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Australia's New International Development Policy: Submission

PaCSIA thanks the Department for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the long-term direction of international development cooperation.

We welcome the ToR's emphasis on a commitment 'to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships ... founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality'. Drawing from PaCSIA's directors' and members' many years' experience working in peacebuilding and international cooperation, we consider a serious commitment to genuine partnership to be the basis of any effective response to Australia's challenges and vulnerabilities. Such relationships need to be between governments but also to reach beyond governments to strong societal, organisational and people to people linkages.

We strongly endorse the clear statement of peace, stability and prosperity as the overarching goals of Australia's international engagements. Peacebuilding, understood broadly as consistently working to enhance peace and stability and against direct or systemic violence (entrenched injustice), offers a coherent, effective and powerful overarching framework for Australia's international development cooperation. If peace is the goal, we need to consistently prioritise the methods, processes and approaches that work towards it.

We embrace the Government's goal of a First Nations led foreign policy. This orientation provides a compelling and deeply challenging basis on which to interrogate and strengthen Australia's capacity to build better partnerships and to enhance peace, stability and prosperity in the region and beyond.

The following paragraphs respond to key themes across the ToR's questions. They are not intended to provide exhaustive responses.

Key Trends and Challenges

As the TOR notes, Australia faces a highly complex and increasingly challenging security, foreign policy and development environment, characterised by the rapid pace of climate change and its profoundly destabilising effects, great power strategic competition and its potential to fracture and silo relations across the region, a marked change in international and regional balances of power, and rising inequality. The interaction of these forces can produce unpredictable effects which are extremely difficult to manage.

In our view, and supporting the current statements of policy direction, the fundamental response to these challenges is twofold.

First, to commit to building long-term, respectful relations across the region and to supporting a network of well-grounded multilateral and regional relationships and channels of communication. A strong and deep pattern of relations, that is, not only with governments but

also with societies, is important in times of relative calm, but in challenging times, it is critical. (We recognise that in some cases this is politically sensitive.) This requires putting resources into developing and maintaining a wide-ranging understanding and appreciation of our neighbours' values, social and cultural organisation and concerns (which is distinct from endorsing them).

Second, to commit significant resources to climate change prevention, mitigation, disaster response and regional loss and damage. This must now be a central element of Australia's international cooperation efforts and is itself part of being a good partner.

Intensifying strategic competition can heighten anxiety and cynicism and lead to the withholding of trust among regional governments and societal bodies regarding relationships that are seen as lacking intrinsic commitment or as merely transactional. This deficit may affect some of Australia's efforts, particularly in the Pacific Islands region, and emphasizes the need for steady, long-term commitment and the allocation of resources into building wide-reaching relations. Such commitment includes both increasing diplomatic and international development personnel and resources and improving knowledge and understanding of our Pacific and Asian neighbours and regions within the Australian population.

Development capabilities; Building stronger partnerships

In building and maintaining relations and partnerships, the best outcomes are possible when all arms of Australia's international engagements work closely together. Development cooperation cannot ultimately be seen apart from diplomacy and foreign policy, or security and defence. This need not and should not lead to a securitisation of development and diplomacy, however, as may be happening currently in our relationship with the Solomon Islands. Rather, it calls for a broad understanding of security, including human and ecological security (in line with our Pacific Island neighbours) as well as defence, where the well-being of our neighbourhood is closely tied to our own well-being and where working to build peace is the foundation of our international engagement.

The language of partnership is common, but the practice can be time-consuming and difficult and is much less common. Australia's international engagements have tended to become overly transactional. Moving away from this and towards partnership involves the development and practice of a range of skills. It involves prioritising the health of the relationship over some versions of efficiency and perhaps re-organising the accounting cycle and mechanisms (without losing accountability) to meet the needs of the relationship which makes the program possible.

Similarly, working to build peace also requires a range of skills and orientations. Some of these skills are analytical (analysis of the sources of violent conflict, conflict dynamics and trajectories, familiarity with forms and requirements of conflict resolution, awareness of trauma effects etc), some are organisational (ensuring the priority is understood across the different arms of the institution or program), many are the same as what is needed for good

partnership. These include listening and paying attention (sometimes called deep listening), respect and mutuality, openness to and awareness of difference, taking the time to develop understanding, and the capacity for cross-cultural dialogue. These are learnable cultural and institutional practices and not simply personal attributes. We need to consider how our international cooperation practices support such orientations.

Partnership involves an attitude of equality, respect and appreciating that the ‘development’ that our partners want is not necessarily to be like us. While forms of direct and structural violence can be culturally embedded (as gender violence is in cultural dynamics in the Pacific Islands, across Asia and in Australia, for example) working against that violence does not mean making others’ cultures more like our own, but is more about cross-cultural dialogue and working together to identify pathways that clearly value our partners and are meaningful to them. In our experience, it is our partners who identify how to undertake sensitive forms of change consistent with their ways of life but transformative of violence. We also have much to learn about working against entrenched violence and building shared peace, stability and prosperity. Good communication often happens when both parties are open to and curious about learning from each other and have the time to get to know each other. Development cooperation is not a one-way street.

