Australia's 2025–26 Humanitarian Program
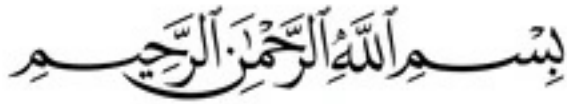
Submission to the Department of Home Affairs
By the Centre for Muslim Wellbeing
August 2025

CMW.ORG.AU →

Acknowledgement

Bismillah Ar-Rahman Ar-Raheem
In the name of Allah, The Most Compassionate, The Most Merciful

We begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, work, and gather—particularly the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation—and all First Nations peoples across Victoria. We pay deep respect to Elders past and present, and recognise that sovereignty was never ceded. This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

We stand in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, whose leadership, knowledge systems, and spiritual connection to Country inspire our shared journey toward justice, healing, and collective wellbeing.

Guided by the Divine names—Ar-Rahman (The Compassionate), Al-Adl (The Just), Ash-Shafee (The Healer), Al-Wasi' (The All-Encompassing), and Al-Hakeem (The All-Wise)—we affirm the sacredness of every life and the right to spiritual, emotional, and cultural wellbeing.

As we reflect on mental health, trauma, and systems reform, we centre lived experience, compassion, and cultural insight. Behind every data point is a person, a family, a story.

This submission is both a call to action and an expression of hope—for a system rooted in equity, dignity, and care.

About Centre for Muslim Wellbeing

Who we are

The Centre for Muslim Wellbeing (CMW) is a not-for-profit, community-led organisation established in 2018, dedicated to improving the mental health, spiritual wellbeing, and social inclusion of Muslim communities in Victoria. Established in response to a critical need for culturally and faith-informed care, CMW is grounded in lived experience, guided by evidence, and driven by community partnership.

We work at the intersection of mental health, community development, and faith-based healing, serving as a trusted bridge between government, services, and communities. Our work honours the diversity of Muslim identities and promotes dignity, resilience, and collective care across generations.

What we do

Through partnerships with primary health networks, services, faith leaders, education providers, and grassroots organisations, CMW has reached thousands of community members — delivering practical impact while championing systemic change.
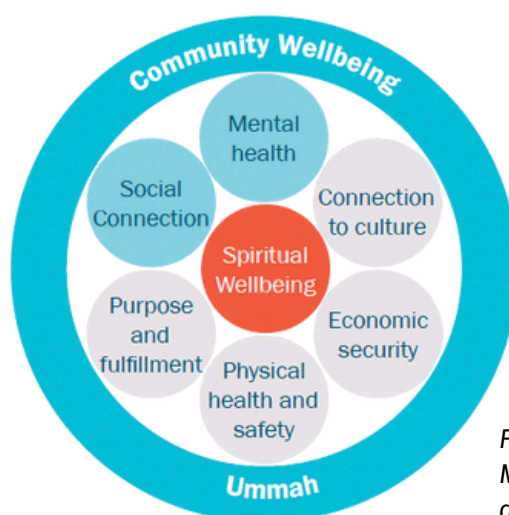

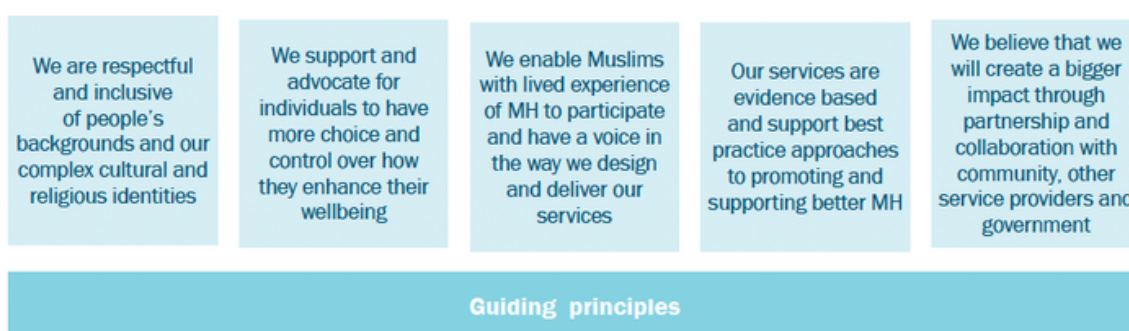*Figure 1: Working Definition of Muslim wellbeing in Australia, developed by CMW*

