

Ipas Partners for Reproductive Justice

Supporting SRHR & Sustainable Abortion Ecosystems Globally
30 November 2022

Ipas Submission on the new International Development Policy for Australia

INTRODUCTION

Ipas welcomes the Australian Government's decision to develop a new policy framework for Australia's International Development and Humanitarian Assistance Program ("the Policy"). We hope this submission demonstrates how to integrate gender equality and human rights standards throughout the Policy, particularly as related to sexual and reproductive health and rights ("SRHR").

Ipas is an international organization that works in more than 20 countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America to increase women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights, especially the right to safe abortion. We envision a world where everyone can make their own sexual and reproductive choices, and ultimately, determine their own future. We work with partners to ensure that safe abortion and contraception is widely available, to connect women with vital information so they can access safe services, and to advocate for safe, legal abortion. We strive to foster a legal, policy, and social environment supportive of women's rights to make their own sexual and reproductive health decisions freely and safely.

Ipas understands and welcomes the Australian Government's desire to develop a new long-term strategy for international development and foreign aid, particularly given the country's longstanding role as a neighbourly cooperating partner for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

The new policy will set the long-term direction for Australia's international development program and deliver on the Government's commitment to work in partnership with its neighbours in the Pacific and Southeast Asia, addressing shared challenges and to achieve collective aspirations.

Australians want an effective development program that is grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and collaborates with its neighbours to help lift them out of poverty. Supporting sustainable and inclusive development in this region is both the smart and right thing to do.

Ipas has experience working with other governments as they develop and implement rights-based foreign policy frameworks, and from our experience we know this process can help position Australia as a key regional and global player, helping partners and local communities to meet their present and future development needs.

Written Submission Requirements

Ipas is pleased to submit the following responses to the series of key questions outlined in the TOR on the immediate challenges and longer-term trends in Australia's region, as well as risks and opportunities for the Australian development program.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR WRITTEN SUBMISSION

In light of key trends and challenges, what are the top three priorities Australia's development program should seek to advance?

A top priority (1) for Australia's development program must be ensuring that women and girls are treated equally by societies and that their human rights, including SRHR, are respected, protected, and fulfilled. Globally, half of women and girls are denied bodily autonomy. This impacts all areas of their lives—from how much schooling they are able to complete; to if and where they work and to how much they earn. Without bodily autonomy and specifically the right to access abortion and contraception, women—and especially girls—may be forced to get married, leave school, interrupt, or leave their jobs, and face a lifetime deficit in earnings. Despite its unique combination of rights, health, and economic benefits as part of the Australian development program, **SRHR, as one of the most underfunded elements** of an integrated health agenda globally, must take a greater central development goal. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates the annual costs of treating major complications of unsafe abortion exceed US\$ 553 million. Increasing women's SRHR options and decision-making strengthens economies because women are better able to contribute to the economy, they can facilitate better educational outcomes for their children, and healthcare costs are not diverted to the preventable problem of unsafe abortion.

A key trend that the Policy must acknowledge is **high population growth and an increasing proportion of young people in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)**. With regards to the Indo Pacific, Australia can learn from Sub Saharan Africa's ("SSA"), trend on high population growth and increasing proportion of young people. SSA is becoming the world's greatest demographic player in the coming decades. SSA's population is growing at the rate of 2.7% a year and together with the high fertility rate and rising cohort of women of reproductive age group (15–49 years), there is a strong need to ensure that reproductive health and bodily autonomy are at the forefront of efforts to respond to this population momentum. Unless the demographic transition in SSA is well-managed, African countries for example, will not be able to reap demographic dividends of its youthful population. Australia's Development Cooperation with African Nations aims to support countries via targeted development cooperation activities to help build food security and resilience, strengthen government capacity in key sectors, empower vulnerable communities, and share knowledge in areas such as climate adaptation and renewable energy. Without a well-managed demographic transition, these investments in Africa might not reap the desired benefits. Australia should therefore consider investing in expanded access to contraception and abortion. Therefore, it must be **another top priority (2) to implement development plans that improve partner governments', organizations', and providers' capacity to provide comprehensive healthcare to women and girls on their terms; to promote human dignity with access to high-quality healthcare; and to provide women and girls with control over their bodies and reproductive choices by enabling access to high-quality and respectful SRHR care.**

