

ACFID Humanitarian Reference Group submission to the JSCFADT Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and the Pacific region

ACFID's Humanitarian Reference Group (HRG) would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for the opportunity to provide this submission on Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

The Humanitarian Reference Group (HRG) of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission into the JSCFADT Foreign Affairs & Aid Subcommittee's Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

The HRG is the independent voice of humanitarian agencies in Australia. It is made up of ACFID's members with significant operational involvement in humanitarian response. The HRG works in international humanitarian assistance to share information, strengthen coordination, advocate to strengthen humanitarian response and engage in policy dialogue with DFAT. HRG members work across a range of areas including protracted crises, disaster risk reduction, humanitarian effectiveness, civil-military engagement, and protection.

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Executive Summary

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and our members welcome the Government's continued interest in responding to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region. Australian Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) have a long history of working in the Pacific and partnering with Pacific Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) – with some partnerships extending for over a century.

This submission will respond to section 3B of the terms of reference: "Evaluate Australia's role in supporting Pacific nations during natural disasters and national emergencies, including pandemics."

The Asia-Pacific is the most disaster-prone region in the world. The multidimensional impacts of climate change, economic downturn and cost of living pressures, particularly with the lingering effects of COVID-19, demand Australia and the international community's attention. The increasing tendency for multifaceted disasters, with compounding impact, raises the probability that initial estimates for the need of humanitarian assistance, will in fact be an under count.¹

"Climate change is the single biggest threat to the region's security. Under current trends global temperature rise will exceed 1.5°C before 2040 and 2°C between 2041 and 2060 unless there are rapid, deep and sustained reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions. As well as more frequent and intense climate induced disasters, the region also faces the impacts of deforestation and biodiversity loss with a significant depletion of certain natural resources that are necessary to sustaining livelihoods." - Blue Pacific 2050 Strategy²

According to the United Nations 2024 Global Humanitarian Overview:³

- In 2022, over 140 disasters struck the Asia-Pacific region, affecting over 64 million people and leading to over 7,500 deaths.
- Nearly 80 per cent of the world's climate-induced displacement happens in Asia and the Pacific, mostly triggered by climate-related and geological hazards such as monsoon rains, floods, tropical cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and landslides.
- As a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), disasters cause more damage in Asia-Pacific than in any other region, and the gap appears to be widening.
- Last year alone, disasters in the region caused economic damages estimated at US\$57 billion.
- At the end of 2022, some 69 million people in Asia-Pacific were acutely food insecure – 41.5 million people more compared to pre-pandemic levels. As of August 2023, over 28 million people in Asia and the Pacific were using coping strategies corresponding to Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3 (Crisis) or above.

¹ United Nations Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2024), "Pacific Islands," [Pacific Islands | OCHA \(unocha.org\)](https://www.unocha.org/pacific-islands)

² Pacific Islands Forum (2022), "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent", <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>

³ OCHA, 2024

Summary of Recommendations

The Humanitarian Reference Group recommends that the Australian Government:

