Australian Government
AusAID
Office of Development Effectiveness

How to win friends and influence policy in the Pacific

A think piece by Derek Brien[1]

In our region we have over one thousand languages, and a cultural make up that is as diverse as it comes. Rules of engagement have some common elements that cross cultural boundaries, and some that don't. The way one person says something, is not necessarily the way the other person hears it. Engaging in policy dialogue in this context is about effective communication: building trust, understanding and consensus for action. This paper is presented as a Pacific perspective on more effective donor engagement in policy dialogue. The Pacific receives considerable international investment in aid, research and development programs. Yet many of these initiatives do not impact on policymaking and reform. Key messages from the research base are often not reaching or influencing national decision-makers. Improving the nexus between policymaking, research and other development actions creates opportunities for more inclusive and informed policy choices.

The great search for success

Amidst the Great Depression, Dale Carnegie penned *How to Win Friends and Influence People.* It was one of the first self-help books to be published, and remains the 'gold standard of the genre' (*Financial Post*, 24 April 2008) having sold more than 15 million copies since its release in 1937. Carnegie's book conveyed a simple message: success depends on our ability to communicate, and manage personal relationships effectively. It is a message that applies equally today, as it does to any discipline dependent on human interaction.

Fast forward 80 years, and we again find the world reeling from a global financial crisis. This time policymakers are responding in a much more interconnected world, and under intense scrutiny from a better informed media and public. As governments and their populations grapple with the enormity of the current global economic and political transformation, a common tendency has been to revert to insular and protectionist thinking. In this shifting landscape, the aid sector has found itself at the forefront of increasing external examination, and internal rethinking. Aid conditionality has been replaced with a mantra of mutual responsibility and jointly achieving shared goals through partnerships. In this part of the world, the *Moresby Declaration*, *Pacific Partnerships for Development* and *Cairns Compact* provide the foundations for a new era of cooperation between Australia and the island nations of the Pacific. These initiatives have marked the beginning of a process of reform, which could greatly benefit development and relations between countries. They also mark a renewed interest in the inherent

[1] This think piece has been produced in response to an invitation of the Office of Development Effectiveness within the Australian Government's overseas aid program (AusAID) to inform the Evaluation of Policy Dialogue (see www.ode.ausaid.gov.au). However, the views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author only.

political dimension of development policy. After all, political relationships shape policy decision-making and the allocation of public resources.

Some people insist that we should decouple aid from politics.[2] It is a school of thought that is divorced from reality. Government to government aid is far more complex than an altruistic form of charity. It is entangled in the unwieldy political web of both donor and recipient governments. As such, it is often steeped in controversy and misunderstanding, which may overshadow the importance that aid can play in improving the lives of many people around the world.

This think piece is premised on the belief that good policy dialogue[3] is increasingly important to achieving results from the Australian aid program (AusAID). The recent independent review of Australian aid effectiveness[4] found a comparatively well performing program that could be better. This view is generally echoed throughout the Pacific. The Australian Government has accepted all but one of the 39 recommendations of the review authors, including recasting the overarching objective of the aid program, as follows:

> *The fundamental objective of Australian aid is to help people overcome poverty.*
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> *We work to improve the lives of those living in conditions far below what Australians find acceptable. We focus our resources and effort on areas of national interest, and where Australia can make a real difference.*

The revised objective is a proper realignment of the program in terms of helping people overcome poverty. It fails, however, to truly clarify the role of Australia's national interest. What is missing is a frank admission of intent. We know donor governments use aid spending as a means to garner solidarity, influence policy and safeguard security. These are perfectly rational foreign policy goals and, so long as we acknowledge them, do not have to be at the expense of a fundamental aim of helping people overcome poverty.

The importance of Australia's aid program to improve its relations with Pacific neighbours was underlined in a 2010 poll[5] which found this to be the highest-ranking foreign policy goal after goals relating to protecting Australia's economy, security and borders. It ranked above 'helping countries reduce poverty' and 'climate change'.

Making the aid program better will be contingent on an open understanding of Australia's involvement in policy change in the countries where it works. AusAID's Office of Development Effectiveness has 'identified a need for more robust, broad and frequent policy dialogue' and found that 'AusAID's

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[2] For example in a 2007 editorial titled 'Combating Poverty: the Charade of Development Aid', Professor Dan Ncaylyana suggests 'international aid must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and bureaucracies of both donor countries and recipient.' (www.bmj.com/content/335/7633/1272)

[3] There is a growing evidence base of the links between policy dialogue and development effectiveness – see in particular the Research And Policy In Development (RAPID) programme at the Overseas Development Institute (www.odi.org.uk), the Evidence Based Policy in Development Network (www.ebpdn.org) and the *Review of Literature and International Practice in Policy Dialogue*, July 2011, by Aoife McCullough, Josephine Tsui, Terry Green and Peter Bazeley. (www.ode.ausaid.gov.au)

