



# Submission to consultation on Australia's new International Development Policy

Prepared on behalf of

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The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is an international network of independent not-for-profit grass-roots volunteer groups offering experiential workshops on self-awareness and creative conflict transformation in prisons, schools, and the wider community. In Australia, each state or territory has unique ways organising and offers different activities.

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## Introduction

Development policy, the focus of this submission, is a tool of foreign policy and, as such, typically reflects foreign policy priorities. In the absence of an updated Foreign Policy White Paper, stakeholders around the world will read the forthcoming new Development Policy, alongside observations of Australia's behaviours on the world stage, to gauge the nuances of the foreign policy of the new national government.

The previous Foreign Policy White Paper emphasised "security and prosperity in a contested and competitive world" (2017, p. v). Considering the increase of chaos and concomitant risk to Australia's security and prosperity since then (Asia Society, 2020). Australia is unwise to play up fears and defensiveness thereby tacitly permitting bullying and colonising approaches. Such approaches do little to reduce the potential for regional conflicts.

The tone set by statements like "Australia is committed to an effective, targeted and generous development program, that advances our shared interest in a peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific"<sup>i</sup> are a welcome change of emphasis.

The Terms of Reference for submissions on the new international development policy suggest seven guiding questions for consideration. Our submission focuses on the following subset of questions:

- *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?*
- *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?*
- *How should the new policy address the role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting the development of our regional partners?*

Our key points, elaborated in the following, are:

1. The context for Australia's new international development policy is one which increases tensions and the potential for conflict. Thus the new policy should be underpinned by a commitment to finding ways to de-escalate tensions, prevent armed conflict and all forms of violence, and promote institutional capacities for *peace-building, equity and adaptation*
2. Multilateral and multi-level approaches to development must take priority as the trends and challenges we face are global and multi-dimensional.
3. Multi-dimensional vulnerabilities are best addressed using highly skilled dynamic and systemic and adaptation, which is enabled by sophisticated diplomacy, intercultural appreciation and inclusion, strategic foresight, ability to find constructive compromise, and willingness to learn from each other.
4. The Australian Government should invest more resources, including funding, in diplomacy training, transformative conflict management and constructive cooperation, strategic systems thinking, collaborative planning and implementation of development activities.

## Context for a new development policy

- 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?

The Government's International Development policy needs to reflect an understanding of dynamic global eco-systems and their regional impacts. Arguably the eco-systems in which we live and wish to 'develop' are now in chaos or near chaos<sup>ii</sup>. One important element of the development policy response is to understand the different dynamics of chaos, complexity and complication.<sup>iii</sup> Different responses are required according to the dynamics.

Our Pacific region is already, and will continue to be in the coming decade, seriously affected by unfamiliar extreme climate patterns and species extinctions. These impact the availability of fresh water, food and energy supplies, destroy vital infrastructures and interrupt supply chains. The global population is expected to continue

to grow in the coming decade while demographic patterns are changing in significant ways. Many established institutional support systems are no longer adequate as the covid pandemic has demonstrated. These intertwined and inseparable trends are already increasing local and global competition for, and conflict over vital resources. The displacement of large populations to Australia and other parts of the world will heighten domestic tensions.

These very real existential threats reveal choices between increasing polarisation and asserting exclusive control over limited resources, or generating collective creative solutions for alternative collaborative ways to survive together peaceably and equitably. The rapid unbridled development of artificial intelligence to use big data to guide choice-making may wrench control over choice-making processes in authoritarian ways if we are not vigilant. These technological capabilities may also be used as tools for problem solving if they are controlled with peace-seeking and inclusive interests as the drivers.

These trends operate with unpredictable dynamics – i.e. they are chaotic – requiring appreciation of systemic relationships and testing novel, adaptive responses. In the face of such trends and challenges *Australia must commit* to model ways of engagement that:

- + avoid all occasions for war;
- + seek understandings that de-escalate conflict;
- + find non-military solutions to escalating tensions (even temporary); and
- + champion peace-building at all levels of engagement.

