

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade – Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee

Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific Region

Submission: World Vision Australia

Introduction

The biggest challenge facing Pacific Island countries is the existential threat of climate change and its impacts on the livelihoods, health, and security of its people.

The Pacific Islands are amongst the world's most vulnerable to climate risk, despite having contributed the least to climate change. Rising sea levels, coastal erosion, coral bleaching, ocean acidification, extreme weather events, droughts, floods, landslides, and saltwater intrusion are all happening in real time.

These impacts pose serious risks to the food security, water availability, biodiversity, cultural heritage, and human rights of the Pacific people, as well as their resilience and adaptation capacities. Climate change also exacerbates existing challenges of poverty, inequality, gender violence, and social instability, increasing the risk of displacement and migration.

World Vision has a long-standing history in the Pacific and Timor-Leste region having worked in the region for over **50 years**. As the largest NGO in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Timor-Leste, we have extensive networks and meaningful and deep partnerships with governments and communities, where we use a strength-based approach in the implementation of our community-led programming.

Looking to the future, World Vision's Pacific 2030 Agenda is already being realised through the expansion to 5 additional countries to include Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu, and Kiribati, only serving to cement our presence in the region. World Vision's core approach is to strengthen the capacity of national governments and local organisations across the disaster management spectrum (mitigation and preparedness, response, and accountability). We are committed to strengthening an ecosystem of locally led actors across the Blue Pacific Continent.

Based on consultations with World Vision staff, both here in Australia and our Field Offices in the Pacific and Timor-Leste region: we propose that the Government channel its focus **into 3 main priority areas** for the region: **Nature-based Solutions** (NbS) for climate mitigation and adaptation including climate-smart agriculture, **natural disasters and emergencies preparedness**, and **gender equality and women's safety**.

Recommendations

1. That 25 percent of **Pacific Resilience Facility funding** be directed to **Nature-based Solutions** to mitigate the effects of climate change.
2. A **stronger focus on natural disasters and emergencies preparedness**, including the need for conflict prevention, peacebuilding and capacity building.
3. Increased support to partnering with local faith and community leaders to promote **gender equality and social inclusion**, and better equip communities and governments to support safety of **women and children**.

Climate Mitigation and Adaptation

“Planting mangroves is important because it can protect us from rising sea levels and be a home for small fish to breed,” says [Stephanie](#), School student, Riwo in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea.

The countries in the Pacific region are facing significant challenges. Within 50 years, the impact of climate change will permanently alter the geographic, economic, and social landscape of the entire region, so much so that by 2060 a number of these island nations will no longer exist. World Vision's mandate is to serve the most vulnerable children, going to places where we are needed most, regardless of the danger or difficulty.

Within the region, many countries are exposed to sea level rises. These nations have areas with low elevation, often just a few metres over the sea level, and they face this crisis with great urgency. Their distinctive geographies and small land areas make them very vulnerable to any rises in sea level, putting their survival and the well-being of their people at risk. Compounding this are changing climate circulation patterns which produce more extreme, frequent, and unpredictable weather patterns. To compound these issues, unsustainable land management practices, logging, and overfishing are further depleting the environment these communities rely upon. As Australia's largest INGO, we have the size, capacity and expertise to partner with the Government, local communities and relevant stakeholders in scaling up and deepening our efforts to assist in combating climate change.

An effective approach to climate resilience must include measures aimed at safeguarding food security and nutrition. Incorporating nature-based solutions can provide sustainable and effective climate-resilient strategies for addressing these challenges. Nature-based Solutions are a vastly underutilised tool in the fight to both combat child poverty and address climate change to provide a sustainable future for our next generations.

A targeted effective aid program is imperative to building Australia's regional resilience. The Pacific region's sea level rise is at a faster rate than the rest of the globe. Protecting natural barriers which shield coastlines against rising sea levels and coastal erosions are therefore imperative.

One of the most effective and sustainable ways to mitigate and adapt to climate change is to harness the power of nature. World Vision has been implementing Nature-based Solutions (Nbs) in the Pacific region over many years with remarkable results. We do this in a way puts communities in charge of their environmental restoration plans - supporting them to scale-up practices that are right for them and their communities.

Partnering with the Australian Government through DFAT and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), we have worked with **eight communities** in Makira and Malaita in the Solomon Islands to restore degraded forest and coastal mangrove areas using assisted regeneration practices, building climate resilience and reducing disaster risks. These areas have been damaged by the impacts of climate change, sea level rise and land clearing and logging for their fuel and timber needs. World Vision has trained over **700 people** in community groups with at least 10 hectares of forest and mangroves now under restoration in Makira and Malaita Provinces. World Vision also works closely with communities to develop natural regeneration plans for coastal and forest areas, as well as helping them to develop community by-laws which guide how the community uses and protects these areas.

In addition, natural regeneration practices have been introduced as tools to over **300 school students** in Makira and North Malaita, with the plan to embed it into the environmental curriculum of partner schools.

