



Level 2, Donkey Wheel House, 673 Bourke Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000
+613 9650 1291 • enquiries@livelearn.org • www.livelearn.org

Friday, June 28, 2024

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

On 15 May 2024, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade resolved to have the Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee inquire into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific Region.

Live & Learn is a network of localised, autonomous organisations with extensive reach in Pacific communities. Working in more than 295 communities in 13 Pacific Islands Countries, Live & Learn is committed to building climate resilience through food systems, water security, energy access, and healthy ecosystems. Since its inception in 1992, Live & Learn has delivered more than 150 development projects, many of which have been supported extensively by Australian Aid.

Live & Learn's response to the inquiry is described below:

Ensuring climate resilience in the Pacific region is crucial and the most significant priority given its vulnerability to the impacts of climate change.

We recommend that the Joint Standing Committee consider the following.

1. **Greater Investments in Infrastructure Resilience:** Build or retrofit infrastructure to withstand extreme weather events like cyclones, floods, and sea-level rise. This strongly emphasises supporting nature-based solutions such as mangrove restoration and natural barriers to protect coastlines.
2. **Greater emphasis on Promoting Resilient Food Systems:** Support farmers in adopting climate-smart agricultural practices. - Diversify crops and promote water-efficient irrigation techniques to enhance resilience to droughts and changing rainfall patterns.
3. **Protect Marine and Oceans Ecosystems:** Establish marine protected areas and sustainable fishing practices to preserve biodiversity and increase resilience to ocean acidification and warming. Encourage community-led conservation efforts to protect coral reefs and marine resources per the Blue Pacific Strategy.
4. **Improving Disaster Preparedness and Response:** Develop early warning systems and emergency response plans to mitigate the impact of natural disasters. The Australian Humanitarian Partnership (AHP) must be localised, and financial resources should be channeled directly to Pacific NGOs to build disaster preparedness with national Governments.
5. **Enhance Climate Information and Data Sharing:** Strengthen meteorological services to provide accurate climate forecasts and early warning information. Share climate data and information among countries in the region to improve preparedness and adaptation efforts.

6. Promoting Climate Education and Awareness: Educate communities about climate change impacts and adaptation strategies. Empower youth and local leaders to drive climate resilience initiatives, advocate for sustainable practices, and place Indigenous Knowledge at the centre of resilience building.
7. Investing in Regional Climate Resilience Initiatives: Foster partnerships and collaboration among Pacific island nations, regional organisations, and Pacific-based NGOs to address shared climate challenges. Share best practices, technologies, and resources to build collective resilience in the region. By implementing these strategies and fostering collaboration at local, national, and regional levels, the Pacific region can enhance its resilience to climate change and build a sustainable future for its communities.

Australia has actively supported the Pacific region across various areas such as trade, investment, infrastructure development, security, and capacity building. Regarding trade, Australia has been working well on enhancing economic ties with Pacific nations through trade agreements and preferential access to Australian markets. This has helped in boosting economic growth and development in the region. Furthermore, Australia has also been involved in promoting investments in the Pacific, particularly in critical sectors like infrastructure, renewable energy, and agriculture. Australia aims to contribute to the region's sustainable development by facilitating investments and providing financial assistance. Australia has supported various projects in infrastructure development to improve connectivity and foster economic development in the Pacific. This includes funding for constructing roads, ports, and other essential infrastructure to support the region's growth.

Moreover, Australia has been working closely with Pacific nations to enhance security cooperation through joint military exercises, capacity building for law enforcement agencies, and disaster response training. These efforts address common security challenges and promote regional stability. Australia's comprehensive approach to supporting the Pacific in trade, investment, infrastructure development, security, and capacity building demonstrates its commitment to being a reliable partner for the Pacific family. By strengthening ties and collaborating in these critical areas, Australia is enhancing its position as a partner of choice for the region.

Enhancing Australia's: regional economic integration and mobility in the Pacific can bring about numerous opportunities for both parties. Here are some key areas where Australia can strengthen to foster closer economic ties and increased mobility in the Pacific region:

- **Trade Agreements:** Australia can work towards establishing more comprehensive trade agreements with Pacific nations to promote greater economic integration and greater equality of Pacific aspirations. By reducing trade barriers and tariffs, Australia can increase trade and investment flows and support economic resilience to climate change in the Pacific, but the Pacific cannot trade its way out of the costs imposed by climate change as markets are too small and too dispersed.
- **Investment Promotion:** Australia should be more proactive in promoting investments in critical sectors in the Pacific, particularly renewable energy, water infrastructure and agriculture, which are sectors that can build climate resilience. Economic growth can be fostered by encouraging Australian businesses to invest in the region, noting that the market is dispersed and small and alliances between the private sector and other stakeholders should be encouraged.
- **Skills Development and Capacity Building:** Australia is supporting important initiatives to enhance the skills and capacity of the workforce in the Pacific. This can be achieved through training programs, scholarships, and exchanges that promote knowledge sharing and skills development. A nuanced approach should be taken to the labour mobility programme. In many countries, e.g., the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, these programmes are causing immense social division, skills drain and cultural decline, whereas a country like Tonga is managing such initiatives better with remittances contributing to the economic fabric at the community level.
- **Infrastructure Development:** Investing in critical and climate-resilient infrastructure projects in the Pacific can improve connectivity and boost economic development. Australia successfully collaborates with Pacific nations to fund and implement infrastructure projects that benefit both regions.

