



# Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

28 June 2024

## About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world’s largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don’t take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs.

Highlights from our [2022-23 Annual Report](#):



**18,000+**  
members and volunteers  
acting for humanity



**324,000+**  
Australians supported during  
33 emergency activations

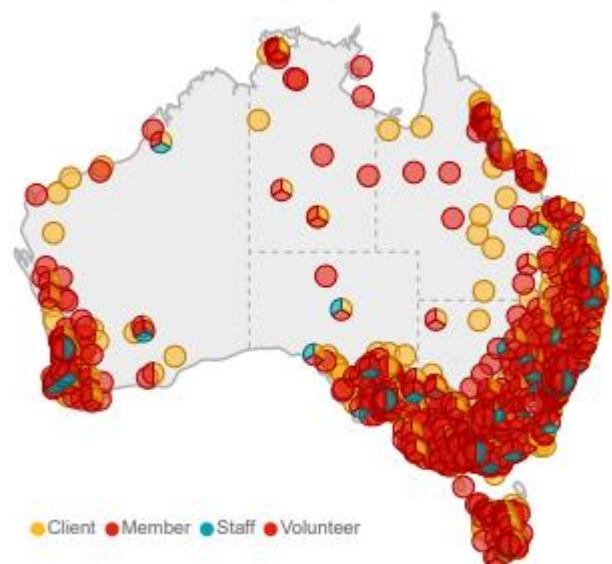


**216,000+**  
social support hours  
delivered



**19,700+**  
people from 125 countries  
supported through migration  
programs

Location of Red Cross people and clients



## **Purpose**

The Australian Government is seeking feedback on Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region, as referred by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for inquiry.

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to provide our input to this inquiry. We have focused our response on areas where we have extensive expertise and that align with the unique humanitarian mandate of Australian Red Cross and of our sister Pacific Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies. Thus, the following sections address the Terms of Reference **1, 3(a), 3(b), and 4(b)**.

## **Summary of recommendations**

Australian Red Cross recommends that the Australian Government:

### **Recommendation 1**

Champion locally led humanitarian action in the Pacific by ensuring that local partners have a seat at decision-making tables and receive multi-year flexible support.

### **Recommendation 2**

Influence key stakeholders, including States, multi-lateral financial institutions and the private sector, to remove barriers for local actors to access climate financing that enable them to lead the design and implementation of contextually relevant climate adaptation initiatives.

### **Recommendation 3**

Ensure that its investment in the Pacific includes funds prioritised for:

- multi-hazard early warning systems across the region;
- community engagement to strengthen locally led prevention, early detection and timely response to disease outbreaks;
- gender mainstreaming programs that provide equitable and inclusive humanitarian responses, tailored to the cultural and social contexts of Pacific communities; and
- organisations that support people with disabilities and for disability inclusion, equity and rights.

### **Recommendation 4**

Support Pacific nations to develop strong, effective disaster and health frameworks, laws and policies tailored to the unique needs and contexts of the region.

## 1. Key priorities for Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

- 1.1 The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent outlines key concerns and aspirations for Pacific nations, collectively determined and agreed upon by Pacific leaders.<sup>1</sup> This strategy emphasises resilience, security, and prosperity for all Pacific peoples in the face of climate change and disasters.
- 1.2 As organisations that are auxiliary to their governments in the humanitarian field, Pacific Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies are dedicated to ensuring that all Pacific peoples remain resilient to climate change and disasters. This commitment aligns with the broader movement regional goal of leading global climate action.
- 1.3 Collectively, Pacific Red Cross leadership acknowledges the many interrelated and sometimes overlapping challenges facing the Ocean Continent. This includes climate change, disasters, population displacement, relocation, migration, growing populations, non-communicable diseases, epidemics and pandemics, the need for the elimination of nuclear weapons and nuclear waste dumping, water and sanitation needs, gender-based violence and inequalities, weak governance and institutional arrangements which exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.4 With a presence across 12 Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste, Pacific National Societies share a common inheritance of the Blue Pacific Continent, along with its values, interests, and challenges. There is a strong commitment to working collectively to achieve humanitarian priorities through locally led solutions tailored for Pacific communities.
- 1.5 Pacific National Societies are integral to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, working alongside governments to build resilient, secure, and prosperous communities. Their efforts contribute to the region's leadership in global climate action, ensuring a sustainable future for all Pacific peoples.

