

International Development Policy
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SUBMISSION TO DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE ON AUSTRALIA'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

SUBMISSION ON NEW INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

This submission is in response to DFAT's invitation to interested stakeholders to contribute to the development of Australia's new International Development Policy.

ABOUT BRIDGING PEOPLES

Bridging Peoples is a network of researchers, trainers, social change makers and aid & development professionals, dedicated to improving the impact of aid & development at the local level. Bridging Peoples began as a consulting agency in Timor-Leste in 2014, and has since expanded to a global network, registered in Australia and Singapore. The founder and director is Australian-born Dr. Deborah Cummins. She has a Bachelor of Laws from the University of Melbourne and a PhD in Local Governance from the University of New South Wales. She has been working in the aid & development sector for almost 20 years.

As a network dedicated to improving local-level impact and community resilience, Bridging Peoples is particularly interested in the Australian government's localisation agenda, seeking ways to improve the impact of Australia's aid and development at the local level. We believe that localisation is essential to achieving people-centred development. Done well, localisation can improve the government's return on investment by decreasing dependency on international consultants, increase impact and sustainability by leveraging local resources and strengths, build trust with partner governments and communities, and provide new tools to contribute to Australia's diplomatic statecraft and national security.

AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S LOCALISATION AGENDA

The Australian Government has already developed guidance on localisation, indicating its commitment to the principles of localisation in the provision of aid & development.

Localisation is best understood as a process rather than a mechanism or set of mechanisms. It describes the transferring of decision-making power from those who traditionally control program design and implementation (development partners, governments, NGOs and other stakeholders) towards those on the receiving end of aid & development (community members.) All stakeholders in a program or initiative have a role to play in this process, following a snowflake model of transferring decision-making in a manner that is as local as possible and as international as necessary. Done well, it can create a sense of local ownership, make effective use of local resources, increase sustainability, and empower local stakeholders and communities to creatively and strategically tackle their own problems.

The need for effective localisation is increasing. The disproportionate impact of climate change on our Asia-Pacific neighbours means we must prepare for increasing internal and external displacement, local conflict over land and water, and accompanying issues of social inequity and exclusion. Addressing these overlapping issues go beyond the capacity of any single government (Australian or otherwise). We must be ready to work in partnership with affected communities and local stakeholders as they adapt to new livelihoods and situations.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS:

Bridging Peoples' research and analyses indicate that there are fundamental prerequisites to delivering aid & development so that it is targeted, effective, strategic, and has increased impact at the local level. Government should:

- Increase the development budget to reflect the importance of positive, respectful development as an essential tool for Australian diplomatic statecraft and national security.
- Bring policy design back in-house to DFAT, with localisation a key element guiding policy design.
- Consider longer program timeframes to support partners in their community engagement.
- Increase development policy capacity of DFAT officials, including in newer policy areas such as localisation.
- Consider localisation criteria and/or indicators for DFAT to use when awarding contracts, managing project reporting, and providing capacity support to local partners in their community engagement.
- Build DFAT and partner capacity in managing the localisation process to ensure localised projects are effective, legitimate and accountable.

Development Assistance and National Security

Australian development assistance and our national security are linked. However, there has been a significant decline in Australian Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding compared to the previous decade.

Recognising that Australia is not the only aid provider in the region, and that Australia is spending close to \$12 on defence for every \$1 on ODA, the government should increase ODA funding with a focus on working in partnership, and localising decision-making power where possible. These 'soft' measures will give diplomats new tools they can use when working to build positive, respectful relationships with our Asia-Pacific neighbours, and will assist in rebuilding Australia's international reputation.

In addition, there is strong evidence that development modelled on localisation and partnership contributes to stronger governance capacity and capability at subnational and community levels. This has the effect of strengthening accountability and ameliorating the impact of higher-level corruption and related potential for conflict in recipient nations.

Bring Development Policy Design In-House

The Australian government has a key role in guiding coherent policy and program design, to ensure Australia's development assistance is coordinated across different program areas, and makes effective use of DFAT's program budgets.

The government should bring policy design back in-house, rebuilding DFAT internal capacity to design and deliver development assistance that is coordinated and accompanied by appropriate funding. Reflecting the government's commitment to localisation and working in partnership, this would ideally include creating longer program timeframes to support partners in their community engagement.

Rebuild Internal Development Capacity

The decision in 2013 to combine AusAID with DFAT, outsourcing of development program and policy design, and challenges due to COVID-19 have all resulted in capacity gaps within DFAT, particularly in newer development policy areas related to localisation.

The government should invest in DFAT training to support officials in managing development contracts and partnerships to ensure they are coordinated, targeted, coherent, and make best use of available budgets for improved local impact.

Consider Criteria and/or Indicators to Assess Partners' Localisation & Community Engagement

Localisation should be a managed process. As well as transferring decision-making power to in-country partners, the Australian government has a key role in encouraging partners at all levels to engage effectively with communities.

The government should increase DFAT capacity in managing partnerships, potentially developing localisation criteria and indicators that can be used when awarding contracts, managing project reporting, providing capacity support to partners, and in their day-to-day partnership management.

Build DFAT and Partner Capacity to Ensure Localised Projects are Effective, Legitimate and Accountable

Bridging Peoples' research across various aid and development contexts over the past eight years underlines the need for any localisation process to be managed. Lessons from the field indicate that without careful management, localisation runs the risk of entrenching local inequalities, (re)creating local conflict and/or setting local actors up for failure.

Our work indicates three key pillars to localisation that any development initiative should satisfy: (1) it should be **technically effective** in meeting program aims; (2) it should be **legitimate** from the perspective of community members; and (3) there should be mechanisms to ensure **downward, local accountability**, ensuring effective outreach to all sectors of the community.

The government should build DFAT and partner capacity to manage program & policy design, and accompany local partners. International and local actors should understand and be able to collaborate in transferring decision-making power using the principles of effectiveness, local legitimacy, and downward, local accountability. Policy mechanisms should encourage ongoing transfer of decision-making power in a manner that is responsible, effective, and that avoids creating harm in communities.

We will be happy to provide case studies, research reports and other evidence that we have gathered over the years across various contexts, if you wish to follow up on any recommendations put forward in this submission. For further information, please contact us at hello@bridgingpeoples.com, or via our website: <https://bridgingpeoples.com>.