

Chair,  
Cabinet COVID-19 Committee (CVD)

## COVID-19: Pacific Preparedness and Response

---

### Proposal

1 The paper updates Ministers on the work being done to support the Pacific with respect to COVID-19, and recommends funding mechanisms for future support, s6(a) bearing in mind the vulnerabilities of New Zealand's offshore network in the Pacific.

### Executive summary

2 Pacific countries are especially vulnerable to severe impacts from a COVID-19 outbreak. While New Zealand has been working closely with Pacific partners, the World Health Organisation and Australia on regional preparedness, readiness across the region remains highly variable, s6(a)

For that reason, officials recommend that a financial support package s6(a) to support Pacific countries to manage their key health, economic, social, and governance challenges relating to COVID-19. This will also help to manage any impacts on New Zealand from Pacific countries struggling to meet these challenges. : s6(a) of this funding would be earmarked to support immediate health system preparation. s6(a) would support broader measures to enable Pacific authorities to address a range of economic, social and governance constraints arising from COVID-19. In the interests of maximum expediency and responsiveness to Pacific need, officials also recommend that the Minister of Foreign Affairs is mandated to decide on the allocation of resources within the s6(a) envelope, keeping Cabinet updated as the support package is rolled out.

s6(a)

s6(a)

5 The vulnerabilities of the Pacific generally translate into vulnerabilities for MFAT's network of 10 posts in the region. The ability of our posts to service consular demands and any COVID-19 response activities in their host country, while also keeping staff safe, will be limited.

## Background

6 This paper outlines current actions and proposed geographic priorities for New Zealand assistance to the Pacific to support preparedness in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak. It should be considered alongside the prioritisation and resourcing decisions underpinning New Zealand's domestic response.

## Comment

7 **Pacific countries are expected to be more severely impacted by COVID-19 outbreaks than** developed countries such as **New Zealand**, due to factors such as s6(a) high levels of non-communicable diseases and associated health complications as well as living conditions. Modelling done by Otago University also suggests that Pacific populations in New Zealand would be disproportionately affected in the event of a New Zealand outbreak (alongside Māori and elderly population groups). The close connections between Pacific populations in New Zealand and out in the region mean that our international response in the Pacific should be well aligned with our domestic response.

*Currently at "Keep it out", but heading into transition*

8 While we are seeing an increasing rate of testing for COVID-19 in Pacific countries, no cases have yet been confirmed in the region as at 8 March. Urgent work by New Zealand border sector agencies is under way to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 entering the Pacific via transmission from New Zealand while we are still in the "keep it out" phase for the region.

9 This work includes scenario planning for the management of aviation/maritime links into the Pacific (including cruise ships), policy work considering the implications of border measures applied by both New Zealand and Pacific partners s6(a)

and regular sharing of Ministry of Health communications with Pacific counterparts. The collaboration with Pacific partners has been close, and much appreciated.

10 As New Zealand and Australia move into the "stamp it out" phase to address anticipated clustered outbreaks, we are working with the World Health Organisation to encourage Pacific partners to increase their readiness to respond in the event of an

outbreak which could require the full range of pandemic response phases. We are working in close collaboration with Australia, to ensure that our responses are well-coordinated and complementary.

*Pacific preparedness*

11 The current level of preparedness for COVID-19 across the region is highly variable, s6(a)

Samoa is focused mainly on preventing COVID-19 arriving by imposing stringent border measures and travel advisories. s6(a)

s6(a)

s6(a)

12 **MFAT and the Ministry of Health are supporting Pacific preparedness for COVID-19 through a range of measures.** These include:

- sharing information on New Zealand's response and risk;
- joint MOH and WHO technical advisory missions to Cook Islands and Niue. (Tokelau requires people from any countries with COVID-19 cases, including New Zealand, to have spent fourteen days in a country without cases before travel to Tokelau. s6(a)
- \$1m in funding to the WHO's Pacific regional preparedness and response work;
- funding COVID-19 testing through ESR;
- procuring such additional personal protective equipment (PPE) as is available on the open market s6(a) and
- responding to other one off requests.

13 This work is ongoing and officials are assessing new ways to support Pacific preparedness and resilience.

14 In terms of their own preparedness planning, Pacific countries, s6(a) have an expectation that New Zealand will assist with medical personnel and supplies should they experience an outbreak of COVID-19. Others, s6(a) are starting to ask if New Zealand will assist in the event of outbreaks.

15 However, any New Zealand response to Pacific challenges must follow the important principle of prioritising scarce health resources for New Zealanders and preserving New Zealanders' welfare. s6(a)

s6(a)

s9(2)(i)

s6(a)

s6(a), s9(2)(i)

*Wider Risks* s6(a)

s6(a)

There are broadly four types of inter-related economic risks. Government expenditure is already starting to be stretched in order to respond to health sector preparation, additional border controls, and other reprioritisation of resources being directed towards COVID-19 response and away from the provision of regular social services. This will be exacerbated, potentially severely so, if COVID-19 cases are found in Pacific countries.

