

Australian Development Policy: RDI Network submission

November 2022

Background on RDI Network

Established in 2009, the Research for Development Impact Network (RDI Network) is a network of development researchers, practitioners, and evaluators. With currently over 2,200 members, the Network has become a key outlet for accessing diverse development research expertise and evidence, tools and guidance for development research engagement and impact, brokering partnerships, convening forums and conferences, as well as supporting ethical research practice among NGOs and academia in Australia.

Below we provide our recommendations for the new aid policy based on our extensive experience and expertise in development issues, research and evidence in Asia and the Pacific.

Trends and challenges, risks and opportunities

What key trends or challenges will shape Australia's engagement in our region and globally over the next five to 10 years? What risks and opportunities does this present for Australia's development assistance?

- **Impact of Climate Change on Livelihoods, Displacement and Conflict (especially in the Pacific):** The past couple of years have shown the impact of climate change on the everyday lives of people in the Asia-Pacific region, with natural disasters such as storms and flooding occurring more frequently and with a more severe impact on people's livelihoods, including forced displacement. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC)¹ about two-third of all internally displaced people (IDPs) or 30.7 million flee natural and man-made disasters. Pacific Island nations are among the most affected, given they are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences that climate change brings, such as extreme weather events, coastal erosion, loss of land and water scarcity. Furthermore, the United Nations finds that "evidence is clear that climate change does contribute to increased conflict, but along indirect pathways. There are a variety of context factors — in particular, socioeconomic conditions, governance, and political factors — that interact and play a key role in translating climate change into conflict risks."² Australia, as a Leader in the Pacific, thus needs to focus on supporting Pacific Island lands, and other partners in Asia, to proactively address the negative consequences of climate change in order to prevent a livelihood crisis and mass displacements of people, but also to ensure regional stability and the protection of those in need.³

¹ https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/grid2021_idmc.pdf

² <https://unfccc.int/blog/conflict-and-climate#:~:text=The%20evidence%20is%20clear%20that,climate%20change%20into%20conflict%20isks.>

³ <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/climate-change-disasters-and-displacement-0>

- **Long-term preventive approaches focused on resilience rather than short-term responses:** To address the adverse effects of climate change, and the associated link to conflict and displacement, a long-term approach, focussing on prevention rather than short-term response is going to yield more positive change - especially if this is done in a participatory approach with our Pacific partners. Prevention, especially if it focuses on resilience, is cheaper than a reactive approach to disasters and in the long-term will have better development outcomes.
- **Climate change impacts all development goals, including basic services such as water and sanitation:** Climate Change, and its associated impact is also central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, with Goal 13 specifically urging climate action, although several of the other goals also speak to climate change issues (e.g., Goals 6, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15) and Goal 16 speaks to the importance of maintaining peace. In addition the link between climate change and access to basic services such as water and sanitation are clear. Climate resilient approaches to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and increased resource allocation to achieve these basic services are fundamental to ensuring resilient communities.
- **Gender equality remains a key priority.** Although there have been many achievements in the rights of women over the past years, gender equality has not yet been achieved. This was most recently exemplified by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021, and the reinstallation of a gender apartheid regime. Evidence shows that women's rights are closely linked with more positive development outcomes, especially education and health care), but also peace and stability. As gender equality necessitates fundamental societal change, it is a long-term development project that needs continuous efforts, especially in close participation with women from the countries Australia supports. A good example of this is a multi-year DFAT funded participatory action-oriented project by UNSW's Dr Linda Bartoleim in five countries in the Asia-Pacific to support the implementation and monitoring of the commitments to refugee women and girls in the Global Compact for Refugees.⁴ Other positive examples include the DFAT Water for Women fund, which places gender and inclusion centrally, and has broken new ground towards gender transformative approaches.

Required development capabilities

What development capabilities will Australia need to respond to these challenges?

To effectively manage the emerging challenges that Australia will face in the years ahead, DFAT requires five key development capabilities:

1. **Evidence generation:** Research plays a critical role in ensuring informed development programming that builds on lessons learnt and ensures that programming integrates latest thinking and ideas to meet the challenges of the 21st century. 'Evidence-based' and 'learning oriented' programming and organisations are now viewed as essential to effective government but this requires dedicated commitment to investing in learning and prioritising it⁵ as a core element of development programming - not merely an add-on. The role of research

⁴ <https://www.unsw.edu.au/arts-design-architecture/our-schools/social-sciences/our-research/research-networks/forced-migration-research-network/projects/gender-audits>

⁵ B. Head (2010) 'Evidence-based policy: Principles and requirements,' in *Strengthening Evidence-Based Policy*, Melbourne: Productivity Commission.

and evidence is also essential in the pursuit of the 2030 Agenda. “*Science, research and academic communities test new ideas that can accelerate development transformation. Advances in science, research and technology in every country will need to be leveraged to enable evidence-based implementation of the SDGs.*”⁶ Long-term funding for predictability and skills building here is important, as identified by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Long-term financing of research in the areas of foreign, security and development policy is a prerequisite for the production of relevant, high-quality new knowledge, reinforcement of specialist institutions and improved capacity to deal with unforeseen developments”.⁷

Australia has tremendous expertise within its universities, as well as amongst research organisations and NGOs, that DFAT can draw on to support its development programming. Australian universities and expertise should be viewed as key partners in delivering Australia’s development strategy, in partnership with academic and research partners in the region, including to build their own capacity and strengthen Australia’s relationships in the region.