Figure 2: CMW's Guiding Principles

Key Area	Description	Core Activities
1. Mental Health Education & Suicide Prevention	Addressing stigma, Islamophobia, and gaps in spiritually congruent care through culturally responsive mental health education, suicide postvention, and grief support. Builds community trust and safer pathways to care.	• Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) workshops • Suicide postvention and grief support • Cultural Intelligence and anti-racism training • Community-based mental health literacy initiatives
2. Trauma Recovery & Family Healing	Supporting individuals and families affected by war, displacement, family violence, sexual assault and intergenerational trauma through faith-informed and trauma-sensitive group programs.	• Healing circles and trauma recovery workshops • Bereavement support (Project Zaytouna) • Emotional regulation and spiritual care • Programs for women, carers, children, and men • End to end services support from pre-natal to parenting workshops for families
3. Youth Wellbeing & School Engagement	Supporting Muslim youth through peer-led programs that foster inclusion, identity, and resilience. Addressing racism, bullying, neurodiversity, disengagement, depression, suicide and self-harm through creative and culturally safe approaches.	• Storytelling and movement (Project Nawah) • School-based anti-bullying, wellbeing and resilience programs • Youth mentoring and spiritual development • Emotional literacy and belonging sessions
4. Settlement Services & Community Connection	Holistic support for newly arrived communities facing systemic barriers. Enhancing community capacity, connection, and access to essential services in culturally responsive ways.	• Peer support for migrants and refugees • Outreach for carers, women, and families • Service navigation (employment, health, housing, legal)
5. System Navigation & Crisis Response	Providing culturally and spiritually appropriate responses during times of acute distress — filling a vital gap in crisis care for Muslim communities. Digital information hub to provide key information to community, providers and government.	• Crisis intervention and case coordination • Support for suicide risk, family breakdown, and violence • Advocacy and safety planning • Partnerships with crisis and support services (i.e hospitals, emergency, justice) • In-language support and digital resource hub

Table of Content

1. Executive Summary

The Centre for Muslim Wellbeing (CMW) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Home Affairs' consultation on Australia's 2025–26 Humanitarian Program.

For CMW, engaging in this policy space represents a natural extension of our mission. We offer settlement services through collaboration and sub contractual arrangements with service providers, and our expertise in mental health, community wellbeing, and culturally responsive service design positions us as an essential partner in humanitarian policy reform.

We see our role as:
- Advocating for policies that centre wellbeing, equity, and family unity.
- Partnering with settlement and trauma services to address the specific needs of Muslim-background entrants.
- Amplifying the lived experiences of Muslim communities in humanitarian debates.
- Building capacity to deliver direct services in the future as the sector evolves.

Our entry into this space is timely. With Muslim communities disproportionately represented in refugee and displacement crises, Australia's humanitarian policy must engage with organisations like CMW to ensure inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and meaningful settlement outcomes.

As a new contributor, CMW proposes to align our initial engagement with three strategic priorities:
1. **Data-informed advocacy:** Collaboratively research and disseminate evidence about emerging priority cohorts — especially culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women and families aligned with Foundation House expertise.
2. **Ethical community engagement:** Support culturally respectful consultation with refugee-founded and community-led organisations to inform pathway design and complementary intake.
3. **Capacity-building:** Offer training, governance support, and cultural matching for community sponsors and settlement service staff, especially in areas of intersectional trauma and multicultural wellbeing.

Terms of Reference: Questions for Consideration

1. What should the **composition of Australia's 2025-26 Humanitarian Program** be and why? What do you think should be the proportion split between the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program (which also includes the Community Support Program) categories in the offshore component of the Humanitarian Program?

Terms of Reference: Questions for Consideration (continued)

2. The Humanitarian Program is under significant pressure from **unprecedented demand** including as a result of **multiple refugee crises across the world** and limited global resettlement places. **How should the Humanitarian Program respond** to these crises while balancing the commitment made for protracted situations, specific cohorts and supporting our region?

