



Australian Institute of International Affairs

*Response to Senate Inquiry in regards to the
National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army)*

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About the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA)

Our mission is to help Australians know more, understand more, and engage more with international affairs. The Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) has been at the forefront of Australia's engagement with foreign policy and international relations for over a century. Established in 1933 by branches that date their foundation back to the 1920s, the AIIA is an independent, non-profit, and non-partisan organisation dedicated to fostering informed debate on global issues. The AIIA is committed to facilitating evidence-based discussions and cross-sector collaboration that supports strategic policy development. The institute is known for its capacity to bring together thought leaders, policymakers, and experts from both Australia and around the world to discuss critical global issues. Recognised as a trusted platform for dialogue, the Institute regularly brings together leading voices from government, academia, diplomacy, and civil society to explore the complex challenges shaping our world.

About the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Network (IPCN)

The Indo-Pacific Cooperation Network, established by the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) and the Japan Foundation, is a distinctive cross-national initiative centered on enhancing climate and disaster resilience throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Over a year, 15 participants from over 12 nations mostly in the Indo-Pacific travel to Japan, Australia, and the South Pacific, engaging with practitioners, scholars, and policymakers to investigate the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change and other disaster related risks. The program not only develops participants' technical skills and cross-cultural competencies, but also provides opportunities to witness a range of local resilience strategies—such as coastal adaptation, disaster risk management, and sustainable resource use—in diverse socio-economic and environmental contexts.

Through collaborative research and experiential learning, Network participants share perspectives from a wide variety of professional and regional backgrounds, deepening their understanding of how climate resilience is interpreted and enacted across the Indo-Pacific. The initiative aspires to foster a robust and enduring community of climate and disaster resilience leaders who can draw on one another for expertise, support, and innovative solutions as they address shared environmental threats. In doing so, the AIIA and the Japan Foundation aim to contribute to a networked approach to regional climate resilience that leverages collective knowledge, promotes adaptive capacity, and encourages long-term sustainability.

Disclaimer: This submission has been prepared in goodwill for the purposes of the Senate inquiry and in accordance with the principles of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme. All views and opinions contained herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the AIIA, the Japan Foundation, the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Network as a whole, or any affiliated institutions. The information provided is intended to inform public discussion and recommendations for the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) in the Indo-Pacific.

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Country Represented:	The Philippines
Terms of Reference Addressed:	(b) exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement (g) comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices
Analysis:	
Anchoring on Australian Core Values, Trust, and Participatory Approach It is crucial for the formation, implementation, and sustainability of Australia’s National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) to be anchored on three things: core Australian cultural values, trust between leaders and volunteers, and a participatory approach throughout the development and implementation of the initiative. Beyond the incentives, robust recruitment, and targeted communications strategies, what will sustain volunteer commitment and fuel the success of such an initiative are these things, which can motivate volunteers to dedicate their skills, time, and effort to a common goal that will benefit local communities and the future generations of Australians. <i>Core Australian Values</i> In the case of the Philippines, the world’s most disaster-prone country^[1], volunteerism, not just in disaster and climate resilience but in development and humanitarian work, broadly, is deeply rooted in the Filipino cultural value called “bayanihan.” Historically, bayanihan was a practice in rural villages where neighbors and villagers came together to help families move their “bahay kubo” (nipa house) by lifting it on bamboo poles to another location. This tradition embodies communal unity and cooperation without asking anything in return. The spirit of bayanihan has transcended geographical boundaries and generations, and has been deeply embedded into all sectors of Philippine society. Volunteerism is crucial in governance, so various policies have been established to support and sustain the spirit of volunteerism in the country, such as the Volunteer Act of 2007^[2] and the creation of the Philippine National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency (PNVSCA) in 1964. Volunteerism in disaster resilience has been further institutionalized under the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010^[3]. Beyond policymaking, volunteerism in disaster and climate resilience resonates further in institutions and local communities. Government agencies, institutions, and communities always ensure to anchor volunteer programs on the bayanihan spirit, which keeps the passion of Filipinos for volunteerism burning. Similar to the Philippines, the leaders of the Climate Army initiative should strategically anchor the framework of the program and its corresponding strategies on core Australian values and ensure that these consistently connect with and remain relevant to volunteers and Australians, in general.	

