RESEARCH OVERVIEW: Pacific Perspectives — Australia Assists' Contribution to Disaster Preparedness and Disaster Risk Management; 2017-2019

Introduction:

The Australia Assists program, funded by the Australian Government and managed by RedR Australia (RedR), is the Australian Government's deployable humanitarian capability, designed to support overseas partners, particularly national governments, UN agencies and regional NGOs before, during and after humanitarian crises.

Research Purpose and Scope:

The review sought to examine **how Australia Assists has supported Pacific partners to strengthen both disaster preparedness and disaster risk management (DRM) to date,** with one important limitation to the scope: it would elicit only Pacific Islander perspectives on the program, rather than include the voices of donors or international actors in the region. The review team conducted interviews in Tonga, Vanuatu and Fiji.

The review is responsive to three central questions related to: (i) program outcomes, (ii) enabling and inhibiting factors, and (iii) evidence of harmonisation and localisation. An enquiry framework was developed to enable analysis of data that reflects the importance of operational/cultural context, and looks at the three question areas through the lens of expectations, experience and outcomes of deployments.

Key Findings:

1. The review finds that local host agencies appreciate the Australia Assists program and can point to a **range of positive and sustainable outcomes being achieved**. Host agencies are also deeply engaged in reflecting on the **experiences and opportunities afforded by the program** as well as ways in which **to improve** its mechanisms and outcomes.

2. Analysis of deployment outcomes shows the important role deployees are playing as **stakeholder connectors** and explores some examples of lasting change in areas such as **improved technical standards and systems, information-based decision making and counterpart capacity strengthening.**

3. Several key pre-deployment initiatives such as terms of reference (TOR) development, clarity of stakeholder responsibilities and approaches to capacity building can be either **enabling or limiting factors of success**, having a degree of impact on the deployment experience and the outcomes achieved by the deployee and their host agency counterparts.

4. While senior managers feel comfortable in their knowledge of deployment mechanisms, the **further down the management structure** these enquiries are made, the **less well understood** the deployment processes seem and the less certainty operational staff have about how tasking priorities for deployments have been decided.

5. **Approaches to TOR development and job design are not standardised**, meaning some evidence-based enabling factors for success may get missed in this process.

> "They bring their global exposure and experiences and I bring the understanding of the local context. Together we work really hard to use that combined knowledge to solve problems. They are very collaborative – we wrack our brains together to come up with solutions to these really complicated problems in our responses (like the 'Second Home' policy for Ambae residents, which is a new concept) and to solve these issues we have had to talk, talk, talk to solve them. We have done it together."
>
> – Deployee counterpart in Vanuatu, May 2019

Australia Assists deployee Mark Vaughan with Red Cross volunteer Maurice in Vanuatu.

20 deployments

**3** host countries

13 host agencies

7 MONTHS average deployment length

Global Experience, Local Expertise and Mutual Respect – *Excerpt from the research*:

Through trending discussions with Pacific Islander informants, a 'model' emerged explaining how a 'sweet spot' of joint problem solving between deployees and their local counterparts was being reached.

This model was expressed in the following way:

LOCAL CONTEXT — JOINT PROBLEM SOLVING — GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

MUTUAL RESPECT
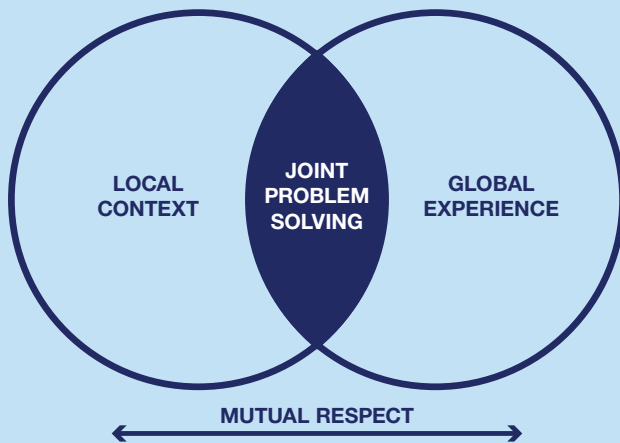
Recommendations:

1. Deployment Effectiveness - Minimising Known Barriers, Maximising Enabling Factors:

1a. Recruit for a combination of **technical and soft skills, including strong capacity building skills**.

1b. Establish **Pacific-based training and deployment opportunities** to foster local skills, ensure strong cultural competencies and longer deployment durations.

1c. Consider **incentivising RedR training for Pacific islanders** e.g. through refunds after the first deployment or a salary scale for repeat deployees.

2. Strengthening Role Clarity and Expectation Setting:

2a. **Co-design deployments with host agencies** via long-term partnership planning. Ensure both parties are transparent about the balance between local priorities and Australian funding interests.

2b. Establish greater clarity regarding the respective **roles and responsibilities** of RedR, host agencies, DFAT and deployees through MoUs, TORs and role design processes.

2c. Ensure **clear communication of deployment expectations** with host organisations prior to placement. Discuss personal and professional assimilation in a tripartite forum between the deployee, host organisation and RedR.

2d. Nominate **more than one candidate** to the host organisation. *"The intent of the process is compromised because we often don't get much of a choice [during recruitment]. In some cases just one person is there to choose."*

3. Monitoring and Measuring Outcomes:

3a. Consider deployment **probationary periods** to help host organisations save face if a deployee is not a suitable fit.

3b. Hold more **regular monitoring meetings** with host agencies to address pastoral care issues, operational issues or other concerns.

3c. Develop **co-designed M&E tools** with host organisations to measure deployment and partnership-level achievements over time.

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