

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Australia's new International Development Policy.

The Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue (AVLD) is an independent non-profit initiative that was established to nurture relationships, promote engagement and incubate collaboration between Australian and Vietnamese young leaders from a broad spectrum of society. The AVLD community includes alumni and other partners with deep expertise in economic development, education, environment, climate change, technology, food security, gender equality, social inclusion and poverty reduction.

We are pleased to see the Australian government investing the resources to develop a new International Development Policy.

### **Aid program quantum**

It has been disappointing to see Australia's Overseas Development Assistance as a proportion of Gross National Income (ODA/GNI) drop significantly under the previous government, making Australia one of the least generous donors. We call for an ambitious ODA/GNI target, but recommend growing the aid program sustainably; ensuring high performing aid investments; and mobilising public and ultimately bipartisan support for increased aid expenditure.

### **Key challenges**

The world is becoming increasingly volatile and the only constant is change. In response, Australia's aid program should focus on building the resilience of traditionally marginalised groups to navigate this change.

A key driver of this volatility is climate change, which has the potential to create more frequent and severe humanitarian crises and undermine hard-won progress across the aid program, including:

- Health
- Gender equality
- Food security
- Peace and security

Failing to take urgent action to reduce Australia's own emissions is affecting Australia's bilateral relationships and global reputation and undermining ODA investments across the aid program. Investments to mitigate catastrophic climate change are more cost-effective than the huge expenses involved in restitution for loss and damage.

Biodiversity loss is not just a moral or ecological issue, but directly impacts on human health if ecosystem services (such as availability of fresh water, food, fertile soils and fuel sources as well as containment of zoonotic diseases) are undermined. Changes in ecosystem services affect livelihoods, income, local migration and can even cause or exacerbate political conflict, with the poorest and most marginalised people disproportionately affected.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread death, disability and disruption. It is expected that pandemics will become more frequent in the future - with scientists estimating that the

annual probability of extreme epidemics occurring could increase threefold in the coming decades<sup>1</sup>. It is estimated that over half of infectious diseases have been aggravated by climate change<sup>2</sup>.

The food and fuel crises will also continue to contribute to increased volatility and undermine progress in poverty reduction.

A key feature of all of these crises is their interconnectedness.

### **Development capacities needed**

Given the interconnectedness of the above challenges, staff and consultants working on the Australian aid program will need strong skills in systems thinking to be able to understand and navigate the connections between issues.

Greater integration within and between Departments will be important to ensure that these issues are addressed in a systematic and cohesive way and to avoid silos.

Investments in innovation capability will also be important.

We would urge caution to avoid over-focusing on a traditional “Jobs and growth” narrative without consideration of other essential elements underlying human wellbeing. The concept of planetary boundaries<sup>3</sup> provides a valuable and accessible framework for meeting human wellbeing needs while ensuring that we do not overshoot humanity’s pressure on the planet’s essential services that we depend on, such as a stable climate, fertile soils, clean water and a protective ozone layer.

Australia’s leadership in social inclusion, particularly gender equality and disability inclusion have been widely recognised and the aid program should continue to invest in and provide global leadership in these areas.

### **Key Priorities**

Responding to the increased volatility in the world will require investment and cooperation in a range of areas:

- We encourage sustained investment in **education and training**, including through programs such as scholarships, volunteering and exchanges (the [Australia-Vietnam Leadership Dialogue \(AVLD\)](#), which aims to create, ignite and nurture a network of exceptional leaders from Australia and Vietnam to accelerate efforts towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is just one example of these important bilateral and multilateral exchanges) in order to simultaneously build capacity in both Australia and our region while also nurturing people-to-people links.
- Investing in the **youth** is especially relevant for Asia and the Pacific, where young people make up more than 25% of the population<sup>4</sup>. AVLD believes that it is essential that young people are given the opportunity to learn and be equipped with skills so that they can turn their dreams into actions and scalable impacts. Mobilising and empowering youth through creating spaces like youth consultations, open dialogues and open spaces for young people to take on active civil roles can allow them to take on key leadership roles in their countries’ development.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/new-study-suggests-risk-extreme-pandemics-covid-19-could-increase-threefold-coming>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/over-half-infectious-diseases-made-worse-climate-change>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/dp-a-safe-and-just-space-for-humanity-130212-en\\_5.pdf](https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/dp-a-safe-and-just-space-for-humanity-130212-en_5.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/asia-young-people-are-key-achieving-national-development-goals>