Trust is crucial

Volunteerism in the Philippines has never faltered and has thrived more under the worsening impacts of disasters, climate change, and public health emergencies. One of the most notable developments in modern volunteerism history in the country is the establishment of “Angat Buhay^[4]” (Uplifting Lives), the country’s largest volunteer network led by former Vice President Leni Robredo^[5]. The network, which is now a non-government organization, has been at the forefront of disaster response and recovery efforts across the country, fueled by massive volunteers, mainly composed of the youth. It is important to note that the success of Angat Buhay in further advancing volunteerism in the country was a combination of gaining people’s trust, providing hope to satisfy their hunger for impactful action, and fueling the inherent bayanihan spirit of Filipinos.

Moreover, Angat Buhay could not have rapidly gained popularity and massive support if not for the former Vice President Leni Robredo, who earned the people’s trust and confidence that their volunteer efforts would not go to waste through her track record in public service. Australia’s Climate Army can hugely benefit from having a leader whom Australians can strongly trust to lead and champion the initiative efficiently. This leader should not only be the face but also the voice and heart of the initiative.

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Policy Recommendations:

- Review existing policies and incorporate core Australian values in the volunteerism and resilience agenda.
- Assign or appoint a reputable leader whom people can strongly trust to lead and champion the Climate Army.
- Integrate socio-behavioral or population-based research into the planning, development, and implementation of the initiative to ensure that they are evidence-based, contextually relevant, inclusive, effective, and aligned with the needs and wants of the populations themselves.
- Partner with academic and research institutions to conduct routine monitoring and evaluation of the initiative, involving volunteers and the local population they serve.

Author:	Dr. Connie Gan Lecturer in Planetary Health, Griffith University
Country Represented:	Australia
Terms of Reference Addressed:	(b) exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture.
Analysis:	
In the aftermath of disasters, healthcare systems face overwhelming strain from both immediate injuries and ongoing health impacts. Australia needs a hybrid volunteer framework that effectively combines episodic or spontaneous volunteers who emerge during crises with established long-term volunteers who provide continuity of care. Drawing from Indonesia's community-based support model and local bushfire recovery experiences, the committee ought to consider a dual/multiple approach that can create an adaptive system where spontaneous volunteers are quickly mobilised, integrated, while preserving and valuing the expertise of existing volunteer networks. Such a multifaceted framework could become integrated within communities, creating a sustainable volunteer ecosystem built on mutual trust, meaningful rewards, and recognition of both immediate and long-term contributions. <i>Indonesia's Community Health Volunteer (Cadres) Model</i> Indonesia's Community-Based Surveillance (CBS) model, implemented through the Indonesian Red Cross and IFRC's CP3 program, demonstrates how empowering local volunteers strengthens public health and disaster response systems. These community health volunteers are embedded and recurring in communities before, during, and after crises, enabling early detection, rapid response, and sustained recovery. Trained in health literacy, risk communication, and surveillance^[1], they create a trusted bridge between communities and formal health systems. Digital tools, such as smartphone-based training videos, enhance volunteer knowledge and engagement^[2]. The model emphasises mental health support^[3], community ownership, capacity building, and recognition—all key elements for volunteer satisfaction and retention. However, challenges persist, including insufficient training and incentives, and absence of job security through formal appointment/employment contracts^[4]. <i>2023 Bushfire in Tara, Queensland – Trust and Local Knowledge in Disaster Response</i> The 2023 bushfires in Tara, Queensland, highlighted the critical role of local knowledge and trust in effective disaster response^[5]. The Tara Neighbourhood Centre^[6] became a central hub for recovery, leveraging long-standing relationships to support displaced and distressed residents. Volunteers from outside the community often lacked the contextual understanding and trust needed for effective support. Long-term recovery required consistent, familiar faces and place-based coordination, not just short-term surge capacity. The bushfire response in Tara also demonstrated the vital importance of local GPs and rural health networks. While emergency services provided immediate evacuation and triage, local general practitioners—supported by efforts from the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Sandpiper Australia, and Tzu Chi Foundation—offered continuity of care, mental health support, dental care, and chronic disease	

management. While established organisations were instrumental in providing emergency response and recovery efforts during a crisis, their effectiveness was often limited by bureaucratic constraints and delayed deployment. On the other hand, ad-hoc citizens' initiatives^[7], though well-meaning, but uncoordinated and create confusion, leading to duplicated efforts and potential safety risks. Current disaster planning fails to adequately address these systemic challenges, neither effectively harnessing spontaneous community responses nor effectively building upon health networks.