1. Invest further in early/anticipatory action, based on credible forecasts, as a tool to significantly reduce the impacts of disasters and crises in the Pacific
2. Ensure investments in anticipatory action and disaster risk reduction have predictable funding and the mechanisms to manage this.
3. Work to ensure that all disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation efforts focus on those most marginalised by disasters: including people living with disability, people of diverse gender and sexual orientation and ethnic minorities. All disaster risk reduction investments should also progress the human rights of these communities and champion local and Indigenous knowledge.
4. Ensure that disaster risk reduction efforts should always champion and enable the priorities and leadership of local communities, their leaders, and local organisations, and funding pathways should always enable this work.
5. Ensure that investment in the Pacific includes funds prioritized for multi-hazard early warning systems across the region and community engagement to strengthen locally led prevention, early detection and timely response to disease outbreaks.
6. Works towards the Grand Bargain target of providing at least 25 percent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible. In doing so, it should ensure that this funding is directed to both implementing organisations and local coordination mechanisms.
7. Continue to invest in DFAT staff capability for responding to humanitarian crises and promoting international humanitarian reform, including through specific training for non-humanitarian posted DFAT staff in aid recipient countries and a dedicated humanitarian specialist recruitment stream within DFAT's career pathway to ensure DFAT recruits, trains and retains dedicated and skilled humanitarian experts.
8. Assess how it can address the root causes (e.g. conflict, climate change), contributing factors (e.g. inequalities) and any enabling factors that result in, or perpetuate, crises.
9. Improve Australia's whole-of-government humanitarian approach by expanding crisis taskforces to include civil society and all agencies relevant to protracted crises across the disaster cycle, including displacement and conflict contexts.
10. Support Pacific nations to develop strong, effective disaster and health frameworks, laws and policies tailored to the unique needs and contexts of the region.
11. Ensure to approach localisation from the perspective of "as local as possible, as international as necessary" when mapping out the future of Australia's humanitarian engagements.
12. Fund anticipatory action and disaster risk-reduction separately from humanitarian budgets
13. Ensure that investment in military capabilities is complemented with investment in civil society's capability to respond to disasters and crises.
14. Reaffirm Australia's commitment to civilian led humanitarian response, in line with the Oslo Guidelines, in all humanitarian responses
15. Continue to invest in institutions and processes that strengthen Australia's civil, military and police engagement.

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16. Improve Australia's whole-of-government humanitarian approach by expanding crisis taskforces to include civil society and all agencies relevant to protracted crises across the disaster cycle, including displacement and conflict contexts.

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Humanitarian response coordination in the Pacific: Australia's role

In successive crises, Australian humanitarian partners consistently provide urgent and often life-saving assistance to large proportions of the affected population through effective and rapid mobilization.

Fundamentally, every humanitarian response must adhere to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence. Ensuring respect and adherence to the humanitarian principles in all aspects of humanitarian policy and operations should be embedded within the Australian Government's structures and decision-making processes. As a key stakeholder and often a leader in the humanitarian responses in the Pacific region, the Australian Government must promote assistance based on humanitarian principles.

In keeping with the principles, Australia should commit to ensuring that humanitarian funding is allocated **on the basis of need alone**, irrespective of where that need arises. Humanitarian decisions, especially related to funding allocations, must be made independently of any other political, economic, or military motivations.

Case Study: Australian humanitarian agencies response to Tropical Cyclone Lola in Vanuatu⁴

On October 24, 2023, category 5 Tropical Cyclone Lola hit the north of Vanuatu, making landfall over Torba, the northernmost province. The cyclone then headed south, intensifying over Penama, and affecting parts of Sanma, Malampa and Shefa provinces.

On October 25, TC Lola was downgraded to category 3, with winds gusting up to 205 km/h, but the cyclone caused widespread damage, affecting a population of 110,748 individuals and 25,944 households, as estimated by the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO). Three casualties were reported, and many families lost part of their homes, suffered damage to, or loss of, their gardens, and experienced landslides and flooding.

To support the recovery, the Australian Government provided AUD \$660,000 to activate Australian Humanitarian Partnership to carry out a six-month response to the disaster.

⁴ Australian Humanitarian Partnership (2024), "Vanuatu- Tropical Cyclone Lola", [Vanuatu – Tropical Cyclone Lola \(australianhumanitarianpartnership.org\)](https://australianhumanitarianpartnership.org)

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AHP partners CARE, Save the Children and ActionAid in Vanuatu worked to meet the immediate needs of communities impacted by TC Lola and related flooding. Partners worked in close coordination with government agencies and disaster authorities at the national and provincial levels.

