

International Development Policy Submission

Asialink: Australia's leading centre for creative engagement with the Indo Pacific

In the wake of a global pandemic, we have witnessed backwards steps in poverty reduction, education access, inclusive societies and other Sustainable Development Goals. Combined with growing geopolitical tensions, Australia's goal to foster a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific while more important than ever, is also more complex to achieve.

To address the challenges our region faces in a post-Covid world, Australia needs an international development policy that prioritises long term engagement, connection and genuine partnership as the means by which we deliver lasting, sustainable results.

An approach that prioritises engagement, connection and genuine partnership creates lasting impact beyond the life of individual development projects. It increases sustainability and development impact by ensuring those who have the most at stake are the major drivers in the design and delivery of programs, and are committed to continuing the legacy and impact of the program after direct Australian support finishes. It also advances Australia's strategic priorities in Southeast Asia and the Pacific because it moves away from traditional donor-recipient relationships and forges stronger, more equal partnerships with regional countries.

Asialink has over 30 years of experience building engagement, connection and partnerships across all sectors between Australia and Indo-Pacific countries. We use our extensive education, business, diplomacy and arts and cultural networks to deliver programs that build collaboration, mutual trust, respect, and fairness and ensure that the next generation of leaders and decision makers are adequately equipped to build a secure, prosperous and shared future in the region. We believe that a policy approach which leverages these sorts of networks and experiences will amplify the impact of Australia's international development assistance.

1 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 impact of climate change, shifting geo-political positions, food security and the global health emergency are just some of the transnational issues which have the potential to unsettle the security and prosperity of our region. A cross-cutting trend that will affect how our region responds to these challenges is the unprecedented uptake of digital technologies. We need a future-focused international development policy that leverages the advances made in digital tools and connectivity throughout the pandemic to expand the reach of our programs, and ensure that no one is left behind as digital technologies change our economies and societies.

Australia's development policy should engage with the challenges of the digital revolution, including by prioritising equitable access to the benefits of digital technologies, and ensuring the risks are addressed. There is an urgent need for many more people across Asia Pacific to be digitally literate,

including the skills to: access and use technologies, understand how to source and analyse accurate information, engage in critical thinking, and understand cyber security.

The lack of regional, rural and remote access to digital technology infrastructure and connectivity, and an ever-widening digital divide between rich and poor, mean the potential benefits are uneven, and some risk being left out of a critical economic opportunity. In considering how to integrate digital considerations across development programs, the international development policy should also consider the differential impact of digital technologies on marginalised groups, such as the impact of new technologies like AI on traditional workforce participation (with women particularly vulnerable) and the protection and promotion of human rights and freedom of expression, notably for First Nations peoples, communities and knowledge.

In addition to digital literacy and economic opportunities, increasing access to digital technologies opens up new ways to deliver development outcomes, and opportunities to expand engagement, connection and partnerships. Digital technologies offer the potential to connect Australians with people across Southeast Asia and the Pacific on an unprecedented scale, enabling the active engagement of a much wider section of the Australian community in the delivery of Australia's international development programs. Engaging more of the Australian community with our region has the potential to increase domestic support for our development programs overall.

The spread of digital technologies in schools and communities opens up extraordinary new opportunities to expand the formal provision of training in education, creative technology, health and other services, leading to peer to peer sharing and learning and increased community and people to people links. Programs that connect Australians with partners in our region to learn together online would strengthen our ability to work together on shared challenges that impact all of us including environmental sustainability, culture, health, business and security. Digital technologies can help us deliver programs that build capacity across all countries of the Indo-Pacific including on digital skills, STEM, communication, cross-cultural collaboration, local and global citizenship, effective pedagogies for the future, leadership, vocational education and creating gender equity.

Asialink's Asia Education Foundation has been delivering online programs as a cost-effective way to expand our reach and forge strong personal connections between Australia and our partners. For example, our online **VETConnect** program adopted a community of practice model to promote quality in skills education in schools. VET teachers from Australia and India came together to explore key themes: Global connections in VET, Assessment of competencies, Engaging girls in VET, and Digital pedagogies for skill-based subjects. They then undertook a classroom-based action research project on one of these themes and worked with their global counterparts to evaluate and refine their practice. As a completely online program, this program is high impact and low cost.

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

The transnational policy challenges we have identified – the impact of climate change, shifting geopolitical positions, food security, the global health emergency and the spread of digital technology – call for close collaboration and liaison between all agencies of government, the business community and civil society as they are all involved in one way or another in boosting the effectiveness of our development activities.

