Responding better to regional crises

Anthony Bergin is the director of research programs at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

While the island states in the Pacific face major problems of instability, natural disasters and the impact of climate change, Australia needs to be much more proactive in responding to complex emergencies in the region. The problems we have seen in East Timor, Fiji and Solomon Islands aren't going to go away.

One useful suggestion to deal with these was offered by opposition spokesman on foreign affairs Robert McClelland: to create, in Australia, a regional college of defence, government and administration which would strengthen nation-states in our immediate region. Similar bodies have been established overseas: the US Office of the Co-ordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilisation, the UK Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit and the UN Peacebuilding Commission.

McClelland correctly observes that Australia must get better at forging mechanisms for responding to complex emergencies and that agencies need to work in unison. Australia's region will continue to see humanitarian crises, internal breakdown or natural disasters that will require Australian responses beyond the capacity of one agency to manage. Numerous actors from the federal police, the electoral commission, aid agencies, private contractors, the military, public servants and emergency services need to co-ordinate their efforts quickly, because the responses required to cope with humanitarian crises are very complex and immediate.

We do not have in Australia an organisation that can train for and provide a co-ordinated response to these humanitarian emergencies. What would McClelland's idea look like in practice? We should establish here the Australian Humanitarian Assistance Academy (AHAA) that could undertake co-ordinated combined training for the range of Australian stakeholders involved in these complex regional operations.

It could invite neighbouring countries to send their own professionals to attend academy courses. Key players would build skills, mutual understanding and rapport at the AHAA, thus enhancing their ability to work better together in humanitarian and peacebuilding operations. The major Australian actors all have their own individual training centres. These could, however, contribute resources to create an AHAA. As East Timor and Solomons show, nation-building efforts require enormous co-operation between a range of actors to ensure stable democratic societies.

A training academy based here where participants meet in a neutral setting, would focus on improving the efficiency of these different actors to achieve their mutual goals. Such an organisation should not be very expensive to establish and run, and would make a contribution in saving lives and strengthening regional peace and stability. The proliferation of political and man-made disasters requiring complex organisational responses in our near region requires we get our responses right.

The Pacific legitimacy problem

Graeme Dobell is Foreign Affairs/Defence Correspondent for Radio Australia, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The disasters that swept the South Pacific in 2006 were man-made.

The riots that devastated Solomon Islands' business heart were matched by the arson and looting that attacked Tonga. The tragedies of Honiara and Nuku'alofa were the symptoms of a region that has to think deeply about nation building, not just about disaster relief.

The threat of natural disaster is a constant in the South Pacific. Now the danger of political catastrophe looms as an equal danger. The coup in Fiji merely underlines the problem of agreeing on political norms for the region. Indeed, an Australian-based Humanitarian Assistance Academy might have to define its scope narrowly, rather than broadly, if it is not to bump into the sensitivities of Tonga's medieval power structure, the military regime in Fiji, and Papua New Guinea's automatic suspicion of anything coming out of Canberra.

The academy is a good idea and would build on the agreements between Australia, New Zealand and France to coordinate disaster relief. As with the regional police training centre created in Fiji, the aim is to pool resources and get common approaches.

Australia can claim a natural right to host such an academy. (Fiji's fourth coup means Suva may finally have lost its default claim on most regional HQs.) But the various fights Canberra has been having with the Somare and Sogavare Governments and the Bainimarama regime point to the tensions inherent in Australia's leadership role.

Perhaps it's time for a certain modesty from Australia; perhaps even a resort to the Pacific way—lots of talking and listening—to seek greater legitimacy and true regional support for Canberra's still hazy vision of what the Pacific should be.