- CARE supported the transportation and distributions of non-food items, including dignity and shelter kits in South Maewo and South Pentecost. Approximately 7 tonnes of fresh food was distributed to 37 boarding schools (reaching 426 people) across Penama Province in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, with cuttings of root vegetables shared with 8,000 households in Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost. The CARE team also supported shelter assessments and rapid gender and protection assessments.
- Save the Children also distributed non-food items, shelter kits and hygiene kits to impacted communities, establishing Child Friendly Spaces, and providing supplies such as tarps to schools to repair damage so they could remain open for classes and as shelters for communities.
- ActionAid Vanuatu, through the Plan International consortium, facilitated a women-led response through the Women I Tok Tok Tugeta (WITTT) network. A Women-Led Needs Assessment was carried out on the island of Malekula, including identifying the needs of women and girls with disability. The assessment demonstrated the need for food, lighting, dignity kits and replacement assistive devices. Four community kitchens were established to support women to cook and share food with the community, while acting as a safe space.

Australian actors in disaster response: putting humanitarian actors first

The HRG reaffirms that Australia's support to humanitarian crises must be led by civilians and Australia's use of its military in humanitarian operations must be in line with the Oslo Guidelines on the use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief. Highly securitised disaster response excludes the voice of civil society, which is best placed to ensure inclusive and effective responses. This is especially important in countries where state and military institutions are not responsive to the needs of minority groups and vulnerable populations.

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative reinforces that humanitarian assistance must be provided based on needs alone, without influence from political or military agendas, and affirms the primary role of civilian organisations in implementing humanitarian action, particularly in areas affected by armed conflict. Ensuring that Australia's defence and humanitarian objectives remain distinct and that military objectives do not subsume humanitarian goals is critical for ensuring the ongoing

effectiveness and impact of Australia's humanitarian assistance. This is likewise consistent with the OECD guidelines, which clearly specify that "military aid and promotion of donor's security interests" do not constitute Official Development Assistance.

Humanitarian response must be principled in both its intent and in the way it is perceived. This means that the use of international military assets is best considered as complementary to existing relief mechanisms, and should only be used when there is no comparable civilian alternative, and where it supports civilian action in achieving humanitarian outcomes

DFAT is, and must remain, the lead for the Australian Government's responses to international humanitarian crises. Australia should continue to consider its military as the provider of last resort in humanitarian response, including in the Pacific. The Australian Government must uphold the clear and firm distinction between defence and humanitarian response in political and policy spaces and adequately resource civilian agencies to lead Australian Government responses, particularly when responding in the Pacific where Australia may deploy supplies and personnel. There is a continued need to build understanding and coordination between civil, military and police actors in disaster management settings, particularly in the Pacific region where Australian Defence and Police forces have played a significant role in supporting Australia's humanitarian preparedness and response.

Since its establishment, the Australian Civil-Military Centre (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 HRG members, has been supporting secondments to the ACMC since September 2009. The ACMC's program of training, exercises, dialogue, stakeholder engagement and research has been a key enabler in improving engagement between civil, military and police actors in Australia. We encourage the Australian Government to continue investing in ACMC and in these training and dialogue opportunities and supporting the participation of non-government civil society actors in them.

Scaling up anticipatory action

In its 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, OCHA commits to "support and facilitate a systemic shift to coherent and embedded anticipatory approaches, including anticipatory action." As humanitarian impacts rise

and disproportionately affect marginalised communities, scaling up and improving disaster risk reduction will be essential.⁵

Anticipatory action is defined as: “**acting ahead of predicted hazards to prevent or reduce acute humanitarian impacts before they fully unfold.** Anticipatory action works best if triggers and decision-making rules (the model) and activities (the delivery) are pre-agreed to guarantee the fast release of pre-arranged financing (the money).”⁶

“By using early warning systems and scientific advances in predicting disasters, anticipatory action maximizes the window of opportunity between the moment of prediction and the arrival of a specific forecasted shock to trigger interventions that prevent or mitigate imminent humanitarian impacts.”

- United Nations Anticipatory Action Framework, Fiji Tropical Cyclones 2023⁷

Case Study: Australian Humanitarian Partnership Disaster READY⁸

Currently in Phase II¹, Disaster Ready is a climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction and resilience program, implemented through the Australian Humanitarian Partnership.