3. Due to an increase of interest in the Community Support Program and limited places under the Humanitarian Program, the Community Support Program is **oversubscribed with processing times increasing** from 6-12 months in 2022-23 to a minimum of 8 years as at June 2025. We understand the Humanitarian Program, while focussed on working age primary applicants, is currently being **primarily used for family reunion**. What can we do to **address** this?

4. How can the **Government better plan and coordinate responses to emergency humanitarian crises**? How can private or community supported initiatives assist people displaced by emergency humanitarian crises?

2. Australia's 2025-26 Humanitarian Program

1. Composition of Australia's 2025-26 Humanitarian Program

1. Strongly Prioritise the Core Refugee Category (Offshore)

- **Preserve the integrity of protection:** The Refugee category is the true embodiment of Australia's enduring commitment to international protection. It remains essential that allocated places be directed to persons most urgently in need — those forcibly displaced, without durable alternatives.
- **Respond to overwhelming global need:** With over 2.9 million refugees projected to require resettlement in 2025 (UNHCR), and Australia's places capped at 20,000, every offshore place must prioritise foundational protection.
- **Decouple special and complementary pathways:** CMW recommends that Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) and Community Support Program (CSP) cases be delivered in addition to allocated core Refugee places — not at their expense. This aligns with sector-wide advocacy calling for additionality, not substitution.

2. Expand Complementary Pathways with Strategic Oversight

- Enhance Community Sponsorship (CSP/CRISP): While community-led pathways such as the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) have demonstrated their value, processing backlogs now exceed eight years . CMW supports urgent reform and targeted expansion, subject to transparent eligibility, quality controls, and equitable governance.
- Establish reasonable quotas: Community sponsorship should be expanded by an additional 5,000 to 10,000 places per annum, governed through licensed intermediaries, as recommended by the Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA) and aligned with the RCOA's commitments to scale to 10,000 complementary places.
- Create emergency reserves: In recognition of the volatility and sustained nature of global crises — including Syria, Gaza, Sudan, Afghanistan, and beyond — Australia must introduce emergency reserve places, deployable rapidly in response to sudden displacement waves.

3. Uncap Onshore Protection, Reflecting Legal Responsibility

- Ensure demand-driven access: Refugee protection is a legal right, not a quota. The onshore protection stream (visas for those lawfully arriving and claiming asylum) must be decoupled from offshore planning levels and operated on an uncapped basis.

2. Australia's Humanitarian Program Response to Demand and Global Crisis

The unprecedented demand placed on the Humanitarian Program due to escalating refugee crises requires a response that is principled, bold, and future-focused. CMW believes that Australia cannot afford to retreat into narrow utilitarian choices, nor can it allow the Program to become reactive to short-term political pressures.

The multiplicity of global crises — from Sudan to Gaza, from Myanmar to Afghanistan — demands agility without losing sight of long-term commitments. A tiered response is essential:

1. **Rapid response allocation** – A reserved quota within the Program should be immediately deployable to address emerging humanitarian catastrophes. This allows Australia to respond quickly without undermining existing commitments to protracted situations.
2. **Dedicated long-term commitment** – Australia must ring-fence places for those in protracted displacement, particularly women, children, and stateless persons, who are often rendered invisible in crisis-driven allocations.
3. **Regional solidarity** – The Asia-Pacific continues to be one of the least resourced areas for refugee resettlement globally. Australia must lead by example by committing a guaranteed minimum share of its intake to regional cohorts, including Rohingya and displaced communities from Myanmar, West Papua, and the Pacific.

The danger in a constrained Program is the creation of hierarchies of "deservingness" that pit one group against another. This is both unethical and counterproductive. Australia must resist any framing that privileges one crisis at the expense of another.

Instead, CMW advocates for a **balanced allocation model** that recognises three priorities:

- **Urgency:** Immediate crises requiring swift intervention.
- **Equity:** Protracted situations where displacement has spanned generations.
- **Regional stability:** Cohorts from within the Asia-Pacific whose displacement affects Australia's direct neighbourhood.

Such a model ensures transparency, consistency, and fairness, while insulating the Program from politicisation or ad hoc decision-making.

The measure of a humanitarian program's success is not only how many people are resettled but how well they are supported to rebuild their lives. Australia must not allow the current "scarcity mindset" to undermine its settlement vision.