The political disasters of 2006 have taken the focus of the Pacific Plan created by the Pacific Islands Forum. But the Plan's vision is vital (even if its bureaucratic language is deadly). Regionalism offers one of the few real prospects of relieving pressure on hard-pressed Island governments by lightening the load of services they must provide. The list of regional solutions is long—unifying everything from statistics to quarantine rules. The strength of the Plan, though, is its offer of an agreed regional view that individual politicians will find it hard to ignore. That issue of how to find and hold a sense of regional legitimacy is concentrating many minds in Canberra.

The problem of legitimacy is at the centre of Australia's extraordinary and intense struggle with Manasseh Sogavare. The Sogavare Government is delivering the death of thousand cuts to the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Sogavare portrays this as an attack on Australia. In reality, it is an attack on one of the most significant enterprises ever undertaken on behalf of the Forum.

The success of Sogavare in slowly strangling RAMSI is shown by the vehemence of the open letter that Australia's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, wrote to the people of the Solomons on February 9th, 2007.

Downer's letter started off red hot and then the prose turned to purple in what amounted to the declaration of a diplomatic war-of-words. Australia accused Sogavare of trying to

‘undermine’ and ‘tarnish’ and ‘smear’ RAMSI. Various of Sogavare’s statements were described as ‘outrageous’, ‘insulting’ and ‘shameful’.

At stake was the very existence of the three-year-old RAMSI experience. Downer said the people of Solomon Islands faced two important decisions:
‘1. Whether RAMSI and its partnership with you is to continue and
2. Whether certain units of the Solomon Islands Police Force should be rearmed.’

Downer’s most damming charge was that Sogavare wanted to restart the civil war, by throwing out RAMSI and taking complete power using the renegade Malaitan Eagle Force. The Foreign Minister told the ABC: ‘At the end of the day, I think Mr Sogavare’s view is that it would be better to get rid of RAMSI and to go back to the situations where the country was basically run by the Malaitan Eagle Force.’

The response from Sogavare was that Downer’s action demonstrated ‘Australia’s attitude of running a parallel government in Solomon Islands’ and Australia’s failure ‘to respect Solomon Islands sovereignty.’ This Downer-Sogavare exchange is a depressing measure of the depths and the dynamic of the difficulties confronting Australia and the South Pacific.

Back to the future? Concentrating on what we ought to know and do best.

Sinclair Dinnen is Senior Fellow, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project (SSGM) and Department of Political and Social Change at the Australian National University.

Anthony Bergin's thoughtful contribution touches on the most pressing—and perplexing—challenge in international relations today. That is, how to craft successful responses to complex emergencies in fragile states. There are no easy solutions and Australia's ongoing frustrations in the Pacific are by no means unique. Of course, there are many different kinds of 'complex emergency' and some are less difficult to deal with than others. Natural disasters are, in theory, more straightforward than deep-seated political crises and post-conflict interventions.

Political crises vary enormously. The immediate manifestations of instability or conflict tend to conceal an array of more complex factors at work. While addressing symptoms is one thing, dealing with underlying causes is a much trickier and long-term task. Global templates that can be used in the immediate aftermath of natural disasters are of less value in tackling the structural sources of particular crises or conflicts. So much is dependent on the local context and, by implication, the 'fit' of the intervention. There is no template.

International assistance needs to combine technical expertise with a thorough understanding of local factors and contexts. The history of security-type interventions on the part of more powerful states to assist weaker states faced with deep-seated problems is littered with failure. Inadequate problem analyses—not just lack of coordination and training—contribute to the difficulties faced by many recent international missions. Assisting fragile states of whatever kind needs skilful, innovative and modulated interventions.

In my view, considerable value would be added to Dr Bergin's proposal if the academy were to focus on the region where Australian interventions are likely to be concentrated for many years to come. As well as providing an integrated training program for Australian and international stakeholders, the academy could excel in the provision of skills and knowledge that would enable trainees to operate effectively in troubled countries in the Asia–Pacific region. An earlier and largely forgotten Australian model in this regard was the Australian School of Pacific Administration (ASOPA) established in Sydney in 1947. ASOPA provided training courses for Australians selected to join the Australian administration in PNG and aimed to familiarise new administrative staff with the history, institutions and culture of PNG and Australia's colonial policy, as well as provide in-service courses for those already employed.