This goal is consistent with the Australian Government commitment to modelling reconciliation in Australia with our First Nations, and supporting the rights of Indigenous peoples around the world.

We note that under current definitions and delineations military assistance is considered separate from development assistance. Nonetheless, the aid program has become increasingly militarised with the emphasis on “security,” border control and (military) threats from neighbours. We endorse the need for cyber security, reduction of trafficking of humans, illegal substances and bio-security threats. We deplore and resist the promotion and development of the arms trade, and Australia’s investments in the capacity and capabilities of other nations or communities to initiate or participate in violent conflicts.

Recently Prime Minister Albanese and Foreign Minister Wong have asserted that Australia *will choose* to consider how to “*acquit our responsibilities to constrain tensions.*”<sup>iv</sup> In practice, realising this choice requires cultivated, state-of-the-art peacebuilding skills.

We strongly encourage the Government to develop policies and programs which:

- + manage tensions in ways that avoid violence;
- + acquit our development responsibilities and disburse investments in development to demonstrate respect for a variety of stakeholders;
- + include of a wide variety of perspectives and knowledge, especially those of women, children, First Nations’ Peoples and other marginalised people; and
- + prioritise development approaches aligned with multilateral agreements on development priorities. In Australia’s case, this obviously includes the SDGs, but also ASEAN development priorities, and the priorities of the various Pacific Islands regional organisations, and other regional organisations where Australia is part

## Ways forward to articulate and implement development policy

- *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?*

We strongly endorse the Government’s stated intent<sup>v</sup> that the

“The new development policy will aim to reinforce the foundations of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, with a focus on:

- building effective, accountable states that can sustain their own development
- enhancing states and community resilience to external pressures and shocks
- connecting partners with Australia and regional architecture, and
- generating collective action on global challenges that impact our region.”

The substitution of the word 'secure' with 'peaceful' sends an important message. Australia's reputation and relationships in this region can be improved by underpinning the new policy with peace building and peace maintenance, delivered through sophisticated peacebuilding skills, seeking constructive compromises, ensuring justice, and non-violent approaches to conflict resolution. Diplomacy, conflict containment and transformation, mediation, intercultural appreciation and inclusion are relevant to every level of development activity without exception. We encourage the Government to generously resource developing such state-of-the art peacebuilding skills, both domestically and across the Pacific region.

Aligning the new international development policy with regional multilateral development priorities will demonstrate our national commitment to meaningful regional partnerships. As Minister Wong has stated: "...what we project to the world about who we are is an element of our national power... we are a nation whose people share common ground with so many of the world's peoples..." Therefore, it is in our national interests and within our reach to act *with* other countries, (not for or in them). This requires sophisticated partnership building skills and skills to adapt as the partnerships mature and change as they inevitably will.

Minister Wong continued "... [A] partnership of equals [is] the only sustainable basis for an enduring relationship ...We want to be partners, not patriarchs"<sup>vi</sup> , to which we add: not warmongers nor arms-dealers. If either side in a partnership wields, or threaten to wield, power violently, that can no longer be a partnership of equals.

Multilateral approaches are possible because Australia already belongs to various multilateral groupings. In many countries, close networks of diplomats and other embassy staff already exist. The Australian Government needs to reinvest in comprehensive diplomatic skills training and relevant language training for our diplomats assigned to foreign posts.

Australia and its development partners can learn together about what helps, how and why it helps in certain situations. These countries, communities and their institutions are contending with similar multidimensional challenges and opportunities as Australia. There are no one-off long term solutions because the challenges and opportunities are dynamic in all their dimensions. The immediate practical solutions will most likely need to take into account local idiosyncrasies, but those same solutions will affect other parts of the eco-system. As we act, the problems we aim to address, the opportunities emerging, and how we understand those change. Development partners need to apply strategic foresight to anticipate future scenarios and viable responses. Collaborative, intercultural appreciative, inclusive, adaptive approaches are required to achieve chosen development goals.