- While the transition to **clean energy** can be challenging, it is urgent and also creates opportunities for providing energy access in more remote areas through decentralised, community-led renewable energy generation. This could also contribute to opportunities for Australia to be a leading renewable energy exporter.
  - Investments in renewable energy should be subject to thorough environmental and social impact assessments / safeguards. Caution should particularly be taken with large-scale hydropower projects, given their potential to displace vulnerable people and disrupt freshwater ecosystems and fisheries.
  
- Collective action to **transform global food systems** is required to deliver food security and nutrition for a potential 10 billion people, keep global warming to 1.5°C and restore biodiversity. In 2021, almost 193 million people globally were acutely food insecure<sup>5</sup>. Roadmaps for transforming national food systems will differ depending on the social, political and environmental dimensions of each country, but will likely involve reducing food loss and waste, transitioning to healthier and more sustainable diets and a shift to regenerative food production on land, sea and rivers. Australia's expertise in agricultural technology and innovation, particularly through ACIAR will be valuable to help to support this transformation.
  - It will be important to ensure that the benefits and costs of this food system transformation is fairly distributed. While 30% of Vietnam's GDP is related to agriculture, 85% of the agricultural labour force in Vietnam is from small households. Opportunities must be created for smallholders to participate and ensure that they are not left behind.
  
- We encourage the government to take a **mainstreaming approach to climate change**, similar to previous approaches to gender mainstreaming, where it is assumed that all aid program investments should contribute to climate change mitigation and / or adaptation, with a specific explanation provided for the small number of programs that this may not be relevant for (an "if not, why not?" approach).
  - It is also important to ensure that aid program activities do not exacerbate climate vulnerability or contribute additional carbon emissions.
  
- **Reversing biodiversity loss** will be essential to restore nature and the critical environmental services it provides – ranging from our clean air, fresh water, food, fuel and fibre; to the intangible ways in which nature contributes to our lives, well-being and cultural identity. For example, an estimated 80% of the nearly 65 million people living in the Lower Mekong River Basin depend on the river and its rich natural resources for their food security and livelihoods<sup>6</sup>.
  - Significant and sustained progress in halting and reversing nature loss cannot be achieved through conservation action alone. It depends on ambitious and transformational actions to address the drivers of nature loss, including key productive sectors, agriculture and food systems and the footprint of our production and consumption that have a negative impact on nature. It also needs to go hand in hand with the respect and recognition of the role and rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
  - There is urgent demand for significant international biodiversity finance. Government bodies are stepping up - the European Commission have announced a doubling of biodiversity funding for the most vulnerable countries<sup>7</sup>, while Canada has committed to funding targets for Nature-based Solutions<sup>8</sup>. We encourage the Australian government to show leadership in this area and implement ambitious targets for biodiversity funding as a critical way to achieve the SDGs.

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.fightfoodcrises.net/fileadmin/user\\_upload/fightfoodcrises/doc/resources/GRFC\\_2022\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.fightfoodcrises.net/fileadmin/user_upload/fightfoodcrises/doc/resources/GRFC_2022_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mrcmekong.org/about/mekong-basin/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_5730](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_5730)

<sup>8</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/8355995/canada-climate-fund-biodiversity-cop26/>

- Given the significant funding gaps for development, climate action and biodiversity; a generous and well-managed aid program is necessary but not sufficient. The Australian government should consider how to best use the aid program to unlock private sector finance in these areas.
  - This may involve facilitating and “de-risking” **private sector investment** in countries in our region; supporting exports and creating incentives for more sustainable and regenerative business practices.
  
- Success in all of these areas will depend on the Australian government:
  - Actively listening, supporting local leadership and responding to local priorities;
  - Developing strong environmental and social safeguards that are implemented thoughtfully, not as a “tick-box” exercise;
  - Going beyond sustainability and focusing on regeneration.