While the ASOPA model is not appropriate to current situations for obvious reasons, it was an innovative and successful response in its time and there is much that we can learn from it. The problems in the so-called arc of instability surrounding our shores are not going to disappear anytime soon. Arguably they will get worse in the immediate future. While as a country we might not be able to claim unique expertise or knowledge in respect of every place where international assistance is required, we surely ought to be able to make this claim in respect of countries with which we are so inextricably bound by reasons of history, geography, sentiment and national interest.

Another Pacific solution—but, with caution …

John McFarlane is a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University and member of the Project Monitoring Group for the Timor Leste Police Development Project, jointly sponsored by AusAID and the AFP. He is a former Director of Intelligence in the AFP.

Anthony Bergin's interesting article proposing the establishment of an Australian Humanitarian Assistance Academy, along similar lines to that suggested by the Opposition Spokesman on Foreign Affairs, Robert McClelland, deserves serious consideration. However, no matter how attractive the idea, any such proposal must take into account more diverse issues than the coordination of the Australian response to crises in the Pacific and providing a facility to which Pacific Island governments can send people to be trained in dealing with 'complex regional operations'. At least four background issues need to be considered before such proposal would be likely to succeed.

First, the problems in the Pacific (and we should include Timor Leste in this context), are much wider than 'instability, natural disasters and the impact of climate change', important as these issues are. Instability includes the capacity of states in the region to resolve or manage long-standing animosities, such as in the recent conflicts in the Solomon Islands, Timor Leste and Fiji, over which the metropolitan countries, Australia and New Zealand, can have little impact—unless, of course, they take sides. However, for any state to succeed, it must develop not only its own sovereignty, but also a sense of nationhood, which few states in the region have achieved. In addition, due to the inadequate preparation for many states to achieve independence, in most cases governance is in the hands of a small, educated political elite and a weak political party structure, few checks and balances (with the notable exception of many of the churches, a relatively free press and some community organisations) for how the elites 'govern', with a result that nepotism and corruption is a major problem in many of these states. Add to this, serious questions of economic viability or the systematic exploitation of such natural resources which may exist; the insidious threat of transnational crime and carpetbaggers all too ready to exploit weaknesses in states in the region; the substantial threats from health pandemics, especially HIV-AIDS; foreign interference in local political issues which is seen as coming not only from China and Taiwan (Chinese Taipei), but also Australia and New Zealand; and the lack of employment opportunities (the Australian Government's rejection of a proposal for people from the Pacific to be allowed short-term visas to work in the agricultural sector did little to enhance Australia's reputation in the region), giving rise to an increasing population of disenchanted youth, and consequent problems of delinquency and crime as exampled by the problems caused by raskol groups in PNG and street gans and martial arts groups in Timor Leste.

Second, the problem of Australia's apparently increasing unpopularity in the region. The recent depiction of Australia as 'dominating regional politics' in a Special Meeting of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu) should be of concern to the Australian Government. Australia also appears to have also lost much of its support in Timor Leste. Why is this so? Could it be that, despite our generous aid and support for the region, we are seen as adopting an arrogant and intolerant approach, insensitive to the culture and politics of the region? Are we guilty of 'megaphone diplomacy' and hypocrisy? In this context, the imposition of the 'Pacific Solution' and the Australian Wheat Board scandal were subject of critical comment in the region. Have we tried to impose Australian solutions to the problems of the region? Would we do better to work multilaterally, as in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), or through the existing institutions like the Pacific Island Forum, rather than bilaterally?

Third, do Australia and the Pacific Island states define ‘democracy’ in the same way? What sort of governance do we wish to see in the region? How should we respond if a corrupt government is democratically elected in the region? Is our implacable opposition to a military takeover of a corrupt, but democratically elected government sustainable? Do we really have an adequate understanding of the political and other developments in the region?

