

Timely and inclusive but implementation remains elusive: AIDN's response to the Australian Government's new Humanitarian Policy

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About AIDN

AIDN's primary purpose is to advocate for more and better international giving and investing from Australians. We encourage collaboration, highlight the good and urgent work being done in the sector and foster an environment for the exploration of what 'better' and 'more' giving means today. We do this through coordinating, encouraging and facilitating initiatives between the private sector, corporate, government, philanthropists and investors ultimately leading to greater international engagement from Australia.



Image: Girls in Kathmandu, Nepal. Credit: [Terry Boynton](#) on Unsplash.

On 16 October 2024, the Australian Government released a [new Humanitarian Policy](#).

The new Humanitarian Policy focuses on three priorities- (p.12):

1. Building readiness and preparedness to anticipate shocks before they occur and working with our international partners to lessen their impact;
2. Responding to crises and disasters by delivering support that meets the needs of crisis-affected populations and protects the most vulnerable immediately and in the long-term; and
3. Reinforcing the international humanitarian system and taking principled and practical steps to strengthen adherence to international humanitarian law.

In this document, AIDN first briefly summarises the new Humanitarian Policy before outlining AIDN's own response to the Policy. Throughout AIDN's response, a number of responses from other organisations in the Australian international development ecosystem, including [ACFID](#), [ADDC](#), [UNICEF](#), [CBM Australia](#) and [The Humanitarian Advisory Group](#) are also highlighted.

Executive Summary

Overall, AIDN welcomes this ambitious and inclusive new Humanitarian Policy from the Australian Government. The new Humanitarian Policy is particularly timely as we face serious and complex humanitarian catastrophes, war, conflict and famine across the globe. In particular, AIDN welcomes:

- The comprehensive nature of the Humanitarian Policy that is both preventative and remedial;
- The new Humanitarian Policy's broader focus on Australia's role as a global development actor by reinforcing the international humanitarian system;
- The consistent focus on diversity and inclusion across all three key Priorities, particularly the deep understanding that women, children, people with disabilities and LGBTQTI+ communities experience increased risks in crises; and
- The brief outlining of how First Nations communities, perspectives and expertise should also be embedded in Australia's Humanitarian operations moving forward, in line with [Australia's International Development Policy](#) 2023.

On the other hand, however, there are aspects of the new Humanitarian Policy that AIDN would like to see further expanded, discussed or more detail provided to our network.

- First, and as aligned to [ACFID's](#) response, AIDN also questions or seeks further detail on how these proposed policies are possible without additional resources or financing;

- Second, whilst AIDN welcomed the preventative nature of the new Humanitarian Policy in Priority 1 (that focuses on readiness and preparedness through innovation, science and technology) it was also clear that there is scope for more detail concerning how Priority 1 will be operationalised and funded;
- And finally, whilst AIDN appreciates the new Humanitarian Policy's commitment to the “do no harm” policy and its adherence to Australian Government risk standards, AIDN concurrently agrees with both ACFID and The Humanitarian Advisory Group that Australian NGOs should continue to or even play an enhanced role in delivering vital humanitarian response and aid. Moreover, that humanitarian response and aid inherently calls for more flexibility, agility and risk-taking.



Image: State of Amazonas, Brazil. Credit: [Daniel Granja](#) on Unsplash.

The new Humanitarian Policy

At the end of October, the Australian Government's new Humanitarian Policy "[outlined] how Australia will harness its resources and expertise to better prepare for and respond to humanitarian crises, now and into the future. It prioritises readiness, rapid response, advocacy and protection of those most in need, with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific region" (p.7). The Humanitarian Policy was the first overarching policy document setting the future directions of Australia's humanitarian program since 2016 (ACFID).

Moreover, as outlined in Minister Wong's Ministerial Forward the "Policy is not just about saving lives and meeting humanitarian needs. It is also about promoting the peace, stability and prosperity that we want for Australia, our region and the world" (p.4). The Humanitarian Policy also builds upon commitments made under Australia's International Development Policy that was released in 2023.