The Tzu Chi Foundation's established presence in Tara since 2007, with its successful medical and dental fairs and ability to transform community halls into temporary clinics, they've created infrastructure and community connections that can be rapidly mobilised to respond to the immediate aftermath of disasters. Building upon this existing infrastructure and community trust presents an opportunity to develop a more permanent and comprehensive healthcare delivery system, during and post-events^[8].

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Policy Recommendations:

- Incorporate a periodic community-embedded volunteer model in the Climate Army.
- Provide training, recognition, and integration with local health and emergency services.
- Establish a tiered recognition system (e.g., certifications, stipends, leadership roles) to acknowledge long-term commitment and skill development.
- Prioritise local volunteer mobilisation and community-led coordination, especially in rural and remote areas.
- Develop regional volunteer pools with cross-community training and exchange programs to build inter-community trust before disasters strike.

NEXT AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION BEGINS ON FOLLOWING PAGE

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Terms of Reference Addressed:	(h) any other related matters.
Analysis:	
The committee ought to consider a) the range of unique gendered challenges and needs post-disaster, b) institutionalising equitable representation in the Climate Army, and c) mandating capacity-building for all volunteers in gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive engagement. <i>a) Gendered challenges and needs during and post-disaster</i> Gender and other intersectional identity markers such as ethnicity, age and disability, impacts peoples' experiences of disaster across contexts.^[1] Three key structural gender inequities – the gendered division of labour, women's social reproductive responsibilities and health inequities, and gender-based violence – correlate with vulnerability during the disaster lifecycle. Women's caregiving responsibilities and domestic expectations as social reproducers are often discounted or seen as unskilled labour.^[2] As a result, women's "traditional" domestic and private roles as caregivers often go unrecognised in disaster recovery, and women are excluded from formal leadership positions and public decision-making. This compounds emotional, material, and psychological loads post-disaster as the gendered division of labour places women as the hidden frontline responders and long-term caregivers to disaster affected networks.^[3] Female-headed households and low-income women whose earnings are essential for her caregiving responsibilities may die during disaster "when they 'choose' to remain in their homes to protect previous livestock or good" ^[4] as was the case in the 2004 Sri Lanka tsunami when three times more women died than men due to the gendered division of labour shaping women's physical locations. Women need specific healthcare, such as access to sanitary hygiene and reproductive health, among other needs. However, gender-blindness in emergency management and disaster response may result in heightened insecurity. For instance, in some contexts women are harassed if given menstrual kits in the view of men in evacuation centres or abused and sexually assaulted when accessing communal toilets with poor lighting.^[5] Australia's approach to disaster relief must not remain complacent or falsely view these instances as anomalies restricted to international contexts. Indeed, domestic and family violence within societies correlates with high instances of gender-based violence during and post-disaster.^[6] Women experienced gender-based and sexual violence from spouses after Black Saturday fires in Australia,^[7] the Kobe and Tohoku earthquakes in Japan,^[8] and tropical cyclones in Fiji and Bangladesh.^[9] Social gender patterns also shape men's experience.^[10] For instance, masculinity norms encouraging men to conform to their context's hegemonic masculine ideal may encourage 'heroic' actions during and post-disaster. During Australia's Black Saturday fires, while women often wanted to evacuate and were	

more receptive to advice from networks and emergency services, men wanted to stay, defend the home, and exhibited greater confidence in their ability to protect.^[11] Notably, more men died in the bushfires compared to women.^[12] The masculinized expectation to ‘get on with it’ may also deter men from approaching relief agencies or seeking psychosocial support and counselling,^[13] while those men who do not conform to those expectations may feel shame and alienation.