Fourth, there may well be a place for the establishment of an Australian Humanitarian Assistance Academy to assist in training Australians and Pacific Islanders involved in responding to the crises listed above, but in view of the reputation which Australia now appears to have in the region, would we be better to name the proposed academy something like the Australia–Pacific Humanitarian and Peacebuilding Academy? Such a title would not only reflect the role of the academy a little more accurately, but also share the spotlight with our Pacific neighbours. Would the academy have to be located in Australia, or could it at least have ‘campuses’ in several Pacific Island states, each specialising in specific training? This would certainly help to achieve the desired ‘neutral status’ for the proposed academy.

It is true that the various Australian departments and agencies involved in assisting the Pacific Island countries need to be coordinated, and that Australia should enunciate a clear and transparent policy in relation to our interests in the region. Officers from DFAT, the Australian Defence Force, AusAID, the Australian Federal Police, and Emergency Management Australia, as well as the humanitarian NGOs, have done some outstanding work in the region. Most of these people have demonstrated the dedication and professionalism of which all Australians should be proud, and the Pacific Islanders should be grateful. However, it is clear that in spite of its initiative and generosity Australia is not making the mark it should within the region. Perhaps we need to adopt a lower key, less judgmental and more humble and culturally sensitive approach—something which our New Zealand colleagues seem to have handled a little better than we appear to have done. In that way, rather than being typecast as a regional bully, we would be recognised, as we should be, as a caring, helpful elder brother.

A gamble well worth taking

Hugh Smith is Visiting Fellow, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

Setting up a new 'think-tank' is always a gamble. Will it simply duplicate what is already being done? Will it really come up with useful proposals for decision makers? Will practitioners actually participate in discussion and debate? What if there is a drought of ideas, talent and resources which causes the tank to run dry? My view is that often the gamble is worthwhile if only because the 'public conversation' about major, long-term issues in Australia is quite limited (compared, say to the US) and unduly constrained by party politics. If the US is think-tank-rich, Australia is think-tank-poor. An academy like the one proposed could assist in focusing the attention of policy makers and the general public on one of the most important challenges this country will have to face: what is to be done about the manifest need to assist the many people around the world who lose even the most basic elements of a decent existence?

This is not a problem which Australia can passively watch from afar. Humanitarian disasters, whether natural or human-caused, occur frequently in our own region and are never confined by state boundaries. Disease, corruption, floods, tsunamis, refugees, civil war, terrorism and so on all have impacts far and wide. An outbreak of disease in Southeast Asia, for example could rapidly become a major threat to Australia's domestic security, requiring a large-scale, whole-of-government response at home and overseas. Every disaster, too, produces refugees of some kind needing assistance. Climate change, moreover, will both add to the frequency and scope of humanitarian disasters and reduce the capacity of many governments to cope with the challenges.

Certainly, various Australian agencies have given and are giving much thought to the range of problems in question but there is a strong case for a new organisation that will (a) promote interaction and cooperation between these agencies; (b) link up with similar think-tanks overseas and facilitate the global exchange of ideas about best practice (and worst practice, for that matter) and (c) increase public attention to and support for dealing with humanitarian emergencies and their management and prevention (while noting that think-tanks which win most publicity are often the least-valued by decision makers). In setting up such an organisation, many factors need to be considered of which just three will be examined briefly.

1. Links to universities and centres of learning

Every humanitarian disaster is inter-disciplinary and requires expertise drawn from a very wide range of academic disciplines. Only universities and other centres of learning, governmental and non-governmental, nourish and promote all of the disciplines crucial to humanitarian assistance e.g. climatology, hydrology, vulcanology, hydrography, architecture, engineering, management, anthropology, languages, public administration and so on. Universities have already gone some way down the track of overcoming disciplinary boundaries and their experience in this would be useful. The proposed organisation should therefore be set up in a way that encourages universities to freely contribute their expertise. This will also provide an opportunity to involve regional institutions of learning both as contributors to and beneficiaries of knowledge.