The new Humanitarian Policy focuses on three priorities- (p.12):

- 1. Building readiness and preparedness to anticipate shocks before they occur and working with our international partners to lessen their impact;*
- 2. Responding to crises and disasters by delivering support that meets the needs of crisis-affected populations and protects the most vulnerable immediately and in the long-term; and*
- 3. Reinforcing the international humanitarian system and taking principled and practical steps to strengthen adherence to international humanitarian law.*

The Humanitarian Policy also marks out six Guiding Principles to achieve the three key priorities. In particular, it is outlined that the Humanitarian Policy (p.12):

- **Advocates** for the internationally agreed humanitarian principles;
- **Advances** adherence to international humanitarian law;
- **Affirms** states' primary responsibility for responses;
- **Abides** by our commitment to 'do no harm';
- **Addresses** inequality and discrimination and promotes inclusion; and
- **Is accountable** to the Australian people and the partners and communities we seek to assist.

AIDN's response to the new Humanitarian Policy

Overall, AIDN welcomes this ambitious and inclusive new Humanitarian Policy from the Australian Government. The new Humanitarian Policy is particularly timely as we face serious and complex humanitarian catastrophes, war, conflict and famine across the globe.

First, AIDN welcomed the comprehensive nature of the Humanitarian Policy that is both preventative (“[anticipates] shocks before they occur” (p.7) and “[directs] Australia’s efforts at the root causes of humanitarian need” (p.7) through Priority 1) and remedial (“delivering support that meets the needs of crisis-affected populations and protects the most vulnerable, both immediately and over the longer term” through Priority 2). Moreover, AIDN welcomed the new Humanitarian Policy’s broader focus on Australia’s role as a global development actor (by “[reinforcing] the international humanitarian system” (p.7) through Priority 3). AIDN was also pleased to see the emphasis on operationalising these three key Priorities in a multi-layered approach that includes “governments, regional bodies, non-government organisations and local communities” (p.14).

Second, a clear highlight of the new Humanitarian Policy was the consistent focus on diversity and inclusion across all three Priorities. Throughout the Humanitarian Policy a deep understanding that crises, humanitarian disasters, wars and conflicts are experienced in unique and complex ways by different groups of people emerged. In particular, the new Humanitarian Policy centred on the fact that women, children, people with disabilities and LGBTQTI+ communities experience increased risks in crises (p.22-23). Consequently, these groups must be both included and supported during and after humanitarian response, and their voices must shape the assistance received.

This focus on diversity and inclusion was also welcomed by [ACFID](#), [UNICEF](#), [CBM Australia](#) and [ADDC](#). In particular, [UNICEF](#) welcomed the new Humanitarian Policy’s focus on children and young people as having distinct and unique needs in the face of crises. [CBM Australia](#) and [ADDC](#) similarly welcomed the Government’s commitment to disability equity as a core area of action within the broad spectrum of humanitarian policy and efforts.

Third, AIDN welcomed the Humanitarian Policy’s brief outlining of how First Nations communities, perspectives and expertise should also be embedded in Australia’s Humanitarian operations moving forward, particularly with regards to disaster and land management (p.15). This focus was in line with [Australia’s International Development Policy](#) 2023 - that similarly highlighted the need for enhanced First Nations engagement and expertise in Australia’s foreign and development policies.

Fourth, AIDN welcomed the new Humanitarian Policy’s focus on positioning Australia as a leader in the international humanitarian architecture and legal system. Once again, at a time when we are facing serious humanitarian crises across the globe the Australian Government’s emphasis on needing to not only uphold this architecture, but actively lead its continued improvement is imperative. In particular, AIDN welcomed the focus on the protection of humanitarian workers, as aligned with Australia’s leadership on the [declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel](#). This leadership is particularly timely when 2024 is likely to become the deadliest year ever for aid workers (Guardian [2024](#)).



Image: Firefighters in Goa, India. Credit: [Slava Taukachou](#) on Unsplash.

On the other hand, however, there are aspects of the new Humanitarian Policy that AIDN would like to see further expanded, discussed or more detail provided to our network.

First, as noted, AIDN believes that this new Humanitarian Policy is timely, comprehensive and inclusive. However, and as aligned to [ACFID](#)'s response, we also question or seek further detail on how these (welcomed) policies are possible without additional resources or financing.

For example, the new Humanitarian Policy sets out that "[the Australian Government] will invest in the people and systems that enable us to provide humanitarian assistance in real time" (p. 24). However, as Naomi Brooks, ACFID's Humanitarian Lead noted, the new Humanitarian Policy "needs resourcing of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's capacity and robust financial investments if it is to reach this potential". In fact, "The Humanitarian Emergency Fund has not been increased since 2018" ([ACFID](#)).