We have also introduced over **250 community members** in both locations to climate-resilient agricultural approaches for supporting livelihoods, farming, and fishing. These have been chosen to complement the use of Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) and other Nature-based Solutions that the community are already implementing. As proven methods that brings that whole of the community together in its fight against climate change, we suggest the Government apportion a 25 percent target of current and future Climate Financing Facilities into community led Nature-based Solutions for environmental restoration.

World Vision is committed to using community-led approaches for climate adaption. Climate change is increasing the occurrence of storm surges in places like The Solomon Islands. By using assisted natural

regeneration approaches to restore mangroves we are supporting communities to create a natural buffer against these disasters.'

The sad reality is that sea levels are rising in real time, whether we prepare for it or not and entire villages and communities will lose their homes and ways of life without action.

Natural Disasters and National Emergencies Preparedness

"We are in dire need of an urgent humanitarian response. Children and families are being forced to live in open areas with inadequate shelter. The health and protection risks they face from cold temperatures and unsanitary conditions are deeply concerning." Chris Jensen, World Vision PNG National Director

The recent tragedy in the Enga province in Papua New Guinea only served to highlight the crucial need for supporting Pacific Island nations in disaster and emergencies preparedness. In the region, Pacific countries are routinely placed at the top of the World Disaster Rankings (with 10 of the world's top 15 natural disaster rankings held by the region). Furthermore, 10 of the Pacific's most destructive weather events over the past century have occurred in the past 15 years alone.

In 2023, World Vision supported three cyclone responses in Vanuatu alone. Two of them occurred in the same week alone (Tropical Cyclones Kevin and Judy). The increasing frequency and ferocity of the annual cyclones now means we expect cyclones to happen in Vanuatu on an annual basis, necessitating a shift in programming. In addition, given the region is sitting on a 'ring of fire', earthquakes and volcanic eruptions also remain constant threats and further add to the complexity of climate and disaster related challenges. The multilayered threats means that development gains and progress are now constantly hindered by the needs to pivot responding to the impacts of disasters. There is an urgent need to be able to deal with severe to catastrophic disasters better. This can be achieved more effectively through engaging a cross section of governments, NGOs, private and community sectors.

In 2023, World Vision led **78** disaster responses across **59** countries, supporting more than **35.8 million** people in need.

World Vision has a presence in 100 countries and responds immediately to humanitarian crises worldwide. In emergencies like the Enga landslide in Papua New Guinea, we ensure people can access critical necessities like food, clean water, hygiene and cooking kits, cash vouchers, and child protection services. We commit to protecting children and other vulnerable people even in the most challenging environments. After addressing immediate needs, we continue to support families and communities as they rebuild. Our commitment is to a dignified and effective humanitarian action which is locally led. We invest in capacity strengthening of local partners and work alongside governments and communities to respond. In the Enga province, approximately (**7,849** people, including **3300** children)

are in immediate need of shelter with infrastructure including houses impacted. Up to 150 structures, including houses and one elementary school, were damaged. The crucial government funding announcement of \$2 million for infrastructure building is most welcomed, in addition to the initial \$2.5 million for emergency supplies and support for humanitarian partners including World Vision. This will allow increased access to the most vulnerable. It is important to note the situation on the ground is complex due to the region's remoteness and ongoing tribal conflicts impact on the distribution of aid. This further highlights the importance of preparedness in a complex region.

World Vision has expanded its operations across the Blue Pacific through local partners, investing in a diverse and responsive humanitarian ecosystem. This is in direct recognition of the significant impacts of climate change, compounded by existing poverty and violence factors.

Our aim is not to set up new offices in the region but rather to help local organisations be better at dealing with emergencies in their own country and communities. Local organisations know their communities best and are the first on the ground to help when disasters strike. They can prevent deaths and rebuild communities. Partnering with them as equals and sharing skills in all aspects of emergency management is therefore critical. Working with local and regional civil society organisations and groups like the Pacific Islands Association of NGOs (PIANGO) to get advice and direction, by asking where we can help the most, and which local organisations we can work with is imperative. World Vision is committed to always following our partners' lead, so that our work is truly community-led, as it is in all our programs around the world.

Further investment is critical to support a more localised approach and to support conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities for the effectiveness of any programs in rapidly changing environments while also strengthening local capacity in relation to all components of disaster management.

Gender Equality and Women's Safety

"Children see VAW (violence against women) in the home, and it is normalised. The women [want] to create a generation that sees VAW as bad, not as normal, in order to cut the cycle." Female community leader, Solomon Islands

Christianity is at the heart of Pacific culture, with approximately **95 percent** of Pacific Islanders identifying as Christians. To achieve significant positive change in gender equality we therefore need to work with faith leaders to change attitudes towards gender equality and by extension improve women's safety in the region.