18 Domestic government revenue will be negatively impacted by reduced business activity in countries from the slowdown in domestic, regional, and global economic demand. This will further stretch government budgets in the absence of additional external revenues. s6(a)

19 Business activity, livelihoods, and jobs are also at serious risk in the region, particularly in certain export sectors such as tourism, s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

Supply chains for certain imported critical goods such as food, fuel, and medicines may be significantly disrupted, and for some more vulnerable countries maybe even entirely cut off for a period, with potentially severe knock-on effects relating to health, food, and economic-security.

s6(a)

s6(a)

*Proposed Support Package*

21 Pacific countries will be dependent on a range of support mechanisms from the international community to manage some of the emerging risks they face in the context of COVID-19. Financial support is one such mechanism that New Zealand can offer s6(a)

22 **Officials recommend that a package of s6(a) of financial support be s6(a) to support Pacific countries to manage their key health, economic, and governance challenges arising from COVID-19.** This will also help to manage any impacts on New Zealand from Pacific countries struggling to meet these challenges.

23 Of this amount, officials recommend that:

- s6(a) **be earmarked to support immediate health system preparation and response to emerging cases.** This would include support in areas such as health supplies and equipment, or technical or medical personnel where feasible to deploy this, through either direct procurement by MFAT or the provision of grants to countries.
- **The remaining s6(a) take the form of support to enable Pacific authorities to address the range of broader economic and governance challenges that they face related to COVID-19.** This includes support towards: government budgets as their expenditure needs increase and their domestic revenues reduce; social safety net mechanisms to respond to potentially severe impacts on business activity, livelihoods, and jobs; and managing supply chain risks such as having to find alternative, more expensive ways of bringing essential goods such as food, fuel, and medicines into the country.

s6(a)

We will coordinate with the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, which will be making resources available to help countries cope with COVID-19 impacts, and Australia, which is also considering a package of financial assistance.

25 Initial analysis suggests that the funding could be broken down as follows:

s6(a)

s6(a)

26 **This initial package of financial support would have the highest impact if it is disbursed quickly,** enabling Pacific countries to put measures in place ready to respond to the growing COVID-19 risks and challenges. In the interests of expediency and responsiveness to Pacific need, **officials recommend that the Minister of Foreign Affairs be mandated by Cabinet to make decisions on the allocation of resources within this initial** s6(a) keeping Ministers through the CNV Cabinet Committee updated as this support package is rolled out. MFAT may seek further funding from Cabinet to support Pacific countries with the impacts of COVID-19 in future, depending on how the outbreak scenario plays out across the region.

s6(a) *assistance in constrained circumstances*

s6(a)

s6(a)

Proactively Released

s6(a)

### *Vulnerabilities of New Zealand's offshore network in the Pacific*

29 The combination of s6(a) health systems, small posts, and the s6(a) host governments all quickly call into question the viability of MFAT's network of Posts in the Pacific, six out of ten of which have four or fewer seconded staff. Setting aside business as usual, their ability to service consular demands and any COVID-19 response activities in their host countries, while also keeping staff safe, will be significantly constrained. In addition, border restrictions imposed by their home countries may mean that they are unable to travel to and from New Zealand. s6(a)

### Consultation

30 The Ministry of Health, NZMAT, NZDF, the Treasury, MBIE (INZ), and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet were consulted on this paper, and concur with its contents.

### Financial implications

31 There will be no impact on the Crown's operating balance resulting from approving this paper. The proposed initiative would be funded from within the current Vote Official Development Assistance baseline. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's ODA financial delegations require Cabinet approval for activities above \$25 million.

### Human rights

32 If support, including emergency medical support, were not available for Tokelau, the Cook Islands and Niue, there would be significant human rights implications for their people as New Zealand citizens in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19 in those locations. Without support, New Zealand's responsibilities to support their right to life and security would be significantly compromised.

33 A proactive approach to Pacific preparedness and response support will help to mitigate the human rights impacts of COVID-19 that would be expected if there were outbreaks in the Pacific. The approach recommended in this paper also supports New Zealand's International Human Rights Action Plan 2019-2023, which recognises human rights in the Pacific as a focus area for New Zealand's international human rights work.

### Legislative implications

34 There are no legislative implications to this paper.

### Regulatory impact analysis

35 A regulatory impact statement is not required.



## Gender implications

36 s6(a)

The approach recommended in this paper would help to mitigate some of the potential for disproportionate impact on women in the region from COVID-19.

## Disability perspective

37 The Pacific context presents challenges to persons with disabilities, with vulnerability often reinforced by societal and cultural norms, economic disparity, and susceptibility to natural disasters. An outbreak of COVID-19 in the region would likely be similar to a natural disaster in terms of additional vulnerability for persons with disabilities. The approach recommended in this paper would be in line with New Zealand's long-standing support for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

## Publicity

38 Ministers may wish to announce a regional package of support, or to highlight elements of New Zealand's response during media interactions focused on COVID-19.

## Recommendations

39 The Minister of Foreign Affairs recommends that the Committee:

1. **Note** that Pacific countries are vulnerable to severe impacts from a COVID-19 outbreak.
2. **Note** that New Zealand has been working closely with Pacific partners, the World Health Organisation and Australia on regional preparedness, but that readiness across the region remains highly variable.
3. s6(a)
4. **Agree** that a package of s6(a) financial support s6(a) to support Pacific countries to manage their key health, economic, social, and governance challenges relating to COVID-19.
  - 4.1. s6(a) of this funding would be earmarked to support immediate health system preparation.
  - 4.2. s6(a) would support broader measures to enable Pacific authorities to address a range of economic, social and governance constraints.
5. **Agree** that the Minister of Foreign Affairs is mandated to decide on the allocation of resources within the s6(a) envelope, keeping Cabinet updated as the support package is rolled out.

6. s6(a)

7. **Note** the vulnerability of New Zealand's offshore network of small posts in the Pacific.

**Approved for lodgement**

Rt Hon Winston Peters  
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Note: Annex 1 withheld under s6(a)