Taking our partners’ concerns and priorities seriously, as the Australian Government is now endeavouring to do in relation to working with Pacific Island neighbours on climate change, is fundamental to good partnership.

Responses to climate change, including responses to disasters, also call for awareness of and sensitivity to partners’ worldviews, cosmologies and ontologies and their cultural, social and economic forms of organisation, including disaster response mechanisms. Partners in long-term, mutual relationships learn better these dimensions of each other’s ways of life and forms and sources of resilience.

In development cooperation, actual relationships and engagements are often mediated by large international corporations hired to ‘deliver’ programs. While this may be appropriate in some circumstances, it may not always be consistent with a primary commitment to building strong relationships and deepening understanding and communication. It is important for the relevant government, commercial and non-government bodies to maintain an ongoing discussion about what goes into making meaningful partnership and review not only policy but also practice in that light. Too often the words are there in the policy, but the actions do not follow through or directly undermine the possibility of partnership emerging.

Meaningful partnership benefits immensely from good people-to-people links. Supporting greater education about and understanding of the broader region, including the study of languages, and supporting cultural links and activities, migration, trade, education and appropriate, non-exploitative employment channels, enable more grounded and nuanced relations.

National strengths

Australia has adopted a First Nations orientation to our international engagements. This is a deeply significant step, the meaning of which will take shape further over time. It highlights non-Indigenous Australia's most egregious development (and socio-political) weakness and our failure at real partnership and building genuine peace within our own political community. Nevertheless, it does so in a way which underscores the path beyond this weakness. It calls non-Indigenous Australians and institutions forward to explore and build a fundamentally important strength and sets out on this task.

A First Nations orientation calls for awareness of our rich but deeply chequered history. As we face working against poverty and violence elsewhere, a First Nations orientation asks us to be fully conscious of the poverty, violence and profound failings regarding mutuality and partnership in our own history, contemporary institutions and society. The continuing and increasingly high rates of First Nations incarceration, the numbers of Indigenous children in detention including solitary confinement, the growing gap in health outcomes, despite numerous inquiries and recommendations, make clear the violence embedded in key institutions and the challenges involved in the pursuit of peace, stability and prosperity. At the same time, we need also to be conscious of our commitment to build and uphold relations between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians that are truly just, equal and respectful and to learn from our efforts to do this in ways that speak to all our partnerships. This calls for humility and openness to learn from others. Some degree of humility, self-awareness, openness and truth, however, are powerful bases for relations with others.

Australia's history also includes our history with regional neighbours. Our international interlocutors are often highly aware of and sensitive to aspects of our history regarding their country or place (Bougainville is a prominent example here). Better understanding of the histories of interaction with regional countries should be part of greater awareness of our own history.

Australian governments and institutions have been poor partners with First Nations Australians, not offering the attention, time and respect needed to appreciate and work with the grain of different cultural and social contexts or recognising and appreciating what can be different governance arrangements in play.

A First Nations orientation highlights the significance of taking social, organisational, ontological and epistemological differences seriously, being prepared to learn the protocols of others, and working respectfully across such differences. Just as contemporary experience highlights how often non-Indigenous institutions and bodies fail to do this within Australia, Australian international development cooperation can also struggle to be aware of the differences in play. If our goal is the delivery of things, that may not matter (although often it does). If we seek to build relationships it matters a lot.

There is much that non-Indigenous institutions could learn from the principles guiding First Nations approaches and from the challenges of working respectfully across difference. There are many forms of societal governance operating in Australian First Nations communities, e.g., many communities continue to have highly developed conflict resolution mechanisms for relations within and between communities. Community values and ordering principles (e.g., such as around land) can be significantly different. Many of our neighbours in Asia and the Pacific Islands also have very significant societally based governance arrangements underpinning social and political order. These are not merely incidental to official state government but often fundamental to the stability and security of the country concerned. We need to take them seriously and engage respectfully.

Taking a First Nations orientation in our international stance is an open, innovative and creative step. It makes the point that non-Indigenous Australians can and do learn about truly living respectfully with First Nations, about partnership and building peace. This is a hugely valuable learning journey for us all, a journey that calls us to learn more about ourselves in ways which also carry great benefits for our international engagements, particularly (though not only) with post-colonial societies and governments.

Performance and Delivery Systems

Being a good partner needs to be one of the key goals of performance and delivery systems, alongside accountability, transparency, effectiveness and learning. Taking the time to be a meaningful partner is likely to significantly increase effectiveness and learning, certainly over the medium and long-term, as communication improves. While it is important that accountability remains strong or improves, accounting mechanisms need to be able to adjust to circumstances in order to be in step with the concrete circumstances and needs of our partners. To support greater continuity of relations and programs, the Government could offer more support for organisations rather than solely for projects. Essentially, the idea of 'delivery systems' needs to be reshaped into the 'practice of partnership' to work against the transactional orientation that continues to prevail in much development cooperation.

Sincerely,



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