It represents a significant investment by the Australian Government in disaster preparedness in the region and sees AHP partners delivering locally led programs through their networks in Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste.

Disaster READY was initially conceived as a five-year program. But with more than 245,000 people equipped with knowledge and resources needed to mitigate the effects of disaster and climate change in the program's final year, the Australian government committed to funding the initiative for an additional five years. This second phase of Disaster READY began in 2022 and further emphasises the inclusion of women and girls, and people with disabilities. The localisation of program design and implementation currently build on the existing partnerships in Disaster READY countries and the strengths forged in the first five years.

⁵ OCHA (2023), “OCHA's Strategic Plan 2023-2026: Transforming Humanitarian Coordination”, [OCHA's Strategic Plan 2023-2026: Transforming Humanitarian Coordination | OCHA \(unocha.org\)](#)

⁶ Relief Web (2023), “Fiji Tropical Cyclones- 2023 Anticipatory Action Framework”, [Fiji Tropical Cyclones - 2023 Anticipatory Action Framework - Fiji | ReliefWeb](#)

⁷ Relief Web, 2023

⁸ Australian Humanitarian Partnership (2024), “Preparedness”, [AHP Disaster READY \(australianhumanitarianpartnership.org\)](#); Australian Humanitarian Partnership (2024), “El Nino early impacts- Timor-Leste and Pacific”, [El Niño early impacts — Timor-Leste and Pacific \(australianhumanitarianpartnership.org\)](#)

*El Niño early impacts — Timor-Leste and Pacific*⁹

The El Niño system is predicted to bring extremely dry conditions to some areas of the region and wild weather to others. In Timor-Leste, drought is impacting agriculture, freshwater availability and food security. Countries in the Pacific are facing similar challenges due to increased cyclone activity and flooding.

Australia is supporting the pre-positioning of non-food items, water conservation and storage, establishment of water systems and support for food security.

Planned activities include:

- **Timor-Leste:** repair and improvements to water infrastructure; food security and livelihoods initiatives such as the provision of drought-resilient vegetable and crop seeds and training on resilient agricultural practices such as terracing and composting; scaling up support to Village Savings and Loans Associations to enhance economic resilience; and increasing community knowledge and understanding on how to conserve water and deal with the drought.
- **Fiji:** communities will be supported to develop drought response plans, learn about resilient agricultural techniques, and to rehabilitate forests in catchment areas. Psychosocial support training will also help communities cope with the impacts of El Niño weather events.
- **PNG:** cash and voucher distribution to support community drought preparedness, community drought response plans with a focus on the needs of women, youth and people with disabilities, climate smart agriculture training, community nutrition education and awareness-raising, improvements to WASH and support for organisations of people with disabilities to be better connected to provincial government disaster authorities.
- **Solomon Islands:** community drought response plans, and forest rehabilitation in catchments.
- **Vanuatu:** installation of water wells in dry areas, support to establish and continue community kitchens that commenced during the Tropical Cyclone Lola response.

As discussed in the submission by the Australian Red Cross, effective disaster laws and well-functioning disaster risk management systems are the foundation to all aspects of disaster risk management, risk reduction, preparedness, response, recovery, climate change adaptation and

⁹ Australian Humanitarian Partnership (2024), "El Nino early impacts", [El Niño early impacts — Timor-Leste and Pacific \(austliianhumanitarianpartnership.org\)](https://www.austliianhumanitarianpartnership.org/)

strengthening sustainable community resilience. Good disaster risk governance also supports communities to be prepared and take early action to save lives.¹⁰ The Australian Government has played an important role in championing effective disaster laws in the Pacific, including International Disaster Response Law, disaster risk governance, through promoting disaster risk management laws, policies and frameworks that help to protect and prepare communities around the world. As we face pandemics and increasingly frequent and intense disasters because of climate change, **the need for effective disaster laws, governance and frameworks which enable rapid and principled humanitarian action continues to rise.** We urge the Australian Government to continue its support for IDRL and disaster risk governance to develop strong, effective disaster and health frameworks, laws and policy to keep communities safe and save lives before, during and after disasters.