b) Institutionalise equitable representation in the Climate Army

The Climate Army must not adopt a binary view of women as victims and men as heroes. Although gender relations shape women’s constraints, these same gender dimensions provide women with relative advantages and opportunities, such as having a higher degree of risk perception, maintaining stronger community networks, and making them better at caring for victims in post-disaster recovery efforts. Indeed, women’s roles as community workers, activists, and neighbourhood leaders – even if informal and in the private – are essential for building integrated cohesive communities that foster resilience to disaster impacts.^[14] For example, IPCN discussions with survivors and experts across Japan consistently stressed that strong communal bonds and social cohesion were critical indicators of a prefecture’s ability to prepare for and respond to disaster. Therefore, the Climate Army initiative drawing on civilian volunteers is an appropriate measure; however, women’s expertise and labour ought to be recognised, valued, and harnessed in the Climate Army. I encourage the Climate Army to institutionalise equitable gender, cultural, and Indigenous representation within its ranks.

c) Mandate capacity-building for all volunteers in gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive engagement

Given the range of vulnerabilities and needs faced by communities post-disaster, and the role of gender and other intersectional identity markers in shaping the disaster experience, all volunteers of the Climate Army must receive capacity-building in trauma-informed care, gender- and culturally- sensitive engagement. Further, I encourage formal, institutionalised and substantive consultations with Indigenous communities and leaders across contexts. This is particularly important given the disproportionate impact of disasters on Indigenous communities, compounded by the failure of Australian State and Federal policies to substantively recognise Indigenous peoples interests and legal rights in disaster relief.^[15]

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Policy Recommendations:

- Institutionalise equitable gender and Indigenous representation within the ranks of the Climate Army.
- Collaborate with universities and research institutes to provide capacity-building to the Climate Army on the gendered and intersectional dynamics of disaster.
- Mandate capacity-building/training for all volunteers in gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and culturally-sensitive practice.
- Establish formal, institutionalised and substantive consultations with Indigenous communities and leaders across contexts.

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Country Represented:	Japan
Terms of Reference Addressed:	(g) comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices (h) any other related matters.
Analysis:	
The Australian Government should consider a) strengthening the volunteer coordination system to support impacted communities and b) promoting collaboration among local government and NPOs/NGOs specialising in volunteer coordination. These efforts in volunteer coordination will lead to efficient volunteering and better recognition of volunteers' contributions, resulting in smooth recruitment of volunteers and a high retention rate under Australia's National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army). <i>Bottleneck for Volunteer Dispatch: Lessons Learned from GHAE</i> In Japan, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (GHAE), a magnitude 6.9 earthquake, struck Kobe City, home to 1.5 million people at that time, early in the morning on January 17, 1993, and some 6,500 people died. It is estimated that 1.8 million volunteers from around Japan visited the devastated area and made a significant contribution to the recovery from the earthquake, which led to nationwide recognition of the volunteers' role in disaster response. Although volunteerism played a significant role in the recovery process of GHAE, the event also highlighted challenges in volunteer involvement in disaster response. One of the biggest challenges for impacted communities is volunteer coordination, which involves overseeing the needs in damaged areas, verifying the qualifications of volunteer applicants, and matching the needs with the available volunteers. However, it is not always feasible for impacted communities to process these complex tasks. In disaster response, impacted communities face a surge in demand for emergency public assistance, including providing food, water, medication, warmth, shelter, sanitation, and mental health care. In such situations, a lack of resources for impacted communities can easily lead to poor volunteer coordination, which can become a bottleneck for the dispatch of volunteers. For example, it is reported that, in response to the GHAE, an enormous number of volunteers rushed to offer their services, which exceeded the capacity of the impacted community, resulting in the temporary closure of volunteer recruitment.^[1] <i>Good Practice in Japan for Volunteer Coordination</i> Poor volunteer coordination can lead to overlaps in volunteer activities, a lack of appreciation from the communities impacted, and disappointment among volunteers. Therefore, in Japan, volunteer	

coordination is considered a crucial component in promoting volunteer involvement in disaster response.

a) Strengthening the volunteer coordination system to support impacted communities

Based on the lessons learned from GHAE, the Japanese Government has worked to develop an efficient volunteer coordination system to address the shortage of human resources in affected communities. For example, after the 2024 Noto Earthquake, Ishikawa Prefecture, a state-level authority, started volunteer coordination on its website to match the needs of local communities and applications for volunteer opportunities.^[2]

b) Promoting collaboration among local communities and NPOs/NGOs specialising in volunteer coordination.

