

Australian **WASH** Reference Group

Coordinator
International Development Policy
Development Policy Section
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
RG Casey Building
John McEwen Crescent
Barton ACT 0221
Australia

29 November 2022

Dear DFAT International Development Policy Coordinator,

Re: Australian WASH Reference Group Submission to the development of a new International Development Policy

This submission has been developed by the Executive Committee of the Australian Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Reference Group. The Australian WASH Reference Group was formed in 2007 as a network of organisations working on WASH in developing countries and is made up of 38 members from 27 organisations, including non-government organisations, academic institutions and private consultants. The Australian WASH Reference Group is therefore the peak group for organisations working towards [Sustainable Development Goal 6 \(SDG 6\) to ensure access to water and sanitation for all](#) and is largely responsible for delivering Australia's contribution to the not-for-profit and academic sectors' contributions to WASH in the Asia and Pacific regions.

Please find our responses to key questions relevant to the development of Australia's new International 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?

Access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is the most basic human need for health and wellbeing. WASH underpins all of the sustainable development goals and without safely managed, affordable and accessible water and sanitation, the other goals will not be realised. Our region has seen long-term misuse, poor management, over extraction of water supplies which has exacerbated water stress for millions. Additionally, countries in our region are facing growing challenges linked to degraded water-related ecosystems, water scarcity and flooding caused by climate change, underinvestment in water and sanitation and insufficient cooperation on transboundary waters.

Alarming, our region is one of the worst performing in the world in terms of WASH and water resources management (SDG 6) and associated health and gender equality and disability outcomes. The Pacific region is the only region globally with declining figures for water and sanitation access ([see JMP for details](#)). This is despite the region having considerable water resources, and Australian expertise and potential partnerships at its doorstep. Under the Coalition Government, Australia's

investment in SDG 6 in the region has decreased considerably over the last ten years and is now a small fraction of the dwindling aid and development budget, well below the OECD average.

Australia's current investment in WASH and water resources management does not reflect the foundational and central importance of clean water and safely managed sanitation to human health and economic growth. People cannot be educated, work, or receive adequate medical care without access to WASH. Communities cannot thrive without access to water and sanitation services that support productivity and enable positive environment and social outcomes. Reducing regional health security threats as well as the incidence of stunting are dependent upon increasing access to safely managed WASH and enabling sustainable water resources management.

Significantly increased investment is required to enable our region to be in with a chance of achieving SDG 6 by 2030. This lack of investment coupled with underinvestment in long-term capacity and skills-building and retention in the sector, particularly the Pacific, and under-prioritisation by developing country governments has contributed to poor sustainability of WASH and water services and infrastructure.

In response to key trends and challenges related to SDG 6, international development, and Australia's role in our region we offer the following eight recommendations:

1. Recognising and responding to the climate impacts of and on water and WASH: Climate change and water are inextricably linked; the impacts of climate change will mostly be felt throughout the water cycle (floods, drought, water quality losses); and access to safe WASH services has the ability to transform communities and increase their resilience and adaptation to climate change. The Pacific region is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of extreme climate events such as cyclones, floods, tsunamis and hurricanes. In addition to these short-term shocks, communities will also face slow onset climate threats. Recent research has also indicated that poorly managed water and sanitation systems contribute to carbon emissions, and there is scope for the WASH and water resources sectors to contribute more to mitigation efforts, including alternative energy generation and carbon offsetting.

2. Increasing the strategic framing of SDG 6 related investments: The Australian Government should make water and sanitation a central pillar of Australia's next Development Policy Framework in order to capitalise on Australia's offerings and expertise to the region, as well as the health, strategic and diplomatic investment benefits in this sector. In order to do this, Australia needs to ensure that funding for WASH and water resources management is on a path back to or ideally beyond, the OECD average of 4.1% of total ODA, particularly given the increasing costs of adapting WASH infrastructure and services to climate change. We would strongly encourage the Government to continue thematic SDG 6 investments, such as Water for Women, and establish long-term bilateral WASH programs. The lack of long-term bilateral WASH programs is a critical gap, particularly in the Pacific.

3. Enhancing DFAT's water and WASH technical capacity: The Australian Government is encouraged to urgently prioritise recruitment of water and WASH experts in key DFAT Posts to drive bilateral dialogue and ensure DFAT investments are aligned to country and regional priorities and take a longer-term view to realising outcomes. We suggest that Australia's university, civil society and consultancy expertise can be drawn on to support and enhance this technical capacity, as well as DFAT increasing it "in house".