Case Study: Strengthening Disaster Resilience - the Role of the Disaster Law in Fiji's New National Disaster Risk Management Bill¹¹

Fiji, like many Pacific nations, faces recurrent natural disasters. In response to these challenges, the Fijian Government initiated the development of the National Disaster Risk Management Bill.

Since 2018, the Red Cross Disaster Law Program has collaborated with the Fijian Government and Fiji Red Cross on the review of the National Disaster Risk Management Bill. During that time, Fiji has been hit by numerous cyclones, other weather-related events, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant lessons from the review process were able to be applied and tested in real-time.

The Bill is contextualised to Fiji's unique needs, while at the same time, aligning Fiji to international instruments, standards and best practices as outlined in global and regional disaster risk reduction frameworks.

Strengthened legal frameworks for disaster risk management are truly the foundation of risk mitigation, anticipatory action, preparedness, response and recovery, and, most importantly, have a direct and tangible impact with regard to saving the lives and livelihoods of the people who need it most.

¹⁰ See IFRC (2020). *An Introduction to IFRC Disaster Law*, and IFRC (2021). *Case Study: Climate-smart disaster law in Fiji*. IFRC.

¹¹ Ibid

Inclusive humanitarian action

Australia's humanitarian policy **should enable locally led humanitarian response that places the protection of women and girls, people with disabilities, people affected by displacement, and ethnic and religious minorities at the heart of humanitarian action.** The policy needs to build systems to directly fund and share decision making power to local partners and civil society.

Shifting power to local actors and transforming systems is essential for effective and inclusive humanitarian response - and the Australian Government has signed up to do so through the Grand Bargain.

Case Study: CBM respond to Tropical Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu¹²

Tropical Cyclone Harold tore through a number of Pacific Island countries. With the most common communication messaging during the cyclone being delivered via radio and written news, blind and deaf people reported difficulty accessing vital information, including where to go to evacuate. After the cyclone hit, local disability organisations coordinated an inclusive response that worked to mitigate barriers for people with disabilities and connect with hard to reach communities. Through a collaborative effort, the Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association (VDPA) and the Vanuatu Society for People with Disabilities (VSPD) quickly mobilised to join post-disaster needs assessment teams and conduct a data validation activity to check what help people with disabilities in affected areas needed. Financial support mobilised from the Vanuatu Skills Partnership made this important work possible. VDPA staff have been sharing this information with all the organisations that are responding, to make sure the cyclone response and recovery reaches everybody.

NGOs as valuable partners for humanitarian response

Australian NGOs are an important partner to the Australian Government's humanitarian response efforts because of:

- the speed in which Australian funding to NGOs can be received on the ground in the aftermath of a disaster
- the effective and unique role that NGOs play in humanitarian response due to their local connections and relationships – with both communities and governments.

¹² CBM (2020), "Delivering a unique localised disability-inclusive humanitarian response", [Delivering a unique localised disability-inclusive humanitarian response | CBM Australia](#)

- the multi-mandated nature of many NGOs which mean they are committed to the communities with which they work before, during and after crises.
- the efficiencies in directly funding NGOs rather than channelling funds to multilaterals who often subcontract implementation back through international or local NGOs.
- the reach that ANGOs have in countries and locations beyond the Australian Government's own aid program and presence; and
- the visibility and oversight the Australian Government have over NGO's humanitarian action, including the ability to track Australian aid priorities (i.e. gender and disability inclusion), and the opportunity this provides to the Australian Government to communicate the role of Australia's assistance to the Australian community

Prioritising locally led response

Localisation or locally led humanitarian action refers to a process of recognising, respecting and strengthening local and national leadership in humanitarian action, in order to better address needs of affected populations.¹³ In the humanitarian sector, Australia has also been a signatory to the World Humanitarian Summit's (WHS) *Grand Bargain* since 2016 and the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030)*. The Grand Bargain commits Australia to support locally led humanitarian action, with a focus on ensuring quality funding is predictable, flexible and delivered more directly to local partners.