The government sector needs to develop a coordination system, but it does not necessarily mean that only the government sector can coordinate. Moreover, NPOs/NGOs can gain experience in volunteer coordination during actual disaster responses nationwide and develop their skills and logistics based on lessons learned from past events, whereas a local government may not have opportunities to experience volunteer coordination if a mega disaster hasn't occurred in their jurisdiction for decades. The Japanese National Council of Social Welfare (JNC SW), a social welfare corporation, has been operating the Disaster Volunteer Centre (DVC) to coordinate volunteers, standing between impacted communities and volunteers to match their needs with available resources in damaged areas. The Japan Voluntary Organisations Active in Disaster (JVOAD), a non-profit organisation (NPO), has made significant contributions to the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake, particularly in coordinating among the government sector, DVC, and NPOs.

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Policy Recommendations:

- Strengthening the volunteer coordination system to support impacted communities.
- Promoting collaboration among local communities and NPOs/NGOs specialising in volunteer coordination.

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Country Represented:	United States
Terms of Reference Addressed:	(b) exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture (g) comparison of relevant overseas models and best practices
Analysis:	
In developing effective disaster response programs, it is critical to keep in mind those who are most vulnerable during and in the aftermath of a disaster. Older adults are often disproportionately affected following a natural disaster. They can face difficulties evacuating and longer-term health impacts due to higher rates of chronic medical conditions as well as challenges adjusting to relocation after a disaster, leading to social isolation and impacting psycho-social wellbeing. In particular, older people are often overrepresented in the phenomenon of so called “disaster-related deaths,” where someone is not directly killed after the disaster, but dies in the aftermath due to secondary effects of the disaster, such as disruptions in healthcare and receiving medication, the psychological stress of evacuation and social isolation, or the exacerbation of existing health conditions. Japan, as one of the most aged nations in the Indo-Pacific and the world, with 28.68% of its population aged 65+ as of 2022¹, offers some stark examples of this challenge. During the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011, people over 65 accounted for 30% of the population but 65% of the ensuing casualties.² Further, a study on disaster-related deaths in three of the most heavily impacted prefectures found that 90% of these deaths occurred amongst people aged 70 or older. While Australia’s population is not as old as Japan’s, it is still considered an “aged society” with over 16% of its population over the age of 65 as of June 2020.⁴ As such, it is important to develop disaster response programs that take into consideration the specific needs of older people. The Indo-Pacific region, as one of the world’s most rapidly aging, and also one of its most disaster-prone regions, must address these dual challenges. At the same time, this means there are already a wealth of innovative community-based and volunteer programs from across the region that present vital lessons, which should be shared widely. The Healthy Aging Prize for Asian Innovation (HAPI)⁵, which takes place under the auspices of the Japanese Government’s Asia Health and Wellbeing Initiative (AHWIN), seeks to recognize and amplify lessons from innovative projects that aim to promote healthy and active aging more broadly in ASEAN and East Asia. Looking at HAPI winners, there are several examples of volunteer-based projects that are specifically relevant for Australia’s National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army). One concrete example is the HAPI 2024 Grand Prize Winner, Philippines-based Padyarescue Inc., and its “Go Bike Project—Ronda Kalusugan Program.” This program showcases intergenerational volunteer activities, which connect young people and older adults in their communities and help strengthen disaster resilience.⁶ Filipino youth are provided with bicycles and trained to carry out basic health checks and present information about disaster preparedness. These “Go-Bikers” then visit older members of their communities and provide health checks, particularly around diabetes and heart disease, through blood-sugar monitoring and blood pressure measurement. In addition, through collaboration with the Philippines Red Cross and Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Management	

Councils, the volunteers also are trained to act as community responders in times of natural disaster.

This initiative offers several lessons that might be relevant to Australia's own volunteer disaster response activities. Firstly, the program emphasizes building intergenerational relationships between older and younger community members prior to a disaster striking. Having these relationships established outside of high-stress situations prepares volunteers and community members with trust and understanding that helps to facilitate better responses and outcomes during disasters. Volunteer responses that are built to address the specific vulnerabilities of older people, may benefit from including a similar disaster preparedness element.

Secondly, the program provides volunteers with concrete skills that may have tangible benefits. Volunteers train to carry out basic healthcare checks, and participate in disaster response drills, providing them with applicable skills that may assist them in their careers moving forward. It also encourages volunteers to improve their own behavior to promote healthy longevity. For participants, the program also provides a sense of purpose – having an older family member who needs support is an almost universal human experience, even if facing a natural disaster is a less frequent situation.

