for the Control and Prevention of NCDs¹⁴.

The Pacific also has alarmingly high rates of blindness and vision impairment, with approximately 90% being preventable or treatable¹⁵. Cataract and refractive error are leading causes of avoidable blindness in the Pacific¹⁶. Among those aged 50+, the estimated prevalence of cataract is 10.66%, and refractive error is 6.97%. Reliable data is limited, but recent studies highlight the severity. For instance, a national survey in Papua New Guinea found that 5.6% of the population aged 50+ is blind, with women disproportionately affected, reflecting global gender disparities in eye health¹⁷. Pacific eye health leaders recognise that strengthening eye health systems require reliable data and contextualised research. They also recognise the importance of eye health and its direct impact on development. To further build this knowledge, eye health research investment is crucial¹⁸.

The pandemic significantly impacted Pacific Island countries, leading to overloaded health systems, budget constraints, and high attrition of health workers. Pacific Island Governments assert that COVID-19 has redefined the region's social, political, and economic landscape, emphasising the need for greater investment in public health¹⁹. With diabetes emerging as the next major health crisis, it is imperative to prepare health systems for this impending tsunami by strengthening health infrastructure, workforce capacity, and eye health services.

Pacific Island countries are prioritising the strengthening of health systems to improve public health outcomes. National eye plans exemplify this, detailing goals and priorities for strengthening eye health systems and demonstrating leadership, political and financial commitments to this effort²⁰.

Efficient use of resources is crucial, with a focus on primary care, health promotion, and reorienting human resources towards public health. Public health investments, coupled with economic growth strategies like increasing women's workforce participation, can simultaneously advance health and economic stability²¹.

Recommendation

- The Australian Government should prioritise listening to Pacific actors, including civil society organisations (CSOs), in shaping its response to the region. This approach should be guided by Pacific-authored strategies, such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, to ensure alignment with regional aspirations and needs.
- Support Pacific Island Countries to scale up actions on the Pacific NCD Roadmap to ensure the safeguarding of people with NCDs, reduce diabetes and the emerging threats of diabetic retinopathy, and minimising co-morbidity and promoting the well-being of all Pacific people.
- Support Pacific Island Countries in scaling up eye health research by enabling resources and in-country capability.

Opportunities for enhanced regional economic integration and mobility

Australia's labour mobility policies, while beneficial economically, have potential negative health implications, particularly concerning the migration of healthcare professionals like nurses from the Pacific²². Despite targeting the unemployed and unskilled, programs such as the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme have seen participants from critical sectors like healthcare²³.

The Australian Government should conduct a thorough assessment of its immigration policies and labour mobility schemes—such as the PALM scheme and Pacific Engagement Visa—to understand their impacts on the region's health systems. This review should focus on the migration trends of nurses and healthcare professionals. Recent years have witnessed a substantial exodus of nurses from Pacific nations, resulting in a loss of critical skills and training.

While acknowledging the economic benefits of schemes like PALM through remittances and skills development, the Australian Government must develop strategies to mitigate negative impacts on health systems. This includes implementing long-term solutions to address the departure of skilled healthcare workers, such as nurses, from Pacific countries.

Recommendation

- Evaluate the health impacts of the Falepili Union, PALM scheme, and Pacific Engagement Visa, particularly on nurse migration.
- Invest in long-term strategies to address the loss of skilled healthcare workers, including nurses, from Pacific nations.

Australia's role in supporting pacific nations during natural disasters and national emergencies, including pandemics

Australia has played a pivotal role in supporting Pacific nations during natural disasters and national emergencies, including pandemics. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia demonstrated proactive leadership by providing critical medical supplies, deploying healthcare personnel, and supporting vaccination campaigns across the Pacific.

An independent review of Australia's COVID-19 Response Package for the Pacific and Timor found that Australia's health response to the Pacific during the COVID-19 pandemic was timely and effective, primarily through the use of budget support that allowed for flexible and rapid assistance to partner governments²⁴. The review also found that while social protection systems in several countries enabled effective responses, the limited engagement with non-governmental organisations hindered the delivery of specialised health services, recommending that future strategies should include contingency funding and better collaboration with civil society to enhance health outcomes²⁵.

Two reports, led by the University of Sydney and UNSW Sydney and commissioned by ACFID and The Fred Hollows Foundation, outline strategies to strengthen post-pandemic health systems in the Indo-Pacific. The reports highlight the need for increased investment in health workforce and data systems to improve health outcomes and preparedness for future outbreaks. They emphasise supporting self-determination in health security, focusing on equity, quality of care, and locally relevant initiatives. Recommendations include prioritising vaccination programs, expanding disease surveillance, and investing in country-led approaches to build resilient health systems in the region.²⁶

Adopting these recommendations and building upon existing investments, Australia can further strengthen regional health systems by enhancing emergency response capacities, fostering collaboration in pandemic preparedness, and ensuring equitable access to healthcare resources during crises. This sustained engagement not only bolsters Australia's partnership with Pacific nations but also reinforces regional resilience in the face of future challenges.