### Recommendation 1

The Australian Government champion locally led humanitarian action in the Pacific by ensuring that local partners have a seat at decision-making tables and receive multi-year flexible support.

## 2. Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation responses in the Pacific

- 2.1 The Pacific region has weathered many storms and bears the brunt of the harsh reality of climate change. Despite this, Pacific people remain resilient, facing new and emerging challenges with a sense of solidarity and ingenuity. Pacific Island Nations experience some of the highest relative GDP losses, between 1% and 9%, due to extreme climate events, which is also exacerbating underlying vulnerabilities.<sup>3</sup>
- 2.2 Pacific National Societies are at the forefront of efforts to prepare for and anticipate the changing impact of disasters across the Pacific. Local actors, with their deep understanding of community contexts, are best positioned to design and implement effective climate adaptation and resilience initiatives that ultimately benefit everyone.

<sup>1</sup> Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. (2022). *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

<sup>2</sup> Pacific Red Cross Leadership Meeting. (2023). *Pacific Leader's Outcome Statement*. Unpublished statement.

<sup>3</sup> UNCTAD. (2020). *Multiple disasters and debt sustainability in Small Island Developing States* (UNCTAD Research Paper No. 55, UNCTAD/SER.RP/2020/14).



## Evaluate Australia's climate support and initiatives aimed at mitigating climate change and assisting Pacific nations in adapting to its impacts.

- 2.3 We welcome the Australian Government's re-engagement with the Green Climate Fund and its contributions to the Pacific Resilience Facility.<sup>4</sup> We also urge the Government to continue to play an active role in shaping the new Loss and Damage Fund. It is critical to build new types of partnerships to address the growing and increasingly complex challenges we face in the Pacific region (and globally), and Australia is well placed to bring together a broad spectrum of actors across the public, private, scientific, technology and financial sectors and harness their expertise, knowledge and resources for new models of collective impact. To ensure these new models are successful, and in the spirit of Australia's International Development Policy, local actors and communities must be at the heart of decision-making and implementation.
- 2.4 Australia can be a powerful voice for greater convergence of humanitarian, climate and development financing for local actors that not only enables sustainable long-term programming but also sustainable local organisations. The great majority of local actors in the Pacific are already operating across the humanitarian-climate-development spectrum but many still struggle to obtain the support they need to sustain their institutions and serve their communities for the long-term. We urge the government to continue advocating for a new collective quantified goal on climate finance (NCQG) that maximises both scale and impact. Australia has been a strong supporter of the Pacific who, alongside other Small Island States and African, Latin American, and Caribbean nations, are calling for loss and damage to be integrated into the NCQG as the third pillar of climate finance.<sup>5</sup> The NCQG, to be adopted at COP29, will be the global mechanism for international climate finance after 2025. It is critical that loss and damage, as well as adaptation and mitigation, are integrated into the NCQG if countries are to collectively meet the scale of finance needed to address the impacts of climate change on those communities who are most affected by the climate crisis, including Pacific Island nations.
- 2.5 The Pacific region faces numerous known risks, such as seasonal cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, coastal flooding and new epidemic outbreaks, along with the need to model for yet unknown threats. To address these challenges effectively, it is crucial to support scaled-up multi-hazard early warning systems, robust early action, and contingency planning for both known and anticipated risks. These efforts should be backed by predictable, pre-positioned financing to ensure timely actions are taken, mitigating the impact of disasters on lives and livelihoods. We commend Australia's investment in the IFRC's multilateral Disaster Response Emergency Fund (DREF), which enables anticipatory action before forecasted events and rapid response when they occur. Continued and increased investment in these mechanisms is essential, as they have proven benefits for communities affected by disasters and crises. From the start of 2023, the DREF has supported the responses of six Pacific National Societies with almost CHF 3 million in rapid response funds targeting more than 100,000 people in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>6</sup>
- 2.6 Climate-driven population movement is expected to increase in the coming years, both internally and regionally in the Pacific.<sup>7</sup> It will be vital to raise awareness about specific vulnerabilities of migrants linked to climate change and to reduce risks, promote preparedness, and build resilience and capacity for informed decision making. Regionally, we expect to see more people seeking safe and orderly migration routes to Australia including labour mobility opportunities, where available, to escape climate driven disasters, resource shortages and conflicts.<sup>8</sup> We urge the Australian