Finally, the program is relatively low-cost, suggesting elements of the program could be easily replicated. The cost of providing a fully equipped bike for the program is approximately PHP25,000 (under AUD\$700) and the cost of the training is only PHP2,000 (just over AUD\$50) per person. In the Philippines, this initiative has already recruited over 2,000 Go-Bikers across 41 communities, who have reached over 42,000 people.

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[4] Data from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/demographic-profile>

[5] For more information about the Healthy Aging Prize for Asian Innovation: <https://ahwin.org/award/>

[6] <https://ahwin.org/go-bike-ronda-kalusugan-program/>

Policy Recommendations:

- Ensure that the specific needs of older adults and other vulnerable groups are considered when developing volunteer initiatives.
- Volunteer response to natural disasters should already be in place before a disaster strikes, with a focus on disaster preparedness, building trust between volunteers and community members and strengthening community resilience
- Volunteer programs should include training in transferable skills, such as basic health monitoring or disaster preparedness, that may benefit volunteers in their future careers.

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Country Represented:	India
Terms of Reference Addressed:	(a) establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) (b) exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture (c) integrating volunteer opportunities within educational institutions to increase student participation in volunteer organisations
Analysis:	
Volunteers are often the first responders in a natural disaster management cycle, and their effective mobilisation during the critical first few hours can significantly reduce the impact of natural disasters on communities. Their roles include spreading early warnings, participating in rescue operations and evacuation drills, offering first aid, relief distribution, awareness campaigns, and beyond. Their efforts for disaster management foster a strong sense of community ownership while enhancing community preparedness, response, and recovery. However, the resources and skills of volunteers for disaster management, which they use to support and save lives during natural disasters, often vary across stakeholders, such as the government, community-based or grassroots organisations, the private sector, and the like. Therefore, related initiatives and actions must be coordinated across sectors and stakeholders to ensure optimal use of resources and avoid duplication. The document briefly outlines the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships among communities, government, educational institutions, grassroots organisations, and the private sector, emphasising the need for convergence. These collaborations across sectors will also develop innovative incentive schemes that may be suitably integrated with the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme, potentially motivating and sustaining volunteer participation. In the following sections, we document the role of various stakeholders in mobilising and/ or incentivising volunteers for their contributions. <i>Government-led Youth Platforms and Community Initiatives</i> The government is indispensable in mobilising and incentivising volunteer participation in the domain of natural disasters, and is responsible for developing suitable policy, legal, monitoring, and regulatory frameworks. It also coordinates a range of actions and mobilises resources available with different stakeholders to offer all-encompassing support to the communities affected by natural disasters in various regions.^[1] For instance, in India, National Cadet Corps (NCC), National Service Scheme (NSS), and Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) are a few youth wings or public service programmes mobilising trained young volunteers and consistently supporting response efforts during disasters, for	

more than 50 years. These programmes, mainly targeted at training school and college students, are a part of the Government of India organisations, including the Indian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. Another inspiring example is The Scheme for Training of Community Volunteers in Disaster Response - *Aapda Mitra*^[2], which was announced in 2016 by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), India's apex body for disaster management. It focused on training 6000 community volunteers in disaster response in the selected 30 flood-prone districts of 25 States of India, which are upscaled to Pan-India. These programmes offer incentives and honorarium, including bonus marks in defence and public service, scholarships, camp allowances, injury insurance, certificates with academic/job weightage, and skill development opportunities.

Leveraging Community-Based and Grassroots Organisations for Local Knowledge Systems

Non-governmental and community-based organisations have immense potential in mobilising local volunteers, especially in rural and remote areas. Grassroots organisations and community groups, when linked with government agencies for training support and resource mobilisation, facilitate context-specific solutions and foster sustainability and scalability. One key feature, as learnt from IPCN study tours, is that they often tap into local knowledge systems, using indigenous practices and culturally appropriate communication methods for early warning and preparedness. These knowledge systems could be documented and disseminated by relevant stakeholders, especially research institutions and government organisations, through suitable platforms. Climate Army must acknowledge and ensure inclusion, equity, and intergenerational participation, including targeted incentives for women, youth, and differently-abled volunteers. Recently, the Government of Uttarakhand, India, launched '*Aapda Sakhi Yojana*', which will train women community volunteers for early warning, relief and rescue operations, psychological assistance, and first aid, among others, harnessing trusted community networks, especially women-led Self Help Groups.