Thirdly, in the face of rising conservatism and populist movements, the rollback on sexual and reproductive health rights is being acutely felt around the globe, including Africa. Gender equality, and the empowerment of women and girls, which are key priorities for Australia's Development Cooperation, are not possible without the realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). In a time of global crisis, human rights defenders – including those that defend reproductive rights -- are more vital than ever. Therefore, it must be a **top priority (3) that this Policy reinforce the critical role of human rights defenders, in both**

monitoring for human rights violations as well as in holding their governments accountable to the health and human rights standards to which governments have committed themselves.

We know from our experience that access to abortion depends on interconnected factors—individual knowledge, social support and power, community access points, health systems, availability of commodities, supply chains, an active civil society, political will, and funding streams. But it also depends on other broader, structural issues: a fundamental belief in and implementation of universal health care, as a right; gender equality and nondiscrimination; democracy, freedom of speech and expression; and basic human rights protections, such as economic and social protection for all citizens. All have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and disruption to any one factor, inevitably has a domino effect on the others. Without a functioning democracy, human rights can be eroded quickly by corruption and repression; holding governments and other duty-bearers accountable for protecting those rights can become difficult or impossible. At the macro-level, distrust in, and defunding of, multilateral bodies like the United Nations, the World Health Organization, UNFPA, among others, erodes their legitimacy and ability to implement their core functions. At Ipas, we understand human rights as not only an end but also the means -- the framing by which public health responses to the pandemic, climate catastrophes, and other humanitarian crises -- must be designed in order to have positive outcomes for women and marginalized communities. **We urge the Australian government to ensure that a rights-based framing and analysis is integrated and clear across all aspects of the Policy.**

[What are the priority issues to advance gender equality and social inclusion?](#)

Lack of bodily autonomy and poverty are intersectional issues. Women already living in poverty have higher rates of unintended pregnancies, are less able to afford contraception, are less educated than their peers, and lack knowledge about or access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Programs and policies must therefore prioritize those women and girls most underserved; those who are poor, young, or unmarried; survivors of violence; displaced; or disabled. All women and girls need to be able to decide for themselves what they want to invest their time in, be it family, education, or employment. Ipas understands this because we work with public health systems and with local community organizations run by and for people living in poverty to ensure that we reach those in need. We use co-creation mechanisms so that beneficiaries and stakeholders – both individuals and groups – engage in active and informed participation in matters related to their health.

Priority issues that Ipas has identified to advance gender equality and social inclusion, and that we also **urge the Australian government to prioritize**, include:

- Providing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to young people, including gender transformative information on violence and abortion self-care.
- Training community and humanitarian aid workers on sexual and gender-based violence, power inequalities, and trauma informed care.
- Training health care workers on gender responsive care, including abortion providers and key health systems stakeholders.
Increasing capacity for community intermediaries and the abortion workforce to provide trauma informed and compassionate care to all women and girls, especially survivors of violence.
- Reflecting gender equality both in and through SRHR by integrating a gender-transformative approach across all Australian Development programs.
- It is important for Australia to support the work to expand access to SRHR services and information in all priority countries—to ensure equal rights, resources, responsibilities, and opportunities.

- Increasing investments focused on scaling gender transformative approaches to SRHR particularly contraception, safe abortion, and post-abortion care services. Only then, can we all achieve social inclusion.

How can Australia ensure the new policy demonstrates a commitment to building stronger and more meaningful partnerships in its region?

- Women and girls, in all their diversity, experience gender, sexual, racial, and economic inequality which causes reduced bodily autonomy and ability to make or act on their own essential health needs, especially when it comes to reproductive health care and decision-making. For the new Policy to demonstrate a bold new commitment to stronger and more meaningful partnerships, we urge the Australian government to prioritize investments, and choose partners, that are using gender transformative and reproductive justice frameworks to define their strategies and programming.
- At Ipas, we find that gender transformative and reproductive justice frameworks help us to define more relevant strategies that consider how gender roles, power imbalances and social and economic inequalities influence the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls in countries where we work. These frameworks help us to take an intersectional approach to better understand the needs of women, girls, and their communities, and then to design activities that are localized and contextualized to the specific populations in each geography. The government's new Policy should take a similar approach if it is seeking to transform gender relations and to promote equality in societies around the world.