2. Links to private enterprise

The importance of involving Australian and regional business in the proposed organisation should not be overlooked. It is more than just an opportunity to make a profit in the production, sale and delivery of the vast range of items needed in complex emergencies that is at issue here. The private sector possesses enormous expertise of relevance to humanitarian assistance. It can and has come up with new ideas and products which, for example, make buildings more earthquake-proof and water more potable. It is also well-placed to train people in skills such as construction methods, mine-clearance and nursing care. Strong involvement of the private sector should also increase opportunities for securing support and sponsorship from that quarter.

3. Links to the Australian Defence Force

The military is often the first responder to humanitarian disasters that occur with little or no warning and to some disasters that have been a long time in the making. Increasingly, military forces have taken on 'save and mend' roles as well as their traditional roles of 'kill and break'. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) in particular has great expertise in this area through its extensive experience in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions and has learned to cooperate with non-governmental agencies over many years. The proposed organisation should therefore work closely with the ADF but should be aware that its focus is and will remain on supporting Australia's military tasks. The ADF Peacekeeping Centre, for example, is a valuable repository of information and 'lessons learned' and presents a course on all aspects of peacekeeping to Australian and regional participants each year, but it also has numerous tasks to perform for the ADF and operates on very limited resources.

Establishment

Many practical issues would need to be resolved in setting up an Australian Humanitarian Assistance Academy. Where would it be located geographically? Would it be free-standing or based in an existing institution such as a university? Who would fund it, at least initially? What would be its priorities for research? How much attention should be given to training of personnel, to public information, to publication of reports, and so on? Certainly, a key to its establishment should be wide and genuine consultation with the very diverse stakeholders at home—federal, state and territory governments and numerous government and non-government agencies—and their overseas counterparts. The complexity of the challenge, however, should not dissuade governments from making the attempt. The need for humanitarian assistance—and the need to deliver it effectively and efficiently—will only increase over time, perhaps much faster than we think.

More relevant than a deputy sheriff

Michael Smith is the Chief Executive Officer of Austcare.

Anthony Bergin argued that Australia should establish an academy to conduct coordinated training for humanitarian interventions and peacebuilding within the region. Citing major problems of instability and natural disasters in Australia's nearer region, and particular ongoing problems in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, Dr Bergin argued that Australia could do better in helping to avert and respond to regional crises.

Dr Bergin's concept is not new, but deserves added attention given Australia's role in the Pacific and the estimated increase in natural disasters as a result of climate change. Displacement of whole Pacific communities will result from rising sea levels, and more tsunamis and earthquakes are predicted. As well, political instability is likely to continue in Australia's front yard, where increasing numbers of people already suffer from abject poverty and chronic health problems including HIV AIDS. The very real threat of pandemics such as Bird Flu on Australia's doorstep, is another reason why Australia will have to take a leading role in regional issues. On top of all this, our nearer region will become increasingly prone to terrorism, illegal trafficking of people and contraband, and proliferation of small arms.

Countering such threats and responding to natural emergencies will require a more coordinated role both from within Australia and regionally. The notion of Australia being a 'Deputy Sheriff' to our strong US ally hardly seems practicable. Better coordination and facilitation of national and regional assets seem far more appropriate than outdated concepts that can be interpreted as regional hegemony or neo-colonialism. New thinking is required.