Academic and Research Institutions Driving Innovation

The academic and research institutions play a pivotal role in technical capacity-building programmes in disaster management, leading to opportunities for students to engage and contribute as volunteers. Emerging ideas such as hackathons, tinkering labs, and climate fellowships can integrate volunteerism as a component, generating awareness about volunteer opportunities. Partnerships with disaster management authorities allow students and faculty to support data collection, risk assessments, and citizen science initiatives for volunteer requirements and support the government in decision-making. Digital tracking of volunteer hours, skills-based deployment, and gamified engagement using badges and missions, which are emerging as creative models in this space, may be spearheaded by technical institutions collaborating with the government. Climate Army can encourage academic and research institutions to contribute to designing and executing volunteer training programmes, in collaboration with the government or grassroots organisations. These institutions often focus on transdisciplinary research, integrating satellite and Geographic Information System (GIS) science, social science, and community/government participation, which diverse stakeholders may leverage to develop volunteer-centric disaster interventions. The India Universities and Institutions Network for Disaster Risk Reduction, under the National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, launched the National Disaster Risk Reduction Research Facility in March 2024. The outputs of doctoral fellowships and research projects under this initiative can feed into multiple volunteer mobilisation avenues, including identifying vulnerable areas or developing digital tools to organise and monitor volunteer efforts. Another example is the role of students from the ITI (Industrial Training Institute), under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India, in offering valuable assistance in repairing damaged infrastructure, restoring

essential services, and providing technical support during emergencies.

Private Sector Contributions for Scalable Volunteer Engagement

The private sector, including corporations, cooperatives, and others, can engage in public-private collaborations for preparedness planning, awareness generation, and post-disaster recovery. They have a huge potential in supporting volunteer training programmes, equipment provisioning, and community preparedness initiatives in partnership with non-government/community-based organisations and local governments. Areas in which the private sector can effectively contribute to volunteer mobilisation and engagement are basic stipends, insurance coverage, or logistical support to volunteers during deployments. The private sector can delve into structured employee volunteering, through policy support, including volunteer leave, matching grants, in-kind resources, etc. The government can promote these initiatives through policy reforms, including options such as a reduction in tax rates, recognition through sustainability-related ratings, annual award systems, and formal agreements. Focussed policy and regulatory mechanisms to enhance Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending for disaster volunteering can help identify untapped private resources, such as potential for skill development, funds allocated for CSR activities, risk insurance, etc.

The Way Forward: Institutionalising Volunteer Incentives

A national digital volunteer database, interlinked with existing government and private institutions and community-based organisations, can become the backbone for structured engagement, recognition, and capacity-building of volunteers. A multi-stakeholder approach connecting diverse stakeholders is essential to mobilise, coordinate, and sustain volunteer efforts. Institutional frameworks blended with local knowledge systems and community-based resources can co-create inclusive models for optimising volunteer deployment, training, and recognition. Dedicated volunteer platforms, similar to or a part of Volunteering Australia^[3], may be created or upgraded, wherein relevant resources, technology solutions, and nationally accredited training opportunities may be provided to volunteers and associated organisations. These platforms can serve as skill-matching and onboarding systems, aligning volunteer capabilities and institutional resources of government and private organisations with localised needs. This unified approach with the proper structure, coordination mechanisms, and shared ownership will guide how volunteers are engaged, recognised, and compensated, enhancing the motivation and long-term participation.

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Policy Recommendations:

- Establish a national digital volunteer database for registration, onboarding, and mapping of volunteers' skills and availability with other stakeholders involved.
- Provide nationally accredited training opportunities to launch modular, certified short-term courses on disaster resilience and climate action in collaboration with disaster management authorities, training institutes, and academic institutions.
- Integrate disaster-related volunteering into educational and skill development programmes, as a part of curricula for school, college, and vocational education institutions, including credit-based internships and climate fellowships.
- Design targeted outreach and support mechanisms to promote the participation of women, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and other intersectional groups in volunteer programmes.
- Facilitate institutional coordination and monitoring mechanisms through inter-departmental and inter-sectoral convergence platforms to oversee volunteer deployment, resource mobilisation, and long-term planning.

