

Church-led disaster response brought to life at Parliament House

Federal Ministers, Members of Parliament and senior Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) officials stepped into the role of frontline humanitarian responders yesterday, as Caritas and the Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations (CAN DO), brought the realities of disaster response in the Asia Pacific region to life at the Australian NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) Parliamentary Showcase at Parliament House.

The showcase highlighted how local church networks are uniquely positioned to support communities before, during and after disasters, helping families prepare for crises, respond when emergencies strike, and rebuild for the long term. Examples included the work of CAN DO, a consortium of Australian church-based agencies working together to strengthen disaster preparedness, resilience and humanitarian response globally.

Foreign Minister Senator Penny Wong and Minister for International Development and Multicultural Affairs Anne Aly addressed participating NGOs during the showcase, thanking the sector for its dedication to supporting vulnerable communities around the world and reflecting on the hope and connection this work brings at a time of growing global division.

At the Caritas and CAN DO activation an interactive map saw ministers and officials placed in the role of an emergency response officer following a major disaster. Participants were challenged to build a response by identifying pre-positioned relief supplies, activating local church-led hub offices and working through frontline churches serving as places of shelter, refuge and community support for affected families.

Caritas Australia CEO Kirsten Sayers said the exercise demonstrated the value of local presence and trusted community relationships in humanitarian response.

"Church networks are already embedded in communities long before disaster strikes. When an emergency occurs, local partners do not need to arrive from elsewhere because they are already there, working alongside the people they serve."

"This is vital because in many parts of the Asia Pacific region, disasters do not happen in isolation. Communities are managing repeated emergencies while also facing long-term challenges such as conflict, food insecurity and climate impacts. Our role is to walk alongside people before, during and after disaster, helping communities prepare, respond and recover for as long as it takes."

Across the Asia Pacific, Caritas and CAN DO work through local church and community networks that help strengthen preparedness, mobilise rapid emergency assistance and support long-term recovery. This approach enables locally led responses that reflect community priorities and can reach people quickly, including in places where access may be difficult following a disaster.

Among those who visited the Caritas and CAN DO exhibit were Foreign Minister Senator Penny Wong; Minister for International Development and Multicultural Affairs Anne Aly; Ambassador for Gender Equality Michelle O'Byrne; Special Envoy for Indian Ocean Affairs Tim Watts; and Members of Parliament Alison Penfold, Monique Ryan, Mike Freeland, Zhi Soon and Tony Zappia.

The Australian NGO Parliamentary Showcase was convened by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and brought together international development and humanitarian organisations from across Australia, giving parliamentarians and officials an opportunity to engage directly with the organisations supporting vulnerable communities around the world.

CAN DO consortium members include Act For Peace, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Anglican Overseas Aid, Anglicans in Development, Australian Lutheran World Service, Baptist World Aid Australia, Caritas Australia, Global Mission Partners and UnitingWorld.

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