Recommendation

- Strengthen investment, capability, and collaboration to build sustainable, people-centred health systems that are resilient to future shocks and changing population health needs.
- Future crisis response designs should consider how NGOs, civil society organisations (CSOs), and peak bodies can support the wider policy response, including budget support operations. Small, strategically targeted investments in non-government partners can significantly contribute to understanding the impacts of a shock and the efficacy of responses, especially when normal systems are disrupted.

Strengthen people-to-people links and partnerships including through well designed development programs

Utilising Pacific Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

The Foundation strongly supports recalibrating development program designs to include Pacific CSOs as delivery partners. CSOs are deeply embedded within local communities and possess a nuanced understanding of the specific needs and challenges faced by these communities. CSOs in the Pacific, with their extensive experience in public health, immunization, social protection, and livelihood support, can significantly enhance government response efforts, especially at the community level. They can facilitate faster implementation, broaden inclusivity, and strengthen transparency and accountability²⁷. By partnering with CSOs, Australia can leverage the strong linkages and trust-based relationships that these organisations have cultivated over many years. This approach ensures that development initiatives are locally relevant, culturally appropriate, and more likely to succeed due to the mutual accountability and trust established between CSOs and the communities they serve.

Recommendation

- Provide core, flexible, and multi-year funding through the Civil Society Fund to local civil society organisations to enhance planning and implementation of health programs and build long-term, trust-based partnerships.

Leveraging NGO expertise for community development

Australian NGOs have a long history of effective community engagement in the Pacific, bringing valuable expertise and in-depth, context-specific knowledge. These organisations have established ready-made relationships and trust within Pacific communities, which can be crucial for delivering impactful community development outcomes. By increasing investment in the resourcing of Australian NGOs, the Australian Government can enhance the delivery of development programs, strengthen partnerships, and ensure that initiatives are tailored to the unique needs of Pacific communities.

Recommendation

- Given that Australian NGOs continue to prioritise support for the Pacific,²⁸ we recommend increasing funding to the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) by \$20 million per annum to scale up existing investments.
- Using the proven reach and existing up-front risk management provided by DFAT accreditation of NGO partners, establish a \$15 million pilot adaptive response pool to support high-impact health programs, including eye health.

Commitment to locally led approaches

The Foundation underscores the importance of a long-term commitment to locally led approaches. Such approaches require substantial time, resources, and policy commitment to be successful. Genuine partnerships and locally led initiatives represent long-term investments that necessitate upfront dedication and adequate resources to deliver effective outcomes.

Eye health is increasingly being prioritised by Pacific Island countries, with several governments developing and adopting national eye health plans. For instance, Timor Leste's Ministry of Health has approved a 30-year strategic plan for eye health services²⁹, and Papua New Guinea has launched a 20-year strategic plan to guide investments in eye health and strengthen health systems³⁰. These examples demonstrate a strong commitment to locally led development in eye health, ensuring sustainable and tailored healthcare improvements. The Australian Government can support these initiatives by providing financial support, strengthening capacity and infrastructure, fostering partnerships, assisting in policy development, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Recommendation

- Support locally led initiatives by providing financial support, strengthening capacity and infrastructure, fostering partnerships, assisting in policy development, and enhancing monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Australia's aid programs and partnerships in promoting genuine community development, good governance, and capacity building for partners in the region

Australia has a unique opportunity to strengthen its partnership with Pacific nations by addressing shared health challenges and enhancing regional resilience. Our Pacific neighbours face pressing health issues, including climate change, rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and persistent communicable diseases³¹ as well as rapidly ageing populations. This dual burden of disease demands collaborative solutions that not only improve health outcomes but also bolster social and economic stability across the region.

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) continue to affect Pacific Island nations disproportionately, despite cost-effective interventions being available³². By prioritising NTDs in our regional health agenda, Australia can demonstrate leadership in global health equity and significantly impact the wellbeing of vulnerable populations in the Pacific.

Moreover, climate change exacerbates health disparities in the Pacific³³, underscoring the urgent need for sustainable healthcare solutions. Strengthening healthcare infrastructure and expanding access to essential services, which is supported by The Pacific Heads of Health³⁴, will mitigate these impacts, promoting health equity and reinforcing Australia's role as a reliable partner in the Pacific family.

Gender inequities persist in leadership roles within the health workforce, hindering the development of inclusive policies and services³⁵. Australia's investment in the Pacific Women Lead (PWL) program³⁶ represents a significant commitment to advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls in the Pacific region. However, more could be done to increase the number of women in leadership roles within the health sector. Addressing this disparity not only empowers women but also enhances the effectiveness of health interventions, ensuring equitable access to healthcare for all.

Australia's commitment to expanding access to assistive technology (AT) in the Pacific, particularly for school-aged children, is commendable³⁷. Extending this initiative to older adults through increased screening programs, funding, and local partnerships will further improve quality of life and community resilience. This holistic approach not only addresses immediate healthcare needs but also fosters long-term social and economic stability across the region³⁸.

