

It's time for an Australian national and community service scheme

A cure for cascading crises?

JOHN BLAXLAND

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In the face of complex environmental and geopolitical security challenges, Australian policymakers should create a voluntary scheme for national and community service to bolster national resilience, John Blaxland writes.

The last three years have borne a multitude of crises, exposing severe insufficiencies in Australia's crisis response mechanisms. In early 2022 alone, there have already been numerous crises that have stretched state and community services beyond capacity, and required assistance from the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Over-reliance on the ADF in domestic crisis situations is **problematic** for both crisis management and long-term combat readiness, and is inappropriate given the current threat environment and the frequency of environmental challenges. To avoid stretching the ADF too thin at a time when it might be needed most internationally, Australia needs to have a serious debate on the topic of national and community service.

The ADF, while a capable and professional organisation, is not a valid **substitute** for specialised emergency services that possess the particular skills and equipment necessary to respond to increasing numbers of natural and human disasters. Additionally, reconfiguring and deploying the ADF on domestic crisis operations is complex and time consuming, and often requires travelling vast distances from their home bases. This risks creating a perception of the ADF being slow to respond and could ultimately undermine the relationship between the ADF and the broader Australian community.



Australia's policy future

Key recommendations

- The Australian Government should create an Australian Universal Scheme for National and Community Service.
- The scheme would be voluntary, incentivised, and allow young Australians to contribute to emergency services, the armed forces, aged care, international development and more.

Australian National University
Crawford School of Public Policy

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Some of the units that were deployed to the stairwells of quarantine hotels four months ago, or to the kitchens and laundries of aged care facilities in February, were recently shovelling mud in northern New South Wales. Such deployments are not what the Australian community should expect of the ADF, nor are they what many ADF members expected of their careers.

The current state of affairs means that ADF personnel miss out on important training and career development opportunities. It also **prevents** the ADF from focusing on its primary task of protecting Australian citizens, territory, interests, and allies from armed confrontation.

Australia now faces a security environment as challenging as any experienced in 80 years, including a three-dimensional spectrum of environmental, governance, and great power contestation challenges.

Environmental challenges such as droughts, fires, cyclones, and floods are **projected** to become more frequent and more extreme.

Governance challenges are also likely to worsen, especially around the use of disinformation, disruption and **interference** by individuals and groups within Australia and abroad.

Finally, deepening great power competition is making armed conflict in Australia's neighbourhood more likely. Meanwhile, the United States' appetite for ideational leadership of the post-Second World War international order has faltered, and Russia's threat to Europe likely will preoccupy the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for years.

It is conceivable that an adversary could create or exploit a crisis in Australia's neighbourhood, presenting a challenge to find the resources needed to respond appropriately, mindful of Australia's recent over-reliance on the ADF for domestic crisis management.

These shortfalls point to the need to maintain the security of the nation writ large, both in terms of domestic and broader security challenges, and an Australian Universal Scheme for National and Community Service could be an important part of the solution.

Such suggestions inevitably are met with concern given Australia's troubled political relationship with **conscriptio**n since 1915, and especially during the Vietnam War.

However, a voluntary, incentivised scheme that harnesses Australian traditions of volunteer service and mutual assistance would help Australia to respond more effectively to these contemporary challenges.

The scheme would present school leavers and young Australians (and not just men, as in days of old) a wide variety of service streams with minimum requirements ranging from one to two years, allowing them to choose how they would prefer to serve their community and country.

Participants would choose from service options within the ADF – similar to the established **ADF Gap Year** program – but also from roles within rural fire services, state emergency services, state health services, aged care, national parks and wildlife, federal and state police, Border Force, and the international development focused Australian Volunteers Program.

Such a scheme would enable Australia to be better prepared to face a spectrum of environmental, governance and security challenges, while actively fostering national resilience.

Participation would need to be incentivised, so participants would receive nationally recognised qualifications and valuable work experience.

In addition to a modest living allowance (since food and accommodation would be provided), a trust account could be established for each participant with fortnightly pay proportional to the difficulty of their service stream, and extra pay for those deployed on a domestic or international crisis.

This account could then be used for higher education fees, government charges, paid into superannuation, or as a soft loan for commercial purposes on completion. Importantly, this service model would be optimised for ongoing service in a part-time capacity thereafter regardless of stream, in a manner similar to the ADF's **Ready Reserve** scheme of the 1990s.

Beyond addressing the current interweaving of challenges, such a program would also have a plethora of benefits in building capacity and community for Australian society, such as bringing young Australians from diverse backgrounds together and further instilling a sense of self-reliance and resilience in young people.

A likely objection is Australia cannot afford to have such a scheme. The response is that Australia cannot afford not to build response capability of some kind, and that this scheme is likely a highly cost-effective contingency against much greater costs of various kinds.

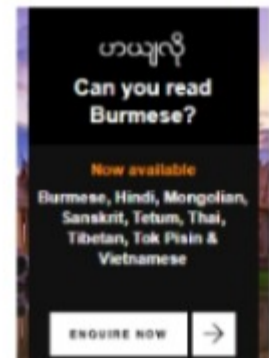
If the nation lacks the capacity to effectively respond to increasingly frequent crises, it may well pay in Australian lives and sovereignty. But through an Australian Universal Scheme for National and Community Service, Australia can tackle these crises together.

*This piece is published as part of Policy Forum's new feature section – **In Focus: Australia's policy future** – which brings you policy analysis and ideas that go beyond the sound bites.*

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