ABC Submission on Australia's New International Development Policy

30 November 2022



An Updated International Media Development Approach

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Introduction

Climate change and its negative impacts, a contested geo-strategic environment, and the rapid rise in digital and social media use and misuse have all heightened challenges, expectations and competition for Australia in the pursuit of its international development goals. In this environment, media development matters more than ever as a tool to support all other development outcomes and as a pro-democratic contribution in its own right.

The ABC has been an enormous asset for Australia across the developing Asia-Pacific for more than 80 years. Today it is the most valued international media voice in the Pacific. More user interactions occur with the ABC than with any other international provider, including the BBC, CNN, and Voice of America. The proportion of respondents in Pacific markets who value the ABC as a 'trusted source of news and information' is 75% – almost as high as in Australia.¹

In August 2022 ABC Pacific was launched. This is a one stop digital brand that will further strengthen the reach and discoverability of the ABC's Pacific news, entertainment and educational offerings. It is designed to target tech-savvy, English-speaking urban residents of Pacific nations, expatriate Australians living in the Pacific, and the Pacific diaspora populations in Australia.

The ABC is an outstanding resource for Australian international development policy precisely because it is not an official mouthpiece for the Australian government but an independent, trusted source of facts and truth, reflecting and broadcasting Pacific hopes and concerns, keeping communities informed in times of crisis, developing local media talent and capability, celebrating shared love of sport and music, elevating women's voices, and more.

The ABC has welcomed the Government's commitment to increase funding to the ABC's international program by \$32 million over four years for enhanced regional transmission, more content production, and increasing media capacity training for Pacific partners. The ABC is working closely with DFAT in the development of the Government's Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy. This new International Development policy should build upon these foundations.

The Prime Minister has been very clear about the strategic importance of a strong Australian voice in the Pacific. "On top of every other consideration, it is a prudent investment in our national security as well as our national interest," he said in his address at the ABC's 90th anniversary dinner in August 2022.

Reflecting this, the ABC proposes a strategic shift to a modernised long-term funding and planning approach for the ABC's role in international development. This would deliver a more effective use of the ABC's capabilities and more efficient use of Government funds. It would deliver a much stronger flow-through from policy objectives to policy outcomes. It would ensure the ABC's reputation, expertise, networks and projects are more effectively utilised to support Australia's international development goals.

This will position Australia's development policy to better address a near-term future that will be heavily influenced by rapidly evolving and expanding digital communications, information provision and social media influence.

¹ Research undertaken for the ABC in late 2021 across six key Pacific markets



Current arrangements

Historically Australia's official development assistance approach to the ABC has been bureaucratic and tactical rather than strategic. Media development and capacity-building have been treated as discretionary, stand-alone activities that may be supportive of, but are never central to, the overarching development agenda.

The ABC trains storytellers, shares media expertise, and provides technical, program and organisational support to partners across the three priority areas of skills and abilities, content creation and broadcast, and quality research. In so doing, it connects Australia's media sector with the Indo-Pacific media community, fostering shared learning and mutual support.

Today, with the dramatic rise in misinformation, disinformation, censorship and fake news, including by state actors, the ABC's work with media organisations and communication partners around the Indo-Pacific is more important than ever to build and strengthen local media, fight corruption and support democracy.

The current approach to this task, however, warrants urgent reconsideration:

- Media development is not presently acknowledged as a substantive stream in Australia's international development agenda. This downgrades the vital importance of media development to all international development.
- DFAT currently funds ABC media development activities from different areas, on a case-by-case basis, determined by many variables. It is a cumbersome, inconsistent and inefficient process for both DFAT and the ABC.
- Despite being a Commonwealth institution, the ABC is treated like a non-government organisation or private sector partner for the purposes of these arrangements. Each project has a separate contract with onerous and unnecessary governance and administrative processes. These added layers are redundant given the ABC is already subject to Commonwealth Government governance standards.

With this project-by-project approach, with a myriad of timelines and lifespans, the ABC is required to work within narrow parameters and has limited latitude to draw upon or amplify the benefits of these stand-alone activities across different projects, markets or operations.