[4] AusAID, *Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness*, Canberra, April 2011. (www.ausaid.gov.au/publications)

[5] F Hanson, *The Lowy Institute Poll 2010 - Australia and the World Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*, The Lowy Institute, Sydney, 2010. (www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=1617)

achievements from policy dialogue are patchy, reflecting a lack of organisational capacity or clear strategy to improve engagement'.[6]

Seek to support, not influence

In his guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence,[7] Harry Jones rightly notes that 'influencing policy is a central part of much international development work'. He goes on to give the example that donor agencies 'must engage in policy dialogue if they channel funds through budget support, to try to ensure their money is well-spent'. It is proper that donor agencies ensure accountability to their parliament and people on the effective and efficient use of resources. It is also true that all international development actors (be they donors, civil society organisations or activists) want to influence policy in some way. But wanting to influence does not mean that you will. Or necessarily should, at least directly.

The discourse on foreign aid is still haunted by issues of guilt, greed, and good intentions. Specifically, the role of donor agencies in policy change has been fraught with accusations of interference, neo-colonialism and aid conditionality. In some cases, such accusations have been warranted. In others the best of intentions have been thwarted, often due to a lack of traction for a good idea. But even the best of intentions can be misguided, especially in the Pacific where text book case studies often do not apply even if they are based on world's best practice. That is why critics of aid (including Bill Easterly and Dambisa Moyo) point to countries that have soaked up huge amounts of aid money with very little to show. In our region, Papua New Guinea jumps to mind. Supporters of aid (including Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz) point to a range of successful countries that have received significant aid (though none in the Pacific).

Criticism is mainly levelled at aid donors. A key constraint on donor agencies and other development actors is the need to prove to their constituents that they are being effective and 'making a difference'. Often this is bound by unrealistic time frames. The usual period of engagement is two to three year project cycles, after which staff move on and development thinking shifts to the next big idea, often buoyed by a success story from somewhere else.

Despite the rhetoric of 'sustainability', promoting 'ownership' and 'building capacity' the pressure is often too great to get a quick result. Yet, rarely do imposed solutions get traction, and for good reason. We humans are a fickle lot—we generally don't like to be told what to do, and especially don't like to be reminded of our faults. In a region that has some of the newest nations on the planet, with the memories of independence afresh, such sentiments are particularly prevalent.

Also present is the oft-misplaced assumption that there is no capacity to deal with complex issues in country. There are technical and politically savvy Pacific islanders, most of whom are more than capable of dealing with national and regional challenges and opportunities. The issue is the pressure placed on individuals and institutions to cover off on an ever-expanding agenda of good ideas and priorities.

Policy influence has been likened to water filtering through limestone: we know the water is absorbed, but there is no knowing what route it will take or where it will come out (Thomas quoted in Bulmer).[8] It

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[6] Office of Development Effectiveness, *Annual Review of Development Effectiveness 2009: Improving Basic Services for the Poor*, AusAID, 2010. (www.ode.ausaid.gov.au/publications/arde.html)

[7] H Jones, *A Guide to Monitoring and Evaluating Policy Influence*, Background Paper, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), February 2011. (www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/5252.pdf)

[8] M Bulmer (ed.), *Social Science and Social Policy*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1986.

is about process and patience—finding the right moment when the stars align to pursue a particular reform or initiative. We have seen that when development partners actively seek to support rather than directly influence, they actually end up doing the latter. The most significant development breakthrough in the last thirty years in the Pacific has been the reform of the telecommunications sector, and the subsequent rapid uptake of mobile telephony. It has had a profound impact on peoples' lives—socially, economically and politically.[9] Many agencies take the credit for the telecommunications revolutions in Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and Vanuatu. Rightly so, as many actors were involved—but the driving force came from within national governments. In the case of Vanuatu, AusAID's Governance for Growth program was able to quickly respond to the government's mood for reform and provide the support to see the monopoly broken, and the new regulatory environment put in place. That experience highlighted the benefit of patiently offering advice in the right way, to the right people, and then being poised to act once the idea takes hold.

It's not what you say, it's how you say it

The Pacific is a region still in the midst of defining its own identity. Despite the widely held misconception that there is a unified regional entity, the Pacific is made up of three very distinct sub-regions: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Within these geographical and cultural divisions are countries of vastly different social, political and economic makeups. Papua New Guinea, for example, is one of the most culturally diverse nations on the planet, with over 850 indigenous languages across a population approaching seven million. The size of the country and its economy (with total Gross Domestic Product around $15 billion) dwarfs its Pacific island neighbours. At the other end of the spectrum is Niue, with a population in the order of 1,400 people (all of whom hold New Zealand citizenship) and a total Gross Domestic Product of about $10 million. The contrast could not be starker, and yet regional thinking is often steeped in the pluralist assumption that what works in Papua New Guinea should work in Niue and vice versa.