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water. (2023, June 15). *COP28: Australia announces support for Pacific*.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, M. (2024, March 18). *Loss and Damage Fund Board: Getting it Right from the Start*. Heinrich Böll Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Fiji Red Cross Society in 2023, Marshall Islands Red Cross Society in 2024, Micronesia Red Cross Society in 2023 and in 2023, Papua New Guinea Red Cross Society in 2024 and Vanuatu Red Cross Society on two occasions in 2023.

<sup>7</sup> UNDP. (2019). *Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific: What's at Stake?*. UNDP.

<sup>8</sup> IFRC. (2021). *Planned Relocation in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change: Guidance for Asia Pacific National Societies*. IFRC.

Government prevent and address humanitarian needs created by climate-induced population movement and displacement across the region, for example by adopting of the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).<sup>9</sup> The GCM contains specific provisions relating to climate mobility. Endorsement provides a key opportunity for Australia to demonstrate its commitment to preventing and addressing the humanitarian impacts of climate change across the region. It will ensure people can continue living on their lands for as long as possible and move with safety and dignity before a disaster strikes or places become uninhabitable.

## **Evaluate Australia's role in supporting Pacific nations during natural disasters and national emergencies, including pandemics.**

- 2.7 Aid is most effective when it is delivered on the basis of the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence and is free from political, security, economic and military objectives. Impartial assistance should be provided to individuals, groups and communities on the basis of need alone, prioritising those experiencing the most vulnerability.<sup>10</sup> We welcome Australia's championing of gender equality and disability equity and inclusion and urge Australia's continued commitment that aid be protected and allocated on the basis of need to ensure assistance reaches those most impacted.
- 2.8 Australian Red Cross and the Australian Government have committed to work together to ensure the safety, dignity and well-being of those facing vulnerability through a series of joint pledges agreed to at the 2019 International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, including the *2020-2023 Pledge on the Prevention of and Response to Sexual and Gender Based Violence*<sup>11</sup>, *2020-2023 Pledge on Localisation*<sup>12</sup>, *2020-2023 Joint Pledge on Modern Slavery*<sup>13</sup>, *2020-2023 Regional Pledge on the Protection of Migrants*<sup>14</sup>, and the *2020-2023 Open Pledge to Report on the Domestic Implementation of International Humanitarian Law*<sup>15</sup>. We note there are opportunities arising in the context of the next International Conference to further pursue joint objectives in relation to universal compliance with IHL, strengthening disaster risk governance, empowering local leadership and protecting people from humanitarian impacts of extreme climate and weather events.
- 2.9 As the scale, scope and frequency of disasters increases in the Pacific, more response operations will see civilian humanitarian agencies and militaries operating in the same space. Recognised international guidance recommends that military assets only be used when 'no comparable civilian alternative' is available and only the use of military assets 'can meet a critical humanitarian need'.<sup>16</sup> The Oslo Guidelines<sup>17</sup>, the Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines for the Use of Foreign Military Assets in Natural Disaster Response Operations<sup>18</sup> and International Disaster Response Law (IDRL) Guidelines (Guidelines for the Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance) also offer guidance on when and how foreign militaries and civil defence assets are used in disaster response. We note that, particularly from the viewpoint of UN agencies and the broader humanitarian community, and as outlined in the Oslo Guidelines, the use of foreign military assets, armed escorts, joint humanitarian-military operations and other actions

<sup>9</sup> IOM. (2018). *Global Compact for Migration*. IOM.

<sup>10</sup> OCHA. (2024). *OCHA Message on Humanitarian Principles*. OCHA.

<sup>11</sup> 33<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Pledge: *Prevention of and Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence – PS330222*.

<sup>12</sup> 33<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Pledge: *Strengthening locally led humanitarian action with a focus on the Pacific - SP330233*.

<sup>13</sup> 33<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Pledge: *Modern Slavery – SP330198*.