One of the risks of "balancing pressures" is the outsourcing of responsibility to community sponsors or underfunded NGOs. CMW insists that while the Community Support Program and civil society contributions are valuable, they cannot become substitutes for a strong, government-led Humanitarian Program. Australia must not privatise its humanitarian responsibility. Instead, the Government should deepen partnerships with multicultural organisations, many of whom already carry the burden of supporting refugee and humanitarian entrants without commensurate funding.

3. Addressing Oversubscription and Delays in the Community Support and Humanitarian Programs

We believe that the Humanitarian Program must be rebalanced in a way that:

1. Recognises the centrality of family unity as a cornerstone of successful settlement and wellbeing.
2. Confronts and addresses the inequitable access created by the current CSP design.
3. Embeds fairness, transparency, and responsiveness into the allocation of places.
4. Actively engages Muslim communities and service organisations to ensure that humanitarian policies are inclusive, culturally responsive, and capable of addressing the specific settlement experiences of Muslim-background entrants.

The Community Support Program was originally designed to enable community, business, and organisational actors to play a role in expanding humanitarian resettlement through sponsorship. In theory, this model could complement the government's resettlement commitments by leveraging additional resources and expanding pathways for those in urgent need. In practice, however, the program has become financially prohibitive, structurally inequitable, and functionally inaccessible to many of the communities most in need.

The fees, bond requirements, and settlement cost obligations associated with the CSP place a disproportionate burden on communities who are themselves often from refugee or migrant backgrounds. For Muslim communities, who frequently carry the additional load of supporting family members displaced in regions experiencing protracted conflict — from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Palestine, and beyond — the CSP model entrenches disadvantage.

The oversubscription of the program, with processing times now extended to a staggering eight years, is indefensible from a humanitarian and wellbeing perspective. Such a delay not only exacerbates family separation and trauma but also risks delegitimising Australia's humanitarian commitments in the eyes of global and domestic partners.

The Humanitarian Program as a De Facto Family Reunion Channel

The Department notes that the Humanitarian Program is being "primarily used for family reunion." From CMW's perspective, this is not a flaw but rather a recognition of the centrality of family unity to humanitarian protection and settlement success. Families fractured by war and displacement cannot rebuild their lives in Australia without the stability, safety, and wellbeing that comes with reunification.

The framing of family reunion as a competing priority risks erasing the lived reality of humanitarian entrants, for whom separation represents one of the most profound and ongoing forms of harm. Indeed, research consistently demonstrates that family unity is directly correlated with improved mental health, higher settlement satisfaction, stronger economic participation, and reduced reliance on crisis services.

3. Addressing Oversubscription and Delays in the Community Support and Humanitarian Programs (Continued)

Instead of displacing family reunion into a marginalised or "secondary" space, the Humanitarian Program should explicitly embed family unity as a core principle. The current practice of treating family reunion as incidental or peripheral undermines the stated objectives of protection and durable settlement.

Equity and Access: A Critical Problem

The CSP's design privileges those with financial means, effectively turning humanitarian entry into a pay-to-play system. This is antithetical to humanitarian principles and exacerbates inequities. Wealthier diaspora groups or those with strong organisational connections are able to mobilise resources, while the poorest and most marginalised are locked out.

For Muslim-background refugees, who often arrive with limited resources and face systemic barriers in employment and housing, the financial impost of the CSP is particularly acute. This creates a two-tiered system of access to protection — one for those who can pay and wait, and another for those who cannot.

As an organisation committed to advancing equity and inclusion, CMW cannot support a system that reproduces inequality at the point of entry.

4. Strengthening Government and Community Responses to Emergency Humanitarian Crises

The scale and intensity of global humanitarian crises are unprecedented. Conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ukraine, and beyond intersect with worsening climate shocks, state collapse, and mass displacement. By 2025, the global number of forcibly displaced people exceeds 120 million, of whom nearly half are Muslim. For Muslim communities in Australia and globally, these emergencies are not abstract. They touch families, kinship networks, diasporas, and religious communities directly. They evoke profound trauma, grief, and urgency.