Capabilities for such dynamic adaptation need to be developed in multilateral communities of government, businesses, and civil society organisations because we are affected as communities, not in isolation. In the face of a crisis or disaster, each country, community, or institution needs to be able to rebuild a position that enables them to cope better in future with similar or related challenges. Even in more stable non-crisis development contexts, the unavoidable but sometimes unpredictable systemic reverberations add import and urgency to the need to learn processes and resilience for dynamic adaptation.

Australia can identify and expand upon the work of local leaders, bilingual, if not multilingual, who are already contributing their field specific expertise to develop their home communities and institutions. Thanks to our history of development cooperation and extensive alum community graduated from Australian education, an extensive network exists of local leaders with whom to liaise and collaborate. Australia can draw on this existing network and its intercultural understanding to multiply the benefits of collaboration and dialogue in a manner that does not escalate conflicts, but creatively de-escalates and transforms them into progressive forward steps for equitable benefits in each development context.

Assuming that Australia-based staff in our Embassies will continue to have responsibility for managing the disbursement of development aid and how it supports other foreign policy objectives, Australia needs to ensure that responsible staff are well educated in development values and principles (not focussed primarily on short-term political gains or personal career building). Australia can provide many case studies of successful development work pertaining to building education and health systems, strengthening local scientific research and its application, understanding the rule of law and its application. Sharing these cases and the lessons learned from them contributes to adaptive learning.

Basing Australian development policy and effort on values of peacebuilding, equity and adaptation, the implementation of activities should look to mid-term sustainability of the benefits. This requires a different disposition from deploying aid for development activities aimed at buying favour and competing to be “the preferred partner.” However, Australia will be a *desired* partner when such a policy and effort is implemented ethically and successfully.

Implementation of such a development policy will mean initiatives are developed with partners, not for them or imported from other ‘best practice’ examples without adaptation to local needs and circumstances. This repeated point about working with (rather than working for) development partners requires culturally sensitive consultation and building long term sustainable links through competent local actors/leaders.

The quick turnover and current working culture in some of our Posts limits Australia’s capacity to build on local experience and expertise and develop these linkages. Ongoing meaningful relationships require particular types of intercultural work and time, often out of office hours. While Australians are posted for a maximum of three years, the provisions for local relationship building and handover for continuity need to be much more sophisticated.

What is proposed here must be distinguished from the recent DFAT emphasis on “localisation” in the aid program. DFAT has focussed on using local service providers which is not the same as collaborating with local knowledge that is consultative, inclusive and well-aligned with local practices for constructive conflict transformation, peacebuilding, equity, and adaptation. Simply contracting the local service provider who offers the best bid does not guarantee the decolonisation of aid work or ensure local actors are empowered for the development of their communities, country, and institutions. Working locally can be difficult due to language and cultural barriers but aid agencies can work at local government levels and with local civil society organisations. Local people who have studied in Australia (or other English-speaking countries) and have intercultural communication skills can be particularly helpful, acting as bridge people and increasing understanding between the local groups and international organisations. This supports the existing rationale for providing educational opportunities as a form of aid which can improve Australia’s relationships and promote effective leadership in the region.

Australia can work in a way that builds trust: trust among and between the actors in the local community, as well as between Australia the recipient country, and the region; but trust between equals, and interdependence, is not to be confused with dependence on foreign aid. The implementation of the type of policy we are advocating requires being wary of heavy reliance on experts who do not know local language, culture, and practices, and who use tools and equipment inappropriate in the context. Often intermediaries who are at least bilingual and skilled in bridging the cultural differences are needed. These can be Australians or locals but it is not a model where experts parachute in with a suggested solution and then out again without following up on the effects of their intervention. A long-term perspective is needed to build relationships that support collaborative problem solving and increasing opportunities for self-determination and self-reliance.