2. **Evidence translation and use:** Beyond simply generating evidence, DFAT also requires capabilities to use and integrate evidence for policy making and investment decisions. This is often assumed to naturally flow from research generation but requires dedicated efforts of staff and systems to engage with researchers and research, have the skills to interrogate ideas for rigour, design investments and ways of working in ways that integrate evidence, and ensure that learning from practice is fed back to research communities. This can include dedicated communities of practice, participation in and engagement with university and researcher fora, and generously contributing to knowledge creation and debates.
3. **Development expertise:** Since integration, DFAT has lost significant development expertise and - particularly under the previous Government - development expertise was not sufficiently valued or invested in. Without foundational development expertise DFAT risks falling behind other development partners and may struggle to be considered a partner of choice. Valuing development expertise alongside diplomatic and trade expertise is essential to being taken seriously as a development partner. This requires recruiting development specialists and providing career pathways for their advancement, ensuring ongoing professional development for development expertise within DFAT, and building communities of practice with the wider development community in Australia - amongst universities, NGOs and the private sector.
4. **Deep contextual knowledge:** Development cannot happen without understanding the particularities of context in the places that DFAT works. This is crucial to DFAT’s investments being relevant, locally owned and led and effective and sustainable. Here, DFAT’s locally engaged staff play an especially important role, having long-term experience in the countries they work in and deep local knowledge that must be respected and valued. Australian DFAT staff can strengthen their own capabilities in this area with robust language and cultural training prior to deployment. Further, Australia’s partners in country (with local government, civil society and the private sector) are also essential in helping Australia navigate the local context. These partnerships must be respectful with Australia recognising the significant benefit and local knowledge that they provide.

At the programming level, there are a range of tools to integrate contextual awareness. These include conflict sensitive approaches that integrate local context understanding into programs, reduce the likelihood of doing harm and increase local uptake. Political economy analysis similarly seeks to understand local political dynamics that shape how and why change happens (or does not). These approaches focus on recognising and strengthening existing

⁶ [UNSDG-SDG-primer-companion-piece.pdf](#), p.11

⁷ [Research strategy for the Foreign Service and Norad 2017–2024 - regjeringen.no](#)

local capacities - rather than substituting them with external ones - and ensuring accountability for what development partners are doing.

5. **Adaptiveness and agility:** It is widely recognised that development is not a linear trajectory but a contested, iterative and complex process in which development partners need to navigate adaptively. This means that traditional program management tools like the logical framework are ill-suited to the task of development in a world with so many rapid and uncertain changes. Flexible and adaptive planning and management is needed, with investments in learning and feedback loops, to ensure projects can respond to changing local contexts and integrate real-time learning. This is especially important in a volatile world facing both climate change and insecurity challenges. Donors that are able to tailor their management styles to better account for this dynamic reality will be better placed to meet partner needs and respond to this challenging environment.

Use of Australian national strengths

How can Australia best utilise its national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities?

- **Australia has a vibrant university sector and an active research community with strong links to Asia and Pacific region**, as well as more broadly internationally. Its academic institutions, as well as individual researchers, are globally recognised for their expertise in a range of fields. This academic and research capacity is a national strength that could be more effectively brought to bear on Australia's development program. This may be through a range of modalities - including both long-term and short-term research partnerships, professional development partnerships, and integration of academic and research expertise in DFAT programmes and operations. This builds off some existing investments, such as the Developmental Leadership Program, Water for Women research grants and research under the Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security and recognises the modalities used by other donor agencies, such as the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office and US Agency for International Development.
- **Key coordinating platforms exist to access research strengths and expertise:** Our national research strength is apparent in the development sector in particular, with the establishment of the Research for Development Impact Network (RDI Network) in 2009, and the Development Studies Association of Australia in 2020. There is thus an established and growing network of development professionals within Australian universities and research bodies - many of whom work extensively with donor agencies and development organisations internationally and are looking to build engagement with DFAT. In addition to the academic and research quality of Australian universities and research institutions, these organisations also bring deep knowledge of and relationships with the Indo-Pacific. These can help to bring deeper understanding of local contexts to Australia's development program but also build people-to-people and institution-to-institution links with partners in the Indo-Pacific. These bring benefit to Australia as a partner of choice, as well as providing important cross-cultural cooperation and strengthening of Indo-Pacific institutions.
- **Civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations are widely recognised for their connections to communities and localised approach to development.** These should continue to be resourced and supported to contribute to Australia's development aims. They

provide a pathway to ensure participatory, locally-led development, and to improve governance and accountability in partner countries.