All too often the development conversation takes place in English, a language that is not the first (or in many cases even the second) language for many people in our region, and the way it can be interpreted is culturally specific. This is especially a concern in Melanesian countries; where the widespread use of pidgin can give the same phrase in English an entirely different meaning, depending on who says it and who is hearing it. This can have serious consequences for policy dialogue in particular.

Another part of dialogue is listening and understanding—something that can be particularly difficult when the conversation is happening amongst people of different educational backgrounds. It is true anywhere that political decision makers do not necessarily have the most technical minds. That is not to say less technical people are any less intelligent, and often technical expertise can come at the cost of being able to communicate effectively—there are very few technically gifted people able to express those ideas to others. Commonly that is why good ideas seldom get used.

Getting technical information to decision makers is a fine art, one that can benefit greatly from making use of appropriate interlocutors—something that is seldom done.

[9] Pacific Institute of Public Policy, *Social and Economic Impact of Introducing Telecommunications in Vanuatu*, PiPP, 2009. (www.pacificpolicy.org)

Expanding our circles

How people access and use information is very much dependent on the circles in which they keep. AusAID has a particular strength in accessing world class technical and academic information, and together with other international institutions (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, United Nations agencies) publish most material on the Pacific. Despite best efforts in knowledge sharing, most reports merely collect dust on bookshelves or prop up computer screens. Many studies are duplicated over and over again. Some are good. Others are cut and paste. More often than not, reports have tended to be viewed as an end product—in itself presenting as a compelling case for change.

But information alone may not translate into action. Building the compelling case for reform from research requires grounding the literature in the live policy debate. And this is best achieved by connecting to dynamic networks—bringing together the right people, about the right things, at the right time.

At its essence, development policy is about managing change. Most people fear change, thus managing change often means managing peoples' fear. Development partnerships may be forged between countries and institutions, but the interactions and engagement occurs through people. What are most important, especially in the Pacific, are the people-to-people relationships.

The inherent nature of an organisation like AusAID does not lend well to building relationships of the depth and understanding required to connect information to the live policy debate. It is not AusAID's comparative advantage, but it does have the ability to tap into existing networks based within the Pacific, and that can draw on extensive local knowledge and experience. It will be those networks that will best engage and connect the principal stakeholders.

AusAID can also play another increasingly important role—bringing together other arms of government, promoting closer fraternity between Australian agencies and their counterparts in the Pacific. This could be greatly enhanced by two-way exchanges of people. Again, it is about developing relationships and exposing people to ideas and what is possible.

The exchange of people can and should be broadened beyond government. We have already witnessed the multiplier effect of the limited seasonal workers schemes—not only do participants get access to job opportunities, but they are also coming home with new ideas for how business and government can and should work. More and more the relationship between the Pacific and Australia could evolve from the current aid-centric focus to closer integration.

Providing a platform for more inclusive public debate and engagement in national and regional development matters will generate greater demand of policymakers to actively pursue development outcomes. That will generate into greater demand for information and research, and thus enhance the policy dialogue.

An overlooked arena for engagement is at the political level. Much of the governance strengthening over the past decade has neglected support for political parties. Across the region politicians are criticised for poor performance, and political parties castigated for not representing any substantial ideological positions. The underlying problem has been summarised as follows.

> *[T]he elites leading the independence movements reimagined their lands and islands in accordance with the maps drawn by their colonisers. The debate was not about the return to the pre-national existence of pre-colonialism, but rather the demand to take over the local institutions of colonial governance. The national revolution took place by way of this thought transfer. All at once, disparate peoples became ni-Vanuatu or Solomon Islanders or Papua New*

> *Guineans. The problem with this conceptual revolution is that it has been restricted to a small band of urban educated leaders. The majority of the people of these nations think of themselves primarily and perhaps at times exclusively in terms of their village, their island or their wantok.[10] The nation suggested by map-makers remains a sparsely imagined construct. Little wonder that we do not see broadly based political parties emerging.[11]*

The pressure on Pacific island policymakers has never been greater, and politicians need access to information to support their role as legislators and leaders. At the same time they need to engage with their constituents, and provide tangible returns so they in turn can be re-elected. The evolution of a nuanced political dialogue will take considerable time—quite a number of election cycles—but change is inevitable.

Engaging directly in policy dialogue and through appropriate intermediaries will lead to a thorough improvement in the way we approach aid and development. It will net improved knowledge sharing, improved returns on investment, and improved research.

Aid agencies have positioned themselves as the providers of help. It is therefore very encouraging to see AusAID undergoing a process of self-help, and the current Office of Development Effectiveness policy dialogue evaluation is to be commended.

In time, with better dialogue there may ultimately be a meeting of minds on the common development expectations, and means to achieve them.

The author

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10 Wantok is a pidgin word loosely translating to 'one talk' or people who speak the same language.

11 Rich et al, *Analysing and Categorising Political Parties in the Pacific Islands*, ANU E-Press, 2008. (http://epress.anu.edu.au/pol_parties/pdf/whole_book.pdf)