<sup>14</sup> 33<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Pledge: *Protection of Migrants – SP330199*.

<sup>15</sup> 33<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Pledge: *Open Pledge to Report on the Domestic Implementation of International Humanitarian Law - OP330050*.

<sup>16</sup> Australian Civil-Military Centre. (2023). *Same Space, Different Mandates: 2023 Edition*. Australian Civil-Military Centre.

<sup>17</sup> OCHA. (2017). *Oslo Guidelines: Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief*. Revision 1.1.

<sup>18</sup> APC-MADRO. (2014). *Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines for the Use of Foreign Military Assets in Natural Disaster Response Operations*. Version 8.01.

involving visible interaction with the military should be the option of last resort. We encourage the Australian Government to follow these guidelines when making decisions about deploying military personnel and assets to support disaster responses in the Pacific region.

- 2.10 We commend Australia for championing locally led humanitarian action, particularly in the Pacific region. Over the past five years, Australian Red Cross has pursued significant change to better prioritise listening to local partners and is actively seeking to change our ways of working and operating model to meet their needs. Collectively, through our partnership with DFAT, we have developed flexible financing and operational models that have further empowered Pacific National Societies and enabled them to respond to requests from their governments to scale up, be prepared for, and respond to humanitarian need. Capacity strengthening also needs to invest in and be more explicitly linked to approaches that support organisational development and that helps local humanitarian actors transform their organisational models.<sup>19</sup> We welcome Australia's commitment to multi-year flexible financing to strengthen capacities to deliver relevant and effective humanitarian services; and note, a similar degree of support will be needed for locally led climate adaptation, pandemic preparedness and prevention and resilience building activities.
- 2.11 Epidemics begin and end in communities and are as much a social problem as a health problem.<sup>20</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how central communities and their behaviours are to epidemic prevention and control. When meaningfully engaged, and linked to effective frontline service response capacity, communities and other civil society actors play a pivotal role in prevention, early detection and timely response to infectious disease threats. The pandemic disrupted routine immunisation and communicable disease prevention and control programs and diverted health care and surveillance efforts, exacerbating pre-existing threats to health security in the region.<sup>21</sup> Now, more than ever, the importance of strengthening community-centred epidemic preparedness and frontline response capacity is paramount. We welcome the Australian Government's ongoing support for epidemic and pandemic preparedness and strongly recommend continued prioritisation and investment in locally led action, including community-based surveillance programming, to strengthen health security across the region.

### **Recommendation 2**

The Australian Government influence key stakeholders, including States, multi-lateral financial institutions and the private sector, to remove barriers for local actors to access climate financing that enable them to lead the design and implementation of contextually relevant climate adaptation initiatives.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Australian Government ensure that its investment in the Pacific includes funds prioritised for:

- multi-hazard early warning systems across the region;
- community engagement to strengthen locally led prevention, early detection and timely response to disease outbreaks;
- gender mainstreaming programs that provide equitable and inclusive humanitarian responses, tailored to the cultural and social contexts of Pacific communities; and
- organisations that support people with disabilities and for disability inclusion, equity and rights.

<sup>19</sup> IFRC (2022). *Localisation of Humanitarian Action in the Red Cross Red Crescent: National Society Development Building Capacities for Crisis Management, Resilience and Peace*. IFRC.

<sup>20</sup> Natoli L, et al. (2020). Community Engagement to Enhance the GHSA: It's about time. *Health Security*. Vol 18; No 4; pp 335-37.

<sup>21</sup> See Nelson R. (2020). *COVID-19 disrupts vaccine delivery*. *Lancet Infectious Disease*. 20(5):546; and Hogan AB, et al. (2020). *Potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria in low-income and middle-income countries: a modelling study*. *Lancet Glob Health*. 8(9).

