

We, the undersigned, welcome the Australian Government's invitation for independent submissions to inform Australia's new International Development Policy. Perspective is critical – capturing inclusive, diverse perspectives beyond the interests of donor peers and domestically invested stakeholders is critical to assess and inform Australia's development assistance policy framework.

We believe Australia needs a clear, consistent, long term and bipartisan international development policy if it is to achieve the impact and genuine engagement needed to position Australia as a trusted, respected, and valued partner. In order to progress this agenda, with respect to the Blue Pacific, we suggest four areas in which Australia can pursue a deeper, more critical rethink in crafting its new International Development Policy, and four related actions that may assist in achieving that end.

1. Reframe the deficit lens through which the current development program operates

Australia has long operated on the premise that it must support the region in light of its deficiencies, its smallness, its remoteness, and its lack of capacity. It is time for this to change. No-one appreciates the pressing development challenges and unique characteristics, vulnerabilities, and complexities more than the region itself. But this is not the whole story.

There is also a generative story; a story of strengths, innovations, rich worldviews, and the many ways in which Pacific people have historically, and are still, rising to the challenges before them. In amongst the development challenges being confronted, there is no shortage of local agency, ideas, and initiatives Australia should acknowledge and support as a genuine and durable partner in the region.

Recommendation 1: Australia's International Development Policy should ensure clear support for the Pacific's own transformative initiatives, such as the Pacific Resilience Facility.

2. Refocus the debate on quality and mutuality

While recent increases in development assistance are welcome and important, the impact of the last five decades of Australian development assistance is negligible and the Pacific remains the most aid-dependent region in the world. We believe the debate must refocus on quality and a sense of mutuality – alongside quantity – in our increasingly inter-connected world. If this shift can be achieved, Australia's development program can do the strategic work required to be remembered in 50 or 100 years' time.

The integration of AusAID into the Department of Foreign Affairs, a decade ago, worsened development effectiveness and resulted in a significant loss of development capability. Seeking short-term tactical and geostrategic benefits from the development program is not the way to achieve the lasting, positive regional legacy, genuine relationships, and deep, broad influence for which Australia should strive.

Recommendation 2: Australia should establish a mutual mechanism with Pacific stakeholders to assess the impact and quality of its development assistance and account mutually to the citizens of Australia - including Indigenous Australians and the Pacific diaspora - and the Blue Pacific.

3. Reform the structures and systems of development assistance

Australian development assistance has become a commercial industry in the Pacific in which control, power and significant finance sits with intermediaries who compete for the aid dollar – multilateral funds, international NGOs, UN agencies and private managing contractors. While some of these intermediaries play critical roles, the system is not delivering for Australia or the Pacific to the extent it could. Instead of creating commercial incentives to deliver effective development assistance, it has created a perverse incentive to prioritise relationship building and maintenance with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The structure positions successful intermediaries close to DFAT, both in setting agendas and in designing, implementing, and evaluating programs, while (critical) beneficiary voices and perspectives are either absent or watered down via filtering through such intermediaries.

We propose consideration of a system of mutuality in which power is shared with the Pacific through partnerships based on understanding, reciprocity, and collaboration. Such a system would enable the co-creation, co-design, co-lead, and co-evaluation of development programs, while incorporating the mutual accountability mechanism above. This would enable the inclusion of the voices of those being supported and impacted by Australia's assistance, thus creating something entirely new and bringing much needed Pacific perspectives to the Australian development industry.

Recommendation 3: An independent advisory group – comprised of both Pacific Island citizens and Australian citizens – should be established to shift Australia's development assistance away from the current commercial model and toward one of partnership in which risk, reward and power are shared more equally.

4. Re-educate Australians with Pacific literacy

Australia needs to understand the region, and the Pacific diaspora, better if it is to grow a cadre of diplomats and officials with strong cultural competence. Development outcomes require strong relationships, and strong relationships require mutual understanding. Long after roads are built, and development programs are delivered, relationships and deeper knowledge can and will endure.

Pacific people know a lot about Australia, but the reverse is far from true. Despite longstanding involvement in the Pacific Islands – including as colonial administrator of Papua New Guinea and Nauru – most Australians have little knowledge about the region. The Australian policy community and wider society need to make a meaningful and sustained investment in building Pacific literacy. Too little is taught in schools and universities about the diversity, dynamism, and history of the Pacific region. We propose, as have many Pacific people, a stronger educational effort.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Government should work with Pacific stakeholders to implement changes to the Australian curriculum to better equip Australians with Pacific literacy at primary, secondary and tertiary level.

With thanks for your consideration and the opportunity to offer these recommendations.

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