A priority area of action emerging from Pacific consultations in advance of the WHS was on better supporting local capacity and action of Pacific communities in response to humanitarian crises. This priority was reflected in the Grand Bargain, with a workstream dedicated to ensuring more support and funding for local and national responders. The Grand Bargain acknowledges that national and local actors are first responders in crises and have the greatest knowledge of local contexts and proposes that such actors be enabled to lead humanitarian responses.

However, Australian NGOs are limited by inflexible funding and the ability to transfer money to local actors. Most INGOs are limited by how donors commit funding, and actual or perceived restrictions from the donor that limit the flexibility INGOs can transfer to their local actors. During COVID-19, donors were provided more flexibility to repurpose, delay and realign funding to respond to pandemic

¹³ Humanitarian Advisory Group (2022), "Demonstrating change on locally led humanitarian action in the Pacific: Ki Namuka vata ga nikau", [Demonstrating change on locally led humanitarian action in the Pacific: Ki Namuka vata ga nikau - Humanitarian Advisory Group](#)

conditions. However, given the unprecedented nature of the crisis and context change, this flexibility was almost inevitable and is not an indication of permanent long-term funding transformation.¹⁴ The Australian Government must ensure that DFAT's policies and risk management procedures enable locally led development.

“A range of positive steps have been taken to strengthen partnership approaches, with an increase in the perceived quality of partnerships since the original baseline studies were conducted. Prior to COVID-19, there was an intentional focus on improving international agency partnership approaches, in particular for INGOs and UN agencies. This was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in improved opportunities and terms for local and national organisations and a greater focus on building stronger partnerships, in particular by INGOs. Several international actors operating in the Pacific have taken up this opportunity, while the Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) in particular, has encouraged greater engagement and partnership with disability and inclusion local partners.”¹⁵

-Humanitarian Advisory Group

¹⁴ Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2022, “Demonstrating change on locally led humanitarian action in the Pacific”

¹⁵ Ibid, 2022

Appendix A – the Pacific Humanitarian Team¹⁶

The primary function of the regional cluster coordinators and cluster support teams is to support national clusters or sectoral working groups where they exist. Where they do not, the cluster support team are still able to provide coordination and technical support related to their sector, as needed under national leadership.

During Disasters:

- **Resource mobilization** – as a recognized part of the global humanitarian system, the PHT can mobilize funding and other resources from emergency funding mechanisms and through joint international appeals.
- **Emergency stocks** – PHT members maintain emergency stocks of key humanitarian supplies for quick deployment during a disaster.
- **Technical expertise** – PHT members can deploy technical experts in a range of areas and sectors to support national governments and NGOs in assessing needs and planning, implementation and monitoring disaster response activities.
- **Coordination support** - cluster support teams and UNOCHA can support national coordination and information management, as well as specialized areas such as civil-military coordination.
- **Assessment support** – PHT members with specific expertise can support nationally-led needs assessment, including coordination, planning, implementation and analysis of results.
- **Information management support** - PHT members can deploy information management experts to support managing the large amounts of constantly changing information during a disaster.
- **Communication and advocacy** – PHT can support national governments, NGOs and communities with ensuring effective national and international communication and advocating to ensure people and organizations in need receive assistance.

¹⁶ Relief Web (2024), “Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT)”, [Pacific Region: Pacific Humanitarian Team \(PHT\) | ReliefWeb Response](#)

Outside of Disasters:

The PHT's role is to work with national governments and partners to ensure necessary arrangements are in place to enable effective international support to a nationally-led disaster response. The PHT's collective focus is on ensuring preparedness to respond based on current national capacity and systems.

The PHT has adopted a country-specific approach to its preparedness work. This recognizes that every country and every context is different and requires unique approach. In practice, this means the PHT will seek to work with national governments and partners to better understand existing national systems and agree in advance how the PHT could support that country during a disaster