More meaningful partnerships

How should the new policy reflect the Government's commitments to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region, founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality?

- **The new aid policy requires a shift to explicitly support locally-owned and locally-led development**, an approach that other bilateral agencies, notably USAID, are increasingly recognising and supporting. Localism and locally-led development will support partnerships that respect the priorities, values and institutions of both partners.
- **The new policy should commit to an assessment of current aid modalities and the business processes that underpin them against partnerships goals and principles**, as this will shed light on the key areas that need to change. Such an assessment would examine the degree to which existing modalities promote and incentivise the establishment and maintenance of genuine partnerships and respectful relationships.
- **Working in partnership should also capitalise on Australian strengths and where these can be leveraged, including the Australian university sector**. An under-utilised strength in the development sector in Australia is the extensive expertise and experience of researchers in Australian institutions working on development issues in Asia and the Pacific. RDI Network, with its 2000+ membership, provides a common platform to engage with this body of expertise. Australian universities also have engagement with knowledge-based institutions in Asia and the Pacific, and strengthened support to this type of partnerships can create a pathway to increase evidence-based policy in countries in the region. Such approaches should also consider decolonising knowledge production.

Lessons from the past

What lessons from Australia's past development efforts should inform the policy? What is Australia seen to be doing comparatively well?

- **Previous investments in research and research networks have proved beneficial to aid policy and practice**. In 2012-2016 AusAID implemented a successful Research Strategy that guided investment in research. Analysis of the development impacts of research investments proved many of these to be impactful (see <https://rdinetwork.org.au/resources/skills-for-development-impact/planning-designing-for-impact/facilitating-impact/from-evidence-to-impact-development-contributions-of-australian-aid-funded-research/>). This history points to the need for the new aid policy to reinstate a research strategy to guide investment. DFAT has recognised the importance of evidence-based policy and programming, but is currently limited in capacity to deliver on this. DFAT found in 2015 that *'a critical precursor to aid innovation is the availability and use of good-quality research'*, and highlighted the need for useful evidence. The 2017 White Paper identified the breadth of resources and potential available: *"We also have world-class scientific and research institutions, access to modern*

research infrastructure and strong intellectual property protections. (Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017, p.13).

- **Upstream investments to build Australian expertise in effective development policy and practice based on evidence have been valuable**, such as DFAT's investment in RDI Network, which has provided a critical foundation to improve development policy and practices.
- **Loss of internal and external independent evaluation functions has been detrimental to maintaining transparency and aid effectiveness.** The loss of Office for Development Effectiveness and reduction in funding for evaluations has put effective development practice at risk. These functions need to be reinstated and resourced, including a focus on how to translate and embed lessons from previous evaluations into current and upcoming investments.
- **During the last years, investigation into PSEAH and other ethical matters revealed shortcomings in DFAT's approach** to ethical approval for evaluations and research. Significant constructive work was completed to support DFAT staff to increase their capacity and understanding of this area, and this should be continued into the future.
- **Combined investments in implementation and research** have proven highly effective. For example, the \$110m Water for Women Fund (2018-2022) funded both civil society organisations and research organisations to work both separately and together in different forms, including within projects themselves and in the form of a joint learning agenda. This Fund has been highly successful in contributing to development outcomes (reaching some 3 million people with increased access to based services, particularly the most marginalised), to world-class research outcomes and influence (Australian voices in global debates including UN Water-related dialogue, COP27 etc.)
- **It would be beneficial to conduct a review of how DFAT views, uses and integrates research and evidence.** This could include exploring the different ways that diverse parts of the Department – across divisions, sectors and geographies – think about, access, produce and use research and evidence and for what purposes. It could also seek to explore how research and evidence could be 'crowded in' to DFAT, including in new and innovative ways to address the obstacle of busy, time-poor staff.

Performance and delivery system design

How should the performance and delivery systems be designed to promote transparency and accountability, as well as effectiveness and learning in Australia's development assistance?

- **The basis for performance and delivery systems should be good evidence and equitable practice.** This requires re-instituting effective internal and external independent evaluation systems as well as combining research within or alongside development interventions. It also requires addressing the deficit in development expertise and know-how in DFAT. To achieve this end, the following are proposed:
 - **Access the diverse relevant expertise in the Australian university sector.** Services could include context-specific knowledge and linkages, strategic-level evaluation, evidence synthesis, training and targeted analysis and research. Other donors have similarly looked to research organisations to bolster knowledge and capacity, via a range of models. These international precedents demonstrate the need for such a

facility in Australia, comparable to other donors. These arrangements can be seen in the [UK](#), [USAID](#), [Canada](#), and [Sweden](#).

- **Reshape the development expertise offerings in DFAT's Diplomatic Academy** and ensure that Australian diplomatic and development staff are equipped with the latest thinking and practice to strengthen the quality of Australian development support to our partners.