The establishment of a training academy would go a long way to improving an Australian 'whole of nation' and regional response to these complex emergencies. My military experience in East Timor, and my current experience in the non-government humanitarian sector, has confirmed that better understanding and coordination by all players is required urgently. Australia should move quickly to establish a regional training centre, bringing together the disparate groups of government and non-government players that respond to complex emergencies. More work needs to be done to link Australian and regional networks to improve human security in a way that is non-threatening, builds local capacity, promotes understanding and peacebuilding, and avoids duplication and wastage of scarce resources. In particular, some of the meagre assets currently assigned by the Australian Defence Force to its ever-increasing role in peacekeeping and civil-military relations could be transitioned to a unified training academy under civilian control. These could be joined by representation from other agencies such as the Australian Federal Police, AusAID, Emergency Management Australia, as well as relevant disaster management non-government organisations and academic bodies.

In such an environment, and joined by regional representatives, scenario planning could be conducted, ensuring better preparation and response to complex emergencies. Currently in Australia there is little understanding of the excellent procedures already developed by the United Nations—specifically in peacekeeping by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and in emergency response by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The frequent lack of UN capability on the ground is the result of member states failing to support successive Secretary Generals

with what they have required and often requested. But the UN's doctrine and procedures for complex emergencies is sound, and in advance of other alternatives.

Congratulations to ASPI and Dr Bergin! The only thing I would change is the name: a Regional Institute for Complex Emergencies (RICE) seems more appropriate than the suggested title of the Australian Humanitarian Assistance Academy (AHAA) – but either is more realistic and relevant than outdated notions of 'Deputy Sheriff'.

Concluding remarks on responding better to regional crises

Anthony Bergin is ASPI's Director of Research Programs.

The thrust of the contributors' commentary is generally supportive of the idea of AHAA. Contributors stressed that the skills that AHAA would develop will be of increasing demand in our region. Importantly AHAA won't represent a duplication of the region's present capacities for coordinating responses to emergencies.

There appears to be a general consensus that there are benefits if AHAA was designed to develop international, inter-agency and inter-sectoral links. As far as the latter is concerned, I would underline the point here that the NGOs are very important players. They are large and professional organisations with substantial financial and human assets. While the Australian Government pledged $35 million to the tsunami relief it has encouraged the public to make cash donations to NGOs because, in the words of Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, the NGO's are best placed to identify critical needs and to buy the basic goods at the most competitive prices.

The NGO's are more often than not the bodies with the closest ties to civil society in the countries where Australia may be deployed in a complex emergency. Dismissing the NGOs or sidelining them would be a large oversight in any planning for such a body as AHAA.

I would endorse Hugh Smith's comments that highlight the increasingly important role of private contractors in complex humanitarian disasters. The private sector's active participation in AHAA would greatly assist in ensuring the right industry assets can be called upon in times of crisis.

Several contributors noted that the positive impact of AHAA would be dependent on the state of regional politics and its scope. There might well be a legitimate concern that the development of AHAA would be hampered by Australia's current standing with many of the countries we are seeking to help. Strained relations with the Solomon Islands, Fiji, East Timor and Papua New Guinea may cast doubt on our ability to attract their support for AHAA.

Without their support and their provision of some staff, AHAA's effect on coordination would be confined to Australian agencies. The depth of AHAA's curriculum in terms of local knowledge would also be compromised. While our neighbours have shown some support for regionalism, they have sometimes balked at its practical manifestations, such as RAMSI.

It's important to stress that in proposing AHAA, which would focus on improving Australian regional responses, I am not suggesting we neglect local capacities in potential crisis areas.

To what extent, however, does AHAA concentrate on band-aid solutions?

If it maintains a humanitarian curriculum, its focus will be on immediacy, rather than sustainability. But broadening AHAA's remit to include efforts at coordinating long-term impacts and an overt inclusion of governance issues may be too ambitious at a time when we do not see eye-to-eye with our neighbours on many of these issues.

A more broadly focused AHAA would demand more resources. It may also struggle to improve the regional political dynamics that might prevent its ultimate success.

A narrowly focused AHAA will create synergies between Australian agencies. It will encourage participation from the states of concern. If AHAA was seen by regional states as Australia using humanitarianism as the thin end of the wedge in state-building, it may be counter productive for Australia's longer term interests in our near neighbourhood.