

## Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with ASEAN

*“Foster greater cooperation in disaster preparedness, mitigation and emergency response as well as rehabilitation and reconstruction <sup>1</sup>”*

*“Strengthen networking and interactions with and among private sectors, civil societies, experts and scholars in order to tap their expertise initiatives and ideas...<sup>2</sup>”*

World Vision Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and support community disaster resilience and response capacity in the region.

World Vision Australia's submission will focus on ASEAN's on-going commitment to respond to natural disasters in South East Asia. ASEAN, as a regional association with a membership of ten countries across South-East Asia has an integral role to play in promoting and improving people's lives, particularly those of the most vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> World Vision is committed to supporting ASEAN countries build their disaster response capacity by working to ensure our programs in ASEAN countries, where we have an operational presence effectively contribute to disaster preparedness, prevention and response.

In 2008, the ASEAN secretariat made a significant contribution to the international community's response to Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar through its coordination of the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) comprised of the Government of Myanmar and United Nations (UN) agencies. The TCG expanded the humanitarian access provided to humanitarian agencies to operate within the Irrawaddy Delta region, the region most affected by Cyclone Nargis. The TCG also helped to escalate issues which had plagued the immediate humanitarian response and advocate for their swift resolution. For example ASEAN and the UN were able to resolve a discrepancy between the mandated Foreign Exchange Certificate and the US Dollar that had led to a loss of up to 25 per cent of funds being brought into the country for the response through the TCG.

ASEAN was also instrumental in the success of the Post-Nargis Joint Assessment (PONJA) placed under the TCG, which was to pave the way for a coordinated inter-agency and inter-governmental response. The success and comprehensive nature of PONJA in its response coordination and disaster assessments is an example of best practice within the humanitarian industry.

However, for ASEAN to maximise its long-term contribution to disaster preparedness, mitigation, emergency response as well as rehabilitation and reconstruction in the region, it must strive for greater engagement with non-government humanitarian and development agencies (NGOs). Local and international NGOs are key stakeholders in responding to humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters and have decades of relevant experience and lessons learnt. Despite the effectiveness of the TCG in fostering a coordinated response to Cyclone Nargis, NGOs had no direct representation on the TCG and limited direct access to the ASEAN secretariat during the response. As a result, NGOs had limited means available to escalate the issues being faced by their beneficiaries to ASEAN or the TCG.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 17 – Joint Declaration on the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Partnership

<sup>2</sup> Article 22 - Joint Declaration on the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Partnership

<sup>3</sup> Acknowledged in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter

The Australian Government, as a key ASEAN dialogue partner is well positioned to strengthen ASEAN's humanitarian and natural disaster response mandate by broadening ASEAN and its member country engagement with reputable humanitarian non-government agencies. Australia should support enhanced ASEAN consultative mechanisms to facilitate and foster greater cooperation with key NGOs in disaster preparedness, mitigation, emergency response, rehabilitation and reconstruction at both the field and ASEAN secretariat levels. This should be pursued by Australian Government Ministers, Australia's Ambassador to ASEAN, senior government officials and the Australian government representative based in the ASEAN-secretariat through their ongoing multilateral and bilateral engagement with ASEAN and its member countries.

Specific ways in which Australia should advocate for enhanced ASEAN – NGO engagement include:

1. Inclusion of relevant NGO stakeholders within the Coordinating Office for the ASEAN Humanitarian Taskforce and the post -Nargis transition team in the implementation of the post-Nargis recovery and preparedness plan
2. At the ASEAN-Australia Post Ministerial Conference and through the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program Joint Planning Committee
3. Inclusion of NGOs and their role in assisting communities in ASEAN countries to prepare, respond and recover from humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters in the implementation of the ASEAN-Australia five year plan of action. We would encourage Australia to publically report on progress made on an annual basis<sup>4</sup>
4. The on-going participation of key international and local NGOs in the ASEAN led Regional Forum voluntary field level activities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Plan of Action supports the implementation of the Joint Declaration on the ASEAN-Australia comprehensive partnership signed and adopted in November 2007

<sup>5</sup> In May 2009, representatives from the Australian Defence Force, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and AusAID participated in the first ever ASEAN Regional Forum voluntary field activity to demonstrate disaster response capabilities. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Voluntary Demonstration of Response (VDR) on disaster relief co-hosted by the Philippines and the United States, demonstrated air, land and sea response capabilities of contributing nations to the effects of a fictional super-typhoon in the Central Luzon region of the Philippines. An invitation was sent to Australian NGOs which is welcomed and World Vision encourages the ongoing inclusion of local NGO in future voluntary field activities.