Australia's response mechanisms — both within the Humanitarian Program and in ad hoc crisis relief — remain inadequate. Current arrangements are slow, reactive, and often fragmented across government agencies. They are also too narrow in their conception of "emergency" — privileging some crises over others, and ignoring the cumulative and protracted nature of displacement. The consequence is predictable: lives lost while waiting, families fractured, and communities in Australia shouldering unbearable burdens of uncertainty.

The Centre for Muslim Wellbeing (CMW) asserts that government planning and coordination for humanitarian emergencies must be **future-focused, equitable, and values-driven**, and must recognise the capacity of **Muslim communities and other culturally diverse communities** to act as partners in this work.

The Limitations of Australia's Current Humanitarian Crisis Response

Fragmented Coordination

Currently, crisis responses are spread across the Department of Home Affairs, DFAT, state-based agencies, and non-governmental actors with little clarity on responsibility. This leads to duplication in some areas and complete neglect in others. For example, the rapid evacuations from Afghanistan in 2021 were plagued by inconsistent criteria, opaque communication, and abrupt cessation of emergency visas, leaving thousands stranded.

Australia's responses to crises are often shaped less by humanitarian need and more by political alignment. Ukrainian refugees were welcomed with relative speed and generosity, while Palestinians displaced by the assault on Gaza face extreme barriers. This double standard erodes trust and alienates communities.

Government systems wait until a crisis explodes before reacting. There are no robust anticipatory mechanisms to plan for displacement caused by climate change in the Pacific or escalating conflicts in Africa and the Middle East.

4. Strengthening Government and Community Responses to Emergency Humanitarian Crises (Continued)

Exclusion of Communities from Decision-Making

Muslim, African, and refugee-background communities who bear the human and social cost of crises are rarely consulted. Policy is designed and executed without their knowledge, insights, or networks, resulting in blunt interventions that fail the test of cultural and lived-experience competence.

Principles for an Effective Response

The CMW proposes that Australia's approach to humanitarian emergencies must rest on five principles:

1. **Speed and Dignity** – Rapid processing and dignified pathways that do not entrench trauma.
2. **Equity and Non-Discrimination** – Consistency across crises, free of geopolitical favouritism.
3. **Community Partnership** – Recognising Muslim and refugee communities as trusted actors.
4. **Transparency and Accountability** – Clear communication, criteria, and oversight mechanisms.
5. **Future-Proofing** – Building resilience for emerging crises, especially climate displacement.

How Government Can Better Plan and Coordinate Responses

i. Establish a National Humanitarian Crisis Response Framework

A whole-of-government framework, legislated and adequately resourced, must set out how Australia responds to humanitarian emergencies. This framework should:

- Mandate inter-agency coordination between Home Affairs, DFAT, Defence, state governments, and service providers.
- Create a standing humanitarian taskforce that can activate within 72 hours of a declared crisis.
- Guarantee dedicated visa allocations for humanitarian emergencies, separate from the capped annual program, to ensure protracted commitments are not displaced.
- Integrate community consultation panels, with CMW and other diaspora-led organisations as permanent participants.

ii. Introduce Emergency Humanitarian Visas with Clear Criteria

- A fast-tracked humanitarian visa subclass for those fleeing emergencies, with processing capped at 6 weeks.
- Transparent and publicly available eligibility criteria.
- Provisions for family unity as a priority, recognising that fractured families exacerbate trauma.

4. Strengthening Government and Community Responses to Emergency Humanitarian Crises (Continued)

iii. Strengthen Regional Preparedness

Australia must collaborate with Pacific, ASEAN, and African Union partners to anticipate displacement. This requires:

- A climate displacement plan for Pacific nations facing existential threats.
- Joint contingency planning with regional governments and the UNHCR for rapid resettlement corridors.

Resource Local Government and Community Settlement Services

State and local governments often absorb the practical responsibilities of reception and settlement without resources. Settlement funding must expand with crisis arrivals, and community organisations like CMW must be directly funded to provide culturally safe, trauma-informed support.

The Role of Private and Community-Supported Initiatives

Muslim communities in Australia have consistently stepped in where government lags: raising funds, lobbying for family reunification, and supporting newly arrived families with housing, employment, and psychosocial care. This labour is invisible and unfunded.