The Pacific region has some the world's highest rates of violence against women and girls. The UNFPA reports that the first sexual experience for more than 45 percent of girls in Vanuatu is forced. More than 65 percent of women in Kiribati and Fiji have experienced intimate partner violence in the past 12

months, and some form of gender-based violence directly affects more than 50 percent of women and girls across all Pacific countries. This is more than **20 percent higher** than the **global average**. Violence against women and girls is a violation of human rights and is the most graphic illustration of the overall issue of gender inequality in the Pacific. Women and girls in the Pacific region experience constant and continual inequalities including low levels of participation in decision making, limited economic opportunities, and restricted access to basic services and rights.

Over **67 percent of women** in PNG, 63.5 percent in Solomon Islands and 60 percent in Vanuatu report having **experienced violence** from an intimate partner over their lifetime, while in Timor-Leste that number is 58.8 percent. Intimate partner violence is often normalised and justified by individuals, families, and communities. Women and girls with **disability** face up to **10 times more gender-based violence** than those without disability in the region.

One of the key aspects of World Vision's work in the Pacific region is to promote gender equality and address the root causes of gender-based violence, which affects up to **two-thirds of women** in some Pacific countries. World Vision uses an innovative approach called Channels of Hope, which engages faith leaders and communities to challenge harmful social norms and attitudes that perpetuate inequality and violence against women and girls. Through participatory workshops, dialogues, and action plans, Channels of Hope empowers men and women to become agents of change for gender justice and peace in their families and communities. World Vision has implemented Channels of Hope – Gender programming in several Pacific countries, such as Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Fiji, and has seen positive results in terms of increased awareness, reduced violence, improved relationships, and enhanced women's participation and leadership. World Vision believes that Channels of Hope is a valuable tool in beginning to break the cycle and empowering women and girls in the region.

Our programs have spanned close to 10 years and have helped to increase knowledge and awareness of gender issues and gender-based violence. Noting that in order to engage civil society we also need to compliment the input of community leaders and promote the voice of women throughout initial project design and implementation.

It is important to also acknowledge the work that needs to be done with the next generation of men and boys.

World Vision also works directly with men and boys to challenge unhealthy norms and practices and equip them with the skills and tools to express their emotions using non-violent techniques while also overcoming negative gender stereotypes, and previous personal experiences of violence and trauma that perpetuate gender inequity.

With support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Gender Action Platform (GAP), World Vision Vanuatu developed an 11-session small group therapy program for perpetrators of

violence, facilitated by faith leaders with specialist training, and mentored by World Vision staff. The purpose of the program is to assist men to reduce and cease family and domestic violence, by addressing attitudes and behaviours around abuse, while creating opportunities for men to understand the impact of their violence on their partners and families.

It is necessary to have multi-pronged approach to reduce the rates of violence in the region and greater support is needed to change generations on unacceptable behaviour towards women and girls.

In line with the 2012 Gender Equality Declaration focus should be on working with governments and key stakeholders to enhance the economic advancement of women that creates access, agency, and equitable systems by supporting livelihoods for women to enhance the development of Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) in both urban and rural settings. Lifting specific barriers such as access to support services, access to finance, improved skill, gender inclusive financial and business training and creation of an enabling environment are all positive steps in creating increased safety for women and girls.

Conclusion

Whilst there are an array of key priorities for Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region, World Vision, in consultation with our Pacific partners, outlines three key priority areas and recommends (1) that 25 percent of Pacific Resilience Facility funding be directed to Nature-based Solutions to mitigate the effects of climate change; (2) that stronger focus be placed on natural disasters and emergencies preparedness, including the need for conflict prevention, peacebuilding and capacity building; and (3) that increased support to partnering with local faith and community leaders to promote gender equality, and social inclusion, and better equip communities and governments to support safety of women and children. We believe that focusing on the three key areas of climate, emergency preparedness, and gender equality contribute to continuing aspirations for economic, environmental and social development in the Pacific region.

About World Vision Australia

For over six decades, World Vision Australia has been working towards eliminating existing poverty and its root causes. As one of Australia's largest International Non-Government Organisations (INGO), with over sixty years' experience in the sector, and working with the help of everyday Australians as a leader in the industry, World Vision has helped to change the lives of over 27.1 million children around the world. With over 100 locations worldwide, World Vision delivers an impact where others cannot. We go where the need is greatest – where many others cannot go or will not go – to help the world's most vulnerable. With our focus on the sustained wellbeing of children, especially the most vulnerable, we channel our efforts into four main categories:

1. Humanitarian and Emergency Relief.
2. Child Community Development (Child Sponsorship, Child Rescue, Chosen program).
3. Our Australian First Nations Program
4. Climate Change.

Globally, our work is supported by 35,000 staff and 3.3 million people who volunteer their efforts to make a difference. The global reach and impact of the charity is vast. In 2022, the organisation's work meant that 29.6 million people received humanitarian assistance and 10.3 million people in 52 countries were reached with food support, 3 million people accessed clean water and 1.6 million children were safeguarded by child protection activities.