Who are the key stakeholders that Australia should partner with to advance gender equality and social inclusion? What should these partnerships look like?

- Australia should consider a cohesive approach through sub-regional blocs, such as the APEC East Africa Community, CSW (as examples), to support and build on existing SRHR and gender frameworks and work with organized women's rights movements that engage in those spaces. This approach will also enable Australia to support the shadow reports presented by women's rights coalitions to inform key human rights and development conversations.
- Secondly, it would make sense to invest in supporting strong, cross-sectoral feminist movements that bring together gender justice actors, economic justice actors, reproductive justice actors and climate justice actors that all seek to address the unequal power structures that drive gender inequality and social exclusion. This partnership should value multi-year financial support to enable such movements – which are severely underfunded -- to engage in sustained actions that can bring about systemic change.
- It would be helpful for Australia to find a balance between funding to multilateral organizations, and CSOs because CSOs can be bolder in their advocacy and interventions that impact communities and health outcomes.
- Australia should also consider core funding to newer partners like the global Ipas entity, to enable bolder advocacy at global level and to ensure strong infrastructure for partners.
- Australia can join the Global Safe Abortion Dialogue to build relationships with other donors and partners supporting priority actions to advance safe abortion access as a critical component of gender equality. By extension, Australia can support the Asia Regional Safe Abortion Dialogue.
- Australia should also look beyond its traditional partners and aim to support new partners working on other social justice issues that intersect with gender inequality. Not all women and girls are equal or equally disadvantaged. The extent to which they

are at risk of being excluded depends on where they lie at the intersection of different underserved, disadvantaged or marginalized groups in any given context. The implications of this intersectionality need to be understood and recognized, in the diversity of partners that Australia will pursue. Poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes constrain access by women and girls to education, employment, and income-earning opportunities, and undermine their ability to participate on an equal basis with men and boys in all spheres of life. It therefore makes sense to support partners, such as Ipas, who work on advancing Reproductive Justice to reflect the intersectionality between SRHR and gender inequality.

How can Australia best utilize its national strengths to enhance the impact of their development program? What capabilities do we need?

- Australia can be a powerful voice on the global stage for increasing ODA commitments to gender equality and SRHR.
- Australia's thought leadership in climate change adaptation is sorely needed if we want to strategically address the issue of climate injustice in Asia and the Global South as a whole. The impacts of climate change are disproportionately felt by women and girls and require an intersectional approach. This can be a strength of Australia's Development Cooperation agenda.
- Additional capabilities are needed in SRHR programming especially in access to contraception and access to safe abortion care. The benefit of this is clear - Investing in sexual and reproductive health and rights saves lives, advances gender equality, improves health and well-being, helps women to access quality education and find decent work, increases productivity and household income, and improves children's health and well-being, thereby contributing to broader development goals.

How should Australia elevate attention to gender equality and social inclusion across the development program?

- This can be achieved by embedding gender transformation and equity across all development work on climate, renewable energy, food security, and health -- which ultimately will make your investments more sustainable and impactful for the countries you will support. There should be additional emphasis on increasing interventions aimed at reaching the most marginalized women and girls within all programmes supported by the Australian Development Cooperation.
- Australia can promote support for CEDAW and global gender equality agreements at the Commission on the Status of Women.
- Australia can elevate key processes such as Universal Health Coverage, to advocate for inclusion of SRHR (including abortion) as a fundamental tool for attainment of gender equality.

What gaps have you observed in terms of gender equality and social inclusion capability within Australia's development program?

- The intersectionality between gender inequality and other social justice issues such as reproductive justice, climate justice, and others is not well articulated.
- A deliberate intent on identifying and reaching the marginalized and socially excluded is not clear.