It is important to note that there are nods to funding throughout the new Humanitarian Policy including:

- A commitment to multi year funding in protracted crises (p.15);
- And various references to private sector capital mobilisation in line with the 2023 [Development Finance Review](#). For example: "Australia will continue to explore innovative financing approaches to uncover new sources of funding to address humanitarian needs. Harnessing the capital and expertise of the private sector, international financial institutions and multilateral development banks is key..." (p.16).

- Beyond the new Humanitarian Policy, there has also been a recent announcement of \$9 million for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and an initial investment of \$5 million to support a newly established Asia-Pacific Regional Humanitarian Fund ([DFAT](#)).

The above commitments are all promising. However, we must not forget that Australia's international aid spending as a share of the federal budget last peaked in 2012 at 1.28 percent. Moreover, it is now on track to hit a record low 0.66 per cent next financial year ([SMH 2024/RedBridge 2024](#)). Moving forward, it is clear that we will need more innovative financing and bigger resources committed to achieve the priorities of the new Humanitarian Policy. Moreover, as [The Humanitarian Advisory Group](#) pointed out in their response, this financing will also need to be adaptive and flexible to match "the evolving nature of crises"... "This might include contingency funds specifically designed to be released immediately after the onset of a crisis, and new, leaner coordination structures that prioritise rapid mobilisation" ([HAG 2024](#)).

In sum, further discussions and road maps as to where this funding is coming from, and when and how it may be (innovatively) deployed is key. Moreover, a closer look at how this Humanitarian Policy aligns with the innovative financing approaches previously mapped out in the Development Finance Review, such as blended finance and impact investing, would also be welcomed. With an ongoing focus on innovative financing, AIDN would be delighted to engage in or host these discussions.

Second, whilst AIDN welcomed the preventative nature of the new Humanitarian Policy in Priority 1 (that focuses on readiness and preparedness), it was also clear that there is further scope for more detail concerning how Priority 1 will be operationalised.

For example, the new Humanitarian Policy notes that "Australia is committed to doing more to build readiness and preparedness. We will increase our support for innovative technology to aid prediction and planning...and strengthen our anticipatory action efforts to limit disaster impacts" (p.13). The new Humanitarian Policy also briefly notes that "Innovation, science and technology can be used to better predict, target and respond to humanitarian crises, saving lives and money" (p. 14). AIDN welcomes this focus on innovation, science and technology to enhance Australia's humanitarian response. However, apart from Box 1 and Case Study 1 there is little further detail on this very broad focus - that inherently brings in many other sectors and actors beyond the international development sector.

For example, there is little focus on how such technologies would be funded, how they might be aligned to the Development Finance Review or how they might be possible through harnessing cross-sector partnerships in the green technology space or private sector. Instead, it is clear that there is an opportunity for further discussion concerning how Priority 1's new focus on innovation, science and technology could actually align with or achieve priorities set out in the 2023 Development Finance Review - such as private capital mobilisation, blended finance or (climate/green) impact investing.

And finally, it should be noted that several fellow international development organisations also highlighted the heavy and potentially limiting focus on risk in the new Humanitarian Policy. On one hand, AIDN certainly appreciates the new Humanitarian Policy's commitment to the "do no harm" policy and its adherence to Australian Government standards, including mandatory compliance and reporting standards to minimise risk.

On the other hand, AIDN agrees with both [ACFID](#) and [The Humanitarian Advisory Group](#)'s response that Australian NGOs (that are in full adherence to the principles and obligations of the [ACFID Code of Conduct](#), and global standards of practice) should continue to or even play an enhanced role in delivering vital humanitarian response and aid. Moreover, that humanitarian response and aid (as opposed to longer-term development projects) inherently calls for more flexibility, agility and risk-taking.

Indeed, as ACFID noted: "The Policy's hesitation to fund Australian NGOs in high-risk settings is closing the door on a valuable delivery partner, trusted by over one million Australians...They are proven effective delivery partners of Australian humanitarian aid and multilateral institutions, including in Syria, Iraq, Myanmar and Lebanon". [The Humanitarian Advisory Group](#) also pointed out that "Humanitarian agencies have periodically been shown to scale responses as needed" and are key to signalling the Government's commitment to localisation. Moving forward, [The Humanitarian Advisory Group](#) has recommended that DFAT could adopt more nuanced approaches to risk that prioritise risk sharing rather than risk transfer for local and national-actors.

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