### 3. Strengthen People-to-People Links and Partnerships

3.1 Embedding relationships with local partners in the Pacific is critical and requires Australia to move beyond traditional aid modalities. This includes recognising and valuing traditional knowledge in response and preparedness efforts. Involving local partners in the decision-making process is essential, and policy frameworks developed by local actors should be prioritized in line with the principles of localisation. Many of Australia's partners already have supportive policy frameworks in place; for example, the Pacific Islands Forum has endorsed the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific, which promotes a more integrated approach to investments in climate change, disaster risk reduction, long-term resilience, and disaster management. We welcome the Pacific Warehouse Initiative as an example of addressing Pacific priorities and working through Pacific-led institutions.<sup>22</sup>

#### The effectiveness of Australia's aid programs and partnerships

3.2 Key investments in the core functions of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies have enabled Australian Red Cross' Pacific partners to respond to the challenges of COVID-19 and requests from their governments to provide humanitarian assistance. Independent case studies undertaken of the dual responses to COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclone Harold in Fiji and Vanuatu in 2020<sup>23</sup> and COVID-19 and flooding in Timor Leste in 2021<sup>24</sup> found that investments in longer-term and flexible partnerships between local and international actors lead to flexible and locally driven responses.

#### Case study: Core Costs and Financial Sustainability Initiative

*"The Core Costs Initiative stands out as the most effective collaborative solution to a persistent challenge over two decades in the Pacific." Secretary General Pacific National Society*

The Core Costs Initiative puts Grand Bargain Commitments into action. Recognising the vital role of core operational expenses in sustaining humanitarian efforts, the initiative seeks to provide a reliable income stream to Pacific National Societies to ensure they can sustain their operational readiness to respond to disasters and crises while, at the same time, enhancing their financial sustainability and self-reliance.

Over five years, partners in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement,<sup>25</sup> supported by back donors in most instances, have contributed CHF 3,294,349 in pooled funds, underscoring the collective commitment to sustainability. This unique initiative has not only provided a reliable income stream to Pacific National Societies, but it has also fostered resilience and adaptability in a rapidly changing environment. By placing National Societies in the driver's seat and empowering them to articulate their needs, the Core Costs and Financial Sustainability Initiative has paved the way for long-term sustainability and self-reliance.

The Core Costs and Financial Sustainability Initiative exemplifies an innovative funding mechanism in building a more resilient humanitarian ecosystem. Its collaborative approach fosters empowerment, reduces dependency, and ensures the sustainability of vital humanitarian operations reaching remote and disaster-prone communities in the Pacific.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> DFAT (2023). *Pacific Humanitarian Warehousing Program factsheet*. DFAT.

<sup>23</sup> Australian Red Cross (2020). *Local Response in a Global Pandemic: A case study of the Red Cross response to Tropical Cyclone Harold during COVID-19 in Vanuatu and Fiji*. Australian Red Cross.

<sup>24</sup> Australian Red Cross (2022). *Double Disaster: a case study of the local Timor-Leste Red Cross (CVTL) response to the 2021 floods during COVID-19*. Australian Red Cross.

<sup>25</sup> Financial contributors are the International Committee of the Red Cross, American Red Cross, New Zealand Red Cross and Australian Red Cross.

<sup>26</sup> Austin, C. (in press). *Core Costs and Financial Sustainability Initiative*. IFRC.



- 3.3 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 strengthening sustainable community resilience. Good disaster risk governance also supports communities to be prepared and take early action to save lives.<sup>27</sup> The Australian Government has played an important role in championing effective disaster laws in the Pacific, including IDRL, 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 as a result 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 Bill**

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.

**Recommendation 4**

The Australian Government support Pacific nations to develop strong, effective disaster and health frameworks, laws and policies tailored to the unique needs and contexts of the region.

<sup>27</sup> IFRC (2020). *An Introduction to IFRC Disaster Law*, and IFRC (2021). *Case Study: Climate-smart disaster law in Fiji*. IFRC.

## **Conclusion**

The Pacific region is confronting unprecedented challenges from climate change and a spectrum of disasters. To effectively support the resilience and well-being of Pacific communities, we urge the Australian Government to continue to be a champion of locally led humanitarian action and to ensure this commitment and philosophy extends to climate adaptation, pandemic preparedness and prevention and resilience building activities.

By listening to our Pacific neighbours and implementing the above recommendations in partnership with them, the Australian Government can play a pivotal role in ensuring that Pacific nations are better equipped to manage and mitigate the myriad challenges they face, fostering a safer, more resilient, and prosperous Pacific region.

Australian Red Cross thanks the Australian Government for the consultative process. As always, we remain available to provide additional support and information as needed.

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