Private Sponsorship with Safeguards

Private or community sponsorship can complement — not replace — state responsibility. To succeed, it must:

- Be additional to the Humanitarian Program, not carve out existing places.
- Include government co-funding to prevent exploitation of communities.
- Provide transparent monitoring to ensure equity in access.

Formalising Diaspora-Led Humanitarian Action

Government should recognise diaspora communities, including Muslim Australians, as partners in humanitarian relief. This includes:

- Community advisory roles in the National Humanitarian Crisis Response Framework.
- Direct funding streams for diaspora-led organisations supporting emergency arrivals.
- Access to training and accreditation programs so communities can be equipped to engage effectively in settlement and humanitarian advocacy.

3. Recommendations

Theme	Category	Recommendation	Details
Responding to Global Crises	Policy & Program Reform	Establish a flexible quota mechanism for sudden surges	Temporarily increase intake without undermining protracted commitments
		Create a regional stability guarantee	Reserve a fixed % of places for Asia-Pacific refugees
	Priority Cohorts & Equity	Embed cohort-specific allocations	Prioritise persecuted religious minorities, women at risk, long-term stateless groups
		Mandate gender equity & protection	Ensure women, children, LGBTQ+ refugees are not deprioritised
	International Leadership & Partnerships	Increase financial contribution to UNHCR/IOM	Secure more resettlement places globally
		Formalise bilateral humanitarian pathways	Equitable responsibility-sharing with partner countries
CSP Over-subscription & Family Reunion	Program Redesign & Equity	Create separate family reunion stream	Distinct from CSP to reduce misuse and wait times
		Cap CSP sponsorship costs	Remove inequitable financial barriers for low-income communities
	Processing & Efficiency	Digital case management & AI-assisted triage	Reduce processing times from 8 years to <2 years
		Priority processing track for urgent cases	Medical, family separation, high-risk cases
	Community Empowerment	Fund community organisations (e.g., CMW)	Provide settlement and integration services
		Launch co-design framework	Ensure CSP reforms reflect lived experience

Theme	Category	Recommendation	Details
Emergency Humanitarian Crises	Government Planning & Preparedness	National Humanitarian Crisis Response Taskforce	Link Home Affairs, DFAT, Defence, NGOs for rapid coordination
		Humanitarian crisis forecasting model	Predict displacement flows based on conflict/climate indicators
	Operational & Infrastructure Capacity	Surge staffing pools	Mobilise caseworkers, translators, trauma counsellors within 72 hours
		Emergency housing agreements	Partner with states & NGOs for large arrivals
	Private & Community Role	Community Humanitarian Sponsorship model	Parallel to CSP, with government co-funding for emergencies
		National fund for community co-contributions	Rapid support via faith groups & migrant organisations
Cross-Cutting Governance & Inclusion	Transparency & Accountability	Annual public reporting	Intake categories, wait times, unmet demand
		Independent Refugee Program Oversight Body	Audit policy outcomes and equity impacts
	Lived Experience & Cultural Inclusion	Lived-experience advisory councils	Muslim, African, Middle Eastern community representation
		Cultural competency training	For caseworkers, visa officers, decision-makers
	Regional & Global Engagement	Regional humanitarian hub	Provide coordination, training, and logistics for Asia-Pacific crises
		Humanitarian mobility compacts	Allow quicker transit of displaced people through partnerships

4. Conclusion

Humanitarian crises will only intensify in the coming decades. Australia cannot afford a piecemeal, selective, and reactionary approach. The government must commit to a National Humanitarian Crisis Response Framework grounded in speed, equity, and community partnership. Emergency humanitarian visas must be introduced, regional preparedness strengthened, and diaspora-led initiatives formally supported. The Centre for Muslim Wellbeing calls for urgent reform: humanitarian planning must be inclusive, future-focused, and anchored in human dignity.

The Centre for Muslim Wellbeing affirms its commitment to participate actively in policy design, implementation, and community-backed delivery, ensuring equitable, culturally competent, and trauma-informed humanitarian responses.

Contact Us

Executive Officer, Ayman Islam –
executiveofficer@cmw.org.au
Email: admin@cmw.org.au
Phone: (03) 9125 4229

CMW.ORG.AU →