- **Tourism Promotion:** Australia will strengthen its work on promoting tourism exchanges and partnerships with Pacific nations to boost the tourism sector in both regions. By showcasing the Pacific's diverse cultural and natural attractions, tourism can become a key driver of economic growth to a much greater extent than we currently see.
- **Sustainable Development:** Australia can collaborate with the Pacific on sustainable development initiatives, focusing on environmental protection, climate change resilience, and conservation efforts. By jointly addressing pressing environmental challenges, both regions can work towards a sustainable future, but Australia needs to be the sustainability leader in the Pacific, which will improve relations and credibility.

Australia's climate support and engagement needs to be better aimed at reversing the dire deterioration of ecosystems and biodiversity, which continues to drive significant changes to Earth's life support systems and communities in the Pacific who depend on them. The Pacific region spans 15 per cent of the world's surface and, according to the Pacific Community (SPC), is home to 44 per cent of the world's endangered species and thousands of endemic animal and plant species.

The Australian engagement with the Pacific needs to fully incorporate the reality that the survival of Pacific Islanders and Pacific culture depends on the ecosystems that support food systems and water availability.

In addition to these ecosystems and biodiversity loss, the Pacific is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, threatened by natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes, volcanoes, droughts and floods, and the effects of climate change. These vulnerabilities are compounded by economic and social factors such as global economic fluctuations, conflict, population growth and migration, poorly planned coastal development, unplanned urban growth and land use, environmental and ecosystem degradation, and unsustainable use of natural resources, as in extensive logging and mining.

The Australian Aid programme needs greater urgency and ambition to address these challenges directly and cost-effectively through localised development initiatives that benefit communities. The global targets on biodiversity and the realisation of sustainable development goals (SDGs) are attainable with the full and leading inclusion of Indigenous people.

The shrinking space for civil society in aid and development in the Pacific poses significant obstacles to practical development work and imposes challenges for the Australian government's ambitions and aspirations in the Pacific. This shrinking space will also negatively affect climate adaptation and mitigation at the local level.

Funding for civil society has become increasingly scarce, risk-averse, and compliance-heavy, which will prevent locally-led development and collaboration between Australian and Pacific organisations. This particularly applies to challenging political and economic environments.

The delivery of humanitarian disaster aid in the Pacific region faces several challenges and shortcomings that can hinder its effectiveness and impact.

- **Timeliness:** One common critique is the issue of delayed response and slow aid delivery following disasters in the Pacific region. This is not the case with the Australian response. We commend the responsiveness of Australian Humanitarian responses in the Pacific. They are integrated, relevant, and timely, especially when providing essential supplies, such as food, water, shelter, and medical assistance, all of which support recovery.
- **Coordination and Communication:** A challenge with delivering humanitarian responses is the lack of effective coordination and communication among aid organisations, government agencies, and local communities during disaster responses. Poor coordination can lead to duplication of efforts, gaps in assistance, and inefficiencies in delivering aid. In the Pacific, Australian responses can communicate better with national disaster clusters and local organisations. Not enough resources are channeled into the locally-led development process, making responses less cost-effective.

- **Cultural Sensitivity and Local Engagement:** Aid agencies sometimes face criticism for not adequately considering local cultural norms, practices, and preferences in their response efforts. Lack of engagement with local communities and insufficient understanding of their needs can result in inappropriate or ineffective aid. Locally led development is critical in overcoming these challenges, and there needs to be a complete paradigm shift within Australian engagement to better accommodate this. This is happening slowly; encouraging and ongoing commitment is needed.
- **Accountability and Transparency:** Transparency and accountability in delivering humanitarian aid are essential to ensure that resources are used effectively and reach those most in need. We believe that Australia is doing exceptionally well in this area with high transparency in funding allocation, decision-making processes, and monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian programs.
- **Sustainability and Resilience:** Some concerns focus on the short-term nature of humanitarian aid in the Pacific, which may not always address underlying vulnerabilities and build long-term resilience. There is a need for greater emphasis on resilient development approaches that strengthen local capacities to prepare for and respond to future disasters. This must include protecting ecosystems, food, and water resources and building physical structures. Much more emphasis needs to be placed on empowering local actors to sustain resilient development, including taking a less risk-averse approach.
- **Climate Change Adaptation:** Given the increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters in the Pacific, humanitarian aid is needed to integrate climate change adaptation strategies. Concerns arise when aid efforts do not sufficiently address the underlying drivers of vulnerability to climate risks. Addressing these critiques requires a multi-faceted approach that emphasises timely response, enhanced coordination and communication, increased cultural sensitivity, improved accountability and transparency, a focus on sustainability and resilience, and integration of climate change adaptation measures in humanitarian disaster aid delivery in the Pacific region.

Based on the above, Live & Learn recommends Australia's engagement that promotes locally led development, climate resilience, and nature-based solutions requires a holistic and participatory approach that empowers local communities, builds their resilience to climate change, and leverages the natural environment for sustainable development through partnerships that are equitable, inclusive, and respectful of local knowledge and perspectives to promote ownership and sustainability of development initiatives.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share our views to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade.

Yours sincerely,

Christian Nielsen
Executive Director