We acknowledge and applaud the new emphasis on transparency and accountability proposed for the policy assuming this transparency and accountability is to the intended beneficiaries and their local communities as well as to DFAT and the Australian taxpayers. We seek transparency about value for money, effectiveness, and lessons learned, from the perspectives of various stakeholders in a particular development project. Evaluations of value for money, effectiveness, and learning, can be multi-faceted acknowledging different perspectives, and will require updates to the current mode of Aid Quality Checks and Partner Performance Assessments. Skilled inclusion of multiple perspectives will build understanding and trust between stakeholders. As the Prime Minister Albanese noted at the G20 after meeting Xi Jin Ping, this inclusion and trust, does not require or imply that everyone always agrees.

Working transparently can also maximise learning from each other. In turn, this will enhance the capabilities of participants for both self-reliance and effective collaboration with various partners. These capabilities are valuable to maintain trusting and mutually respectful engagement in relationships that inevitably will evolve over time, and in which Australia wants to remain positively engaged i.e. peacefully, equitably and adaptively.

## The role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting development

- How should the new policy address the role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting the development of our regional partners?

Currently the distinction between ODA and non-ODA cooperation for development is not readily distinguishable to many partners, and Australia needs to clarify if and how this matters. The boundaries of what “specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries”<sup>vii</sup> are blurry e.g., the federal Department of Education has a budget for education work overseas that clearly can contribute to the economic welfare of developing countries; likewise funds for the work of Austrade. The rhetoric about ‘whole of government’ approaches however has been made farcical in places where ODA and non-ODA funds have been invested in cross purposes at worst and, at least, often with lack of any visible coordination.

Australia also needs to be more explicit that military cooperation is not the main or most valued form of cooperation. Military cooperation can be reduced as other economic and socio-cultural means are sought to ensure resilience and security, and those latter forms of cooperation are promoted and strengthened. Australia can build on its experiences and successes in cooperation and funding for to the prevention of human trafficking, slavery, illegal trade of endangered species, drugs, spread of disease and pests, and cyber security. We support the allocation of budget and cooperation on training personnel such as police, fire-fighters, medical teams, and soldiers in emergency response and border control. We are totally opposed to the increase in trade in arms, and in Australian investments in training the armed forces of other countries in any forms of warfare or use of arms.

## Conclusion

An international development policy underpinned by peacebuilding, equity and adaptation is not only possible, but plausible, and will raise Australian reputation and respect, within the region and globally. Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs, for its own self-respect and conscionable use of its power, to avoid foreign policy based on fear and defensiveness, and to avoid international development based on deficit models of others.

Australia is experienced and mature enough to choose to design and implement development policy that builds mutual trust and respect, resilience, and contributes to peace building in multiple mutually reinforcing ways. A new international development policy which drives efforts in this direction will build enduring positive relationships with constructive purpose, finding creative mutually beneficial, equitable ways forward that are adaptive to the ever-changing context in which we and others act.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/development/australias-development-program>

<sup>ii</sup> See for example:

Walker, B., et al. 2020. Navigating the chaos of an unfolding global cycle. *Ecology and Society* 25(4):23.

<https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12072-250423>

<https://www.cambridge.org/au/academic/subjects/life-sciences/ecology-and-conservation/surviving-climate-chaos-strengthening-communities-and-ecosystems> (2021)

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/18/revealed-the-places-humanity-must-not-destroy-to-avoid-climate-chaos>

<https://phys.org/news/2022-06-chaos-common-ecological-previously-thought.html>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://thecynefin.co/about-us/about-cynefin-framework/>. The Cynefin Co – Cognitive Edge.

<sup>iv</sup> Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Whitlam Oration 13 Nov 2022

<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/whitlam-oration>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/development/new-international-development-policy/terms-reference>

<sup>vi</sup> Penny Wong, op cit

<sup>vii</sup> OECD definition of ODA