NEXT AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION BEGINS ON FOLLOWING PAGE

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Country Represented:	Cook Islands
Terms of Reference Addressed:	(a) establishing targeted initiatives to encourage young people to participate in the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army); (b) exploring strategies to enhance volunteer engagement, including systems to recognise and compensate volunteers to promote satisfaction and positive culture; (f) the structure and governance of the National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army).
Analysis:	
Formation of a National Volunteer Incentive Scheme (Climate Army) to respond to the immediate aftermath of natural disasters in Australia. This brief covers two community-based approaches by the Cook Islands in responding to natural disasters. The first covers the Cook Islands puna disaster response system, the second on a youth programme about engaging in issues relating to the environment. <i>The Cook Islands Puna System</i> The Cook Islands government disaster response approach is a decentralised system that incorporates government and traditional systems on each inhabited island. On the main island of Rarotonga, disaster response is managed by Emergency Management Cook Islands who co-ordinates with a volunteer committee for each sub-village, based on the traditional system of “puna” (translated as freshwater well or spring). Puna is a Cook Islands traditional communal settlement system centred around a main water source such as a creek, spring or estuary.¹ There are 24 puna on Rarotonga, each resident on Rarotonga will be within the jurisdiction of one puna committee. Other than disaster response, each puna is also responsible for village beautification, and infrastructure asset management. The system was also successfully used in the Cook Islands government response to COVID-19.² Learning from the government response, the Cook Islands Ministry of Health established a partnership with each puna to support primary health care provision, and has funded renovations or upgrades to disused puna health clinics. Each puna consists of a chairperson, a co-ordinator, and local volunteers. The majority of puna chairpersons are men, while most co-ordinators are women. Persons with disabilities, who are most vulnerable to disaster, are not present in decision-making at all. As co-ordinators do most of the volunteer work before, during and after disaster, it has been recommended that more women and persons with disabilities are included as chairpersons or in other high-level decision-making roles.³	

Youth Engagement in Climate Action

Pacific youth engagement in climate change action is extremely strong.^{4,5} Supporting indigenous youth engagement in natural disaster response volunteering schemes is essential to future-proof response to disaster and ensure knowledge and skills are transferred to future generations.^{6,7} To keep youth engaged it is essential to allow space for youth to participate in protecting and making decisions about the environment.

In the Cook Islands, the local non-government organisation Te Kōrero o te 'Ōrau [KOTO] (translated as “Knowledge of the land, sea and sky”) was established after its founders identified the importance of involving local youth in environmental knowledge building around the impacts of climate change on the local environment.⁸

Local youth are incentivised to volunteer for the organisation by connecting with ancestral environmental knowledge, and recognising their leadership in acquiring and passing this knowledge on (as “Indigenous Guardians”). This approach provides a personal connection and reason for taking climate action. KOTO has a strong social media presence, the youth members are responsible for communication and outreach, making it a popular organisation to volunteer for. KOTO actively includes at-risk youth in their programmes, providing a community that emphasises a culture of connection and inclusion while doing meaningful work, to help reduce youth crime.

Conclusion

Both the examples presented in this brief provide insight into local or indigenous volunteering in disaster preparedness and response. In the Australian context, these examples would be particularly relevant in strategies to include indigenous communities, at-risk youth, persons with disabilities and women. Women and persons with disabilities must be represented at local-level volunteer committees (or other decision-making bodies). Incentives for youth must involve the perspectives of indigenous youth, include them in decision-making and utilise social media platforms for effective communication and awareness building amongst youth.

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Policy Recommendations:

- Establish decentralised, community-based volunteer structures modelled on local or traditional systems;
- Ensure women and persons with disabilities are represented in leadership and decision-making roles;
- Partner with indigenous communities to co-design culturally relevant disaster response initiatives;
- Incentivise youth participation by connecting volunteer work to indigenous knowledge and community identity;
- Empower youth to lead communication and outreach through social media platforms;
- Include at-risk youth as a form of meaningful engagement and reduce crime risk during disaster.

END OF PARTICIPANT CONTRIBUTIONS

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