With diabetes emerging as the next major health crisis³⁹, it is imperative to prepare health systems for this impending tsunami by strengthening health infrastructure, workforce capacity, and eye health services. By incorporating the expertise of NGOs and CSOs, Australia can enhance policy responses and ensure that innovations in gender equality and disability inclusion are integrated into government programs, ultimately bolstering health security and economic sustainability in the Pacific.

By seizing this opportunity to collaborate on health initiatives, Australia can enhance its position as a partner of choice in the Pacific, promoting sustainable development and prosperity for all. The Foundation provides four achievable, high impact investments that can make a real difference in the Pacific region, in line with Australia's new International Development Policy.

- Support our Pacific neighbours to eliminate or control the eight debilitating NTDs that remain prevalent in the Pacific region, with an understanding of clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) as key contributors.
- Invest in climate-resilient healthcare infrastructure across the Pacific region to strengthen healthcare systems, mitigate climate impacts, address NCDs and enhance community resilience.
- Make health systems more responsive to women, girls and the most marginalised by supporting systemic women's leadership in the health sector in the Pacific.
- Extend support for Assistive Technology (AT) initiatives beyond school-aged children to include older adults in the Pacific, addressing accessibility barriers and promoting inclusivity across all age groups.

To address emerging socio-economic and health issues where Australia can make a significant difference, we suggest two policy recommendations to support the Australian Government's practical implementation of a "development program that is fit for the challenges and opportunities our times."⁴⁰ They focus on:

- Support initiatives that integrate eye health into broader economic and social development programs, ensuring that people with vision impairment are not left behind.

Improving eye health can directly impact economic integration and mobility by enabling individuals to participate fully in economic activities. Restoring sight is not only cost-effective, with high returns on investment, but it also brings about wider social and economic benefits. Restoring sight boosts education, employment, and social inclusion, improving lives beyond health. Economic modelling demonstrates that every \$US1 invested in treating cataract delivers an economic return of \$US20.50, confirming cataract surgery provides among the highest return on investment of any disease interventions modelled in similar investment cases.⁴¹

- Fostering Healthy Ageing in our rapidly ageing region.

In Asia and the Pacific one in four people will be over 60 years of age by 2050 - close to 1.3 billion people. Investing in the four interconnected action areas of the Decade of Healthy Ageing⁴² can make healthy ageing a reality for every older person in the Asia and the Pacific region.

Leveraging cultural and family connections to strengthen its relationships with the pacific

Indigenous Australian and Pacific Islander peoples share long-standing cultural and family connections⁴³. First Nations people were Australia's first diplomats and Australia should continue to leverage these cultural connections to strengthen its relationships with the Pacific. The Foundation welcomes Australia's First Nations approach to foreign policy and the appointment of an Ambassador for First Nations People to lead the government's efforts in embedding Indigenous perspectives, experiences and interests across DFAT⁴⁴.

We encourage the Australian Government to continue working in genuine partnership with First Nations communities, leaders and advocates on how Australia's international engagement across foreign, trade, development and corporate policy can better support First Nations peoples whilst strengthening Australia's relationships with the Pacific.

Recommendation

- Continue and expand efforts to boost First Nations trade and investment and enhance collaboration between First Nations communities and partners across the Pacific.

Ways in which the Australian community can be more engaged with and have a better understanding of Australia's international relations and in particular the official aid and development program in the region

To strengthen the Australian community's engagement with and understanding of Australia's international relations and official aid and development programs in the Pacific, the Australian Government can leverage trusted NGOs like The Fred Hollows Foundation. As an iconic Australian NGO with substantial public support, The Foundation has a proven track record in effective communication and enjoys widespread backing.

The Foundation, supported by 900,000 Australians who have collectively contributed \$425 million, exemplifies the strong public commitment to international development. This broad support base can be mobilised to deepen understanding and garner backing for Australia's aid programs.

Highlighting successful projects and partnerships delivered by Australian NGOs in the Pacific, such as the 535 projects managed by 49 ACFID members, can illustrate the tangible impacts of aid programs. This approach fosters a stronger connection between the Australian public and international development efforts.

Additionally, fostering public-private partnerships can amplify the reach and impact of development communications. Collaborations between government, the private sector, and civil society organisations are crucial in broadening understanding and support for Australia's international relations and aid initiatives.

- Provide increased funding to Australian development organisations to enhance their capacity for community engagement and outreach.
- Showcase successful projects and partnerships delivered by Australian NGOs to demonstrate the concrete impacts of development programs and strengthen public connection.
- Promote partnerships between government, the private sector, and civil society organisations to amplify the reach and effectiveness of development communications beyond traditional donor bases.

ABOUT THE FRED HOLLOWES FOUNDATION

Established in 1992, The Fred Hollows Foundation carries on the legacy of Professor Fred Hollows, focusing on providing high-quality eye care to underserved communities around the globe. Our work spans more than 33 countries, including nine Pacific Island nations and seven ASEAN countries as well as remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia, making us one of the nation's most trusted charities.

We build self-sustaining health systems that can address eye health comprehensively. By providing infrastructure, training health professionals, and advocating for policy changes, we're making long-term improvements in eye care globally. Investing in eye health strengthens health systems, equipping them to respond better in times of emergency.



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