At its most elementary, Australian government agencies must work even more closely together to support countries in our region build their national capability to independently tackle these challenges sustainably.

Strong government to government, civil society and people to people connections within the Indo-Pacific need to be nurtured and expanded and must be built on mutual understanding and respect.

A foundational asset for Australia is deep in country expertise and cultural competence-not just within government but across all our productive communities: business, knowledge sector, civil society and the not-for-profit sector more generally.

Another foundational asset is a commitment to a partnership approach which listens to and is sensitive to the countries with which Australia has development cooperation activities. “Inviting rather than instructing change”. This will help build national capability in and ownership of national development.

Utilising relevant regional and national institutions and networks through which to channel development programming with a view to empowering local design and delivery for maximum ownership and impact is another important capability for Australia. A particular area of focus should be the strengthening of civil society institutions in partner countries.

Over 30 years, Asialink’s four programs in Arts, Business, Education and Diplomacy have partnered with educational, cultural, business and institutional counterparts throughout the Indo-Pacific through programs and dialogues with great success. Some examples are provided below from the Education and Arts portfolios.

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

Australia has the oldest continuing culture in the world, a vibrant arts and cultural sector, a strong economy, a unique geographic position and a world-class school education system that is at the forefront of the contemporary teaching and learning required to equip young people for the future. These capabilities, combined with an approach focused on connection and partnerships, are the key ingredients for an impactful international development policy, and form a particularly important part of efforts to address multidimensional vulnerabilities.

Australia can leverage its vibrant arts and culture sector to deliver programs which generate sustained economic benefits and long-lasting connections between Australia and our region. Long term programs of sustained creative and cultural exchanges, focused on upskilling and amplifying the voices of marginalised and vulnerable groups, deliver not only economic benefits to the participants and their communities, but contribute to longer term change by expanding the public space for these voices. These exchanges also develop a shared cross-cultural understanding, competencies in entrepreneurial skills and new audiences. Incorporating First Nations perspectives and knowledge into our international and cross-cultural engagements would also help to shift the focus onto community, understand the importance of place and support enduring relationships formed over time.

Asialink Arts’ Regional//Regional program brings together regional arts festival representatives from across Australia and the Asia-Pacific to create opportunities for local and global co-curation,

co-productions, international touring and new audience engagement strategies. The program delivers skills development and entrepreneurial competencies for festivals outside the major metropolitan areas, but the benefits extend to artists, arts workers, local governments, SMEs and non-profits through the increased economic activity, jobs and investment generated by the scaled up (and skilled up) event. In addition to the economic benefits and development impact, Regional//Regional is another example of how development programs can strengthen our people-to-people links and long-term connections with the region.

Australian expertise in vocational education, STEM, digital literacy, inclusion of girls, increased student agency and leadership are in demand in Asia and the Pacific, as all countries work to transform school education to meet the needs of new economies and to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The Australian Curriculum embeds seven general capabilities in all learning areas including collaboration, communication, critical and creative thinking, ethical and intercultural understanding, and digital skills. Achieving these capabilities is also a strong focus of many developing countries in their school education as they strive to leapfrog from an education system designed for the past to one that will equip their young people for the future.

To meet this need, Asialink recommends leveraging demand for Australian expertise by undertaking a range of programs which focus on teacher training, leadership and forging connections between Australia and the region. This can be achieved through: the establishment of online school partnerships, virtual student initiatives, professional teacher and school leader training, communities of practice that can build school education capacity in our region (and in Australia), and cross-sectoral leadership programs delivered in Australia and across the region.

For example, the Asia Education Foundation's **BRIDGE schools partnership program** has connected 540 Australian schools with schools, teachers and students across 23 nations in Asia and the Pacific. By collaborating, sharing practice and addressing local challenges through the lens of the SDGs, the BRIDGE program builds educator capabilities, increases the quality of teaching, develops intercultural understanding in teachers and supports school and system improvement to ensure teachers are empowered to develop 21st century skills in the next generation.

The **PNG-Australia Secondary Schools (PASS) Initiative** takes a multi-level approach to increase the quality of secondary school education in PNG, designed in collaboration with the National Department of Education (NDoE), provincial education officials, school leaders, teachers and students. The program pivoted online in 2020, and offers a suite of activities for education leaders, teachers and students focusing on STEM, women's empowerment and leadership, capability development and digital literacy. The only engagement Australia has at a secondary level in the Pacific is the PASS program, which will end in 2023. Australia is neglecting a critical demographic - those who will go on to be leaders in the next 10 - 20 years.