4. Designing a more coherent Pacific WASH (SDG 6) program focused on strengthening government systems and building capacity: The Australian Government is encouraged to develop a 'Pacific Water and WASH Compact' with governments and donors across the region to ensure the suitability and sustainability of new infrastructure built through concessional loans and other development finance. Building institutional and human resource capacity to ensure sustainability,

operations and maintenance of water and WASH investments requires long-term commitments to training, education and skills-building/ retention. There is an urgent need for grant funding (for governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) to address human resource and governance priorities.

5. Focusing on Menstrual Health in the Pacific: The Australian Government is encouraged to design a 'Pacific Menstrual Health Program' to complement the DFAT Pacific Women Lead program. A Pacific Menstrual Health Program should focus on achieving menstrual health for all women and girls by adopting multi-sectoral approaches which supports Pacific Island Countries in public health to address menstrual health.

6. Ensuring a focus on interrelated SDG 6 targets on sanitation and hygiene: Sanitation and hygiene investments in the region must pay specific attention to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, for example, women and people with disabilities in line with the SDG targets, and associated targets such as SDG 5 (gender equality and inclusion).

7. Integrating WASH with regional health security initiatives: The Australian Government is encouraged to develop a Southeast Asia and Pacific WASH in healthcare facilities initiative to complement Australia's investment in regional health security.

8. Ensuring WASH policy, practice, partnerships and research is decolonised in line with a First Nations foreign policy: Australia has considerable expertise in policy, practice, partnerships and research relevant to SDG 6, and this should be leveraged to build research capacity in the region. Water resources management and WASH projects and programs funded by the Australian Government should include a requirement to engage meaningfully with local organisations as equal partners, and in support of meaningful localisation agendas.

How can Australia best utilise its national strengths to enhance the impact of our SDG 6 development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities?

Australia's WASH and water sector is well positioned to assist with the advancement of SDG 6 in our region at a range of levels and across our SDG 6 related sectors.

Institutional capacity: Australia has a range of capabilities on offer including community engagement, WASH system strengthening, gender equality and inclusion, co-developing and enabling institutional frameworks, water resource planning, climate adaptation and mitigation, nature-based solutions, data-based decision making, technical skills development and assessment, asset and risk assessment, monitoring and evaluation, applied research, resource recovery and technical innovations. We are able to provide holistic support and assistance and response to all elements of SDG 6 in line with socio-political and contextual understanding and partnerships in the countries in which we work.

Advisory capacity: The Australian WASH Reference Group is made up of CSOs, associations, university partners and small-scale consultancies who have decades of experience working on technical and behavioural SDG 6 related projects and programs. We are world leading in a range of areas such as WASH systems strengthening, gender equality and inclusion and applied research. Better utilisation of existing expert advisory groups such as the WASH Reference Group could greatly support the progress towards SDG 6 in our region.

Knowledge capacity: Australian WASH Reference Group members and other actors working towards SDG 6 have vast levels of knowledge related to what works and what does not work with respect to WASH and water management in our region. Decades of research, experience and monitoring and

evaluation and learning have informed this expertise, and we are wanting to share this knowledge to inform Australia's new International Development Policy.

How should the new international development 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?

Without water, sanitation, hygiene, including menstrual health and hygiene, communities, and especially women and girls, cannot thrive and live lives with dignity. We are encouraged by and agree with the priority given to embed and promote gender equality and inclusion within the aid, trade and development program, in line with international best practice. Water management and WASH are central to achieving the foreign affairs goals, and the vision of strategic equilibrium and investing in our region to address the losses of the past ten years and to reframe our relationship with the region going forward.

We see great opportunity for the Australian Government to make connections between WASH, water resources management and regional bodies such as Pacific Island Forum (PIF), Pacific Water and Wastewater Association (PWWA), and The Pacific Community (SPC) in support of a stronger regional alliance, underpinned by practical responses to climate change and development challenges. It is essential to invest in communities, institutions and skills to develop locally-led solutions that will manage and maintain much-needed WASH and water management services and infrastructure.

Investing in SDG 6 also supports the Government's call for a First Nations foreign policy, especially if the wisdom and experience of Australia's Indigenous water experts and knowledge holders are engaged to inform the sustainable and culturally enriched management of water resources. This would contribute greatly to an Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda, of which many of our membership are involved in here in Australia and internationally through our own programs and the DFAT funded Australian Water Partnership.

Partnerships need to be underpinned by long-term sector and human capacity building and sharing including skills retention and organisational learning. Short term efforts can lead to underutilised opportunities, assets and distrust. We support partnerships with SDG 6 related actors in our region (governments, water utilities, academic organisations, WASH CSOs, rights holder organisations for example) to be built upon trust and long-term engagement, which members from the Australian WASH Reference Group are well placed to inform.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your team to discuss our experience, insights and recommendations on how to lift the strategic importance of water and WASH to Australia's diplomatic and development engagement.

Sincerely,

The Executive Committee of the Australian WASH Reference Group