Media Development and democracy

The engagement of informed citizens is a fundamental requirement for effective democracy, along with consistently accountable government and appropriate checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power. People in countries with a free and independent media are better informed about their government and politics, have more positive civic attitudes and greater trust in others.

As António Guterres, UN Secretary General said, "Throughout the world, a free press is essential for peace, justice, sustainable development and human rights — and the cornerstone for building fair and impartial institutions. No society can be free and fair without journalists who are able to investigate wrongdoing, bring information to citizens, hold leaders accountable and speak truth to power."

Sustaining democracy also requires constant vigilance. When communities are well-informed, they can make informed decisions, question government policy, and interact effectively with the institutions and systems that shape their realities. Balanced and accurate reporting can inspire and even mandate positive social change.



As a member of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU), the ABC models and promotes public interest journalism as the foundation of a democratic society, while also encouraging social inclusion and civic participation. The ABC's role is more important than ever to counter growing issues of misinformation, disinformation, cyber security, State controlled information and media censorship.

There are very different information and media development contexts across the Indo-Pacific region, and between the Pacific and South East Asia. But engagement remains key. The two countries – Solomon Islands and Cambodia – where Australia most recently disengaged its long-term media development relationships are heading backwards in development and geo-strategic terms. Other countries, including those with different values relating to public interest media, are taking advantage of the media training gap left by Australia.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda recognises the power and potential of the spread of information, communications technology and global interconnectedness, "to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies, as does scientific and technological innovation across areas as diverse as medicine and energy". Specifically, SGD Goal 16 recognises the direct links between media, information and peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.

What we propose

It is therefore timely for Australia to formally recognise that media development is an integral part of all development and reflect that reality in Australian International Development policy:

- The role of public interest media development should be made explicit in the Government's articulation of its international development goals, consistent with Australian democratic values.
- The ABC should be formally recognised as Australia's public interest media development body.
- An annual funding stream to the ABC should be established, with the ABC receiving annual
 appropriated funding to carry out its media development mission in accordance with
 Commonwealth policy and governance requirements.
- This may sound novel, but it is not. DFAT provides annual funds for the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research for example, recognising that this is the best and most efficient way to achieve its policy objectives for this thematic stream. Stand-alone media development programs are now operating out of the UK (BBC Media Action), Germany (DW Akademie) and US (Internews).
- In the past Australia has been criticised by the Pacific for imposing our views or projecting ourselves on the Pacific. This updated policy model would enable the ABC to cultivate a stronger culture of listening, learning and collaborating with our partners, especially in the Pacific, and working with communities in the ways they want to engage.
- The ABC will of course continue working closely with DFAT on all these endeavours in a spirit of
 partnership and mutual respect for our separate areas of expertise. It will also continue sound
 governance (financial and reporting) in line with current best practice and Commonwealth
 standards.

² https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda, Paragraph 15.



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Benefits to Australia

The benefits to this updated approach will be substantial:

- The Government will have articulated and clarified the pro-democratic context in which it designs and delivers all its international development assistance.
- Putting media development explicitly as a priority in Australia's international development policy sends a clear geo-political signal that media freedom is recognised by Australia as a necessary ingredient for democracy and that Australia stands with Indo-Pacific countries to protect democracy from those trying to erode it.
- The ABC will be better placed to undertake long-term media development planning, capitalise on opportunities, and coordinate and deliver services in support of Australia's international development objectives to:
 - Build and support sustainable states and communities
 - Deepen regional partnerships and connections
 - Enhance state and community resilience
 - Encourage collective action on shared global challenges.
- Administrative and governance processes will be simplified, reducing time and costs.
- Untying ABC activities from specific DFAT projects will remove any risk that the ABC is seen as directly promoting Australian security or other agendas.
- The ABC will be well-placed to foster stronger, deeper relationships with our Pacific colleagues, to collaborate on mutually agreed projects, and support democratic progress more broadly.

The ABC would be pleased to expand on this proposal at any time.

