

The New International Development Policy

Submission prepared by Christopher Dureau¹

***In Summary:** Stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region will require Australian's International Development Policy to amplify the space for those most affected by change to be the drivers of that change. This submission proposes that the most effective and sustainable way to achieve this is by adopting a strengths-based mentality and methodology reflected in all aspects of the Australian Governments international development programming.*

1. Key trends or challenges shaping Australia's engagement

The international development program has had many successes, but these are overshadowed by the persistence of a short sighted and vertical power relationship between donor and beneficiary. Australia is indeed recognised as a generous donor country providing much needed responses to articulated local needs. But this has led to minimal advancement and a begrudging dependence on the donor by local governments and communities. And consequently, it has given rise to cynicism of the aid program's motives both in Australia and among our partners as well. Our international development must now change to promote a sense of pride among regional partners in what they are achieving themselves not a sense of powerless resulting from the continuation of donor dependence.

We have tried budget subsidies, sector wide approaches and whole of government assistance and many other trends without substantial success because in each of these our development contribution is driven by us 'the outsider' rather than by the people for whom the development efforts are intended.

What is now required is for our International Development Policy to support local governments and communities in acknowledging their own local capacity, their own available local resources, and their sovereignty over the means to achieving their own development goals.

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2. The Development capabilities required by Australians

Both ODA and non-ODA development programs readily acknowledge that it is important to be locally led and fully engage participants in their own development. However, practicing this has proved to be elusive.

The main reason is that to achieve this requires a complete change in mentality from a deficit/problem tree analysis to a strengths-based focus. As the donor-partner we will need to turn our focus on supporting what governments and communities are already doing with some success and strengthen their capacity to do it more effectively. We will need to strengthen national institutions by working through them not alongside them as we so often do in our current programs. This applies both to the way we relate to our regional neighbours as well as how each individual initiative is carried out. A strengths-based approach will require us to change from 'managing development initiatives' to facilitating and encouraging a change process managed and resourced by local governments and communities. The focus of our own development capabilities must become one that promotes **locally led** co-design, co-production, and co-evaluation.

3. Utilising our national strengths

Of the many implications of acquiring these new capabilities, how to learn listen to and acknowledge local culture and local longstanding wisdom is paramount. We are a nation of settlers from many societies and cultures. As we become aware of the diversity and complexity of cultures within our own society, we can begin to apply that awareness to our regional neighbours – many of whose value systems and cultural influences are considerably different from the more dominant cultures that determine how we live and work in Australia.

We are struggling with the First Nation People request for Treaty and a Voice to Parliament. This struggle reveals both our inherent reluctance to listen to and learn from the voices of other cultures as well as our appreciation that this is the way we need to go in the future. The struggle with this dynamic is also our strength. The new International Development Policy will need to recognise what is happening to ourselves in this regard and how we are open to learn from our regional neighbours about how to become our better selves.

4. Committing to stronger and more meaningful partnerships

A partnership is not necessarily between equals. Indeed, most partnerships in International Development are not between equals. The Donor often has both power and agency over the outcome. The desire to change this is referred to as 'decolonising the aid program'. In this submission I propose that the adoption of a strengths-based approach to International Development would lead to much more equal and more horizontal partnerships between Australia and our regional neighbours.

A strengths-based approach requires that the donor partner to provide the technical support and resources, so the local partner has the capacity to identify and appreciate

their own available resource and cumulative wisdom to address their current and future development aspirations. And this must happen prior to any supplementary contribution by the outside partner. Clearly this is an approach that starts with what the local partner can contribute rather than what they articulate as their needs. It has been a long-standing practice of beneficiary countries to ask donors to work in parallel with (but not alongside) government services. This too does not lead to sustainable government systems of service delivery.

Providing support to a local partner to identify and appreciate what they already have and what are their current competencies is more likely to enhance mutual trust and respect than analysing their incompetence and needs as the basis for a program of support to any country or community.

Where our focus has often been on what we can contribute, the new International Development Policy should focus on how each partner can identify what all can contribute. This requires a much more horizontal rather than a vertical partnership paradigm. Changing the focus of the Policy to what each can contribute to the partnership with an emphasis on equality of contribution will be more successful in generating collaborative action on both local and global challenges that impact our whole region.

5. Lessons from Australia's past development efforts.

Australian international development policy has for many decades been based on self-interest – what works best for Australia. Investment in the aid sector has been about return for the investor at its base level. While self-interest has a place, the lesson is that **mutual self-interest** is of more lasting consequence. Mutual self-interest can best be achieved by ensuring that the beneficiary of our aid dollar mutually benefits and becomes a stronger partner in all respects – whether it be in trade, defence, diplomacy or addressing the impact of climate change.

Also, it has been my experience over multiple projects in multiple countries that the Australian government and their agency partners are more intent on spending available funds than on ensuring local ownership and management. Ensuring citizen participation in their own development activities has been a much lower priority than the imperative to do something ourselves and be manifestly seen to have done it. How do we spend the allocated budget with the least amount of effort and in what did we contribute have been our driving forces in the selection and implementation of our aid dollar. I can provide multiple examples of how successful initiatives have been cut short because they did not appear to sufficiently demonstrate 'the Australia's contribution' or required too many of our resources to support local self-management.

The lesson we must learn now is that programs that we manage and control, whether it be ODA or non-ODA (INGO), are simply not sustainable and tend to collapse very soon after project completion. On the other hand, approaches that focus on developing local assets, building locally managed associations, and appreciating previous historical success of local partners not only lead to substantially stronger local ownership but are more sustainable.

6. Transparent and Accountable Delivery

Contracting as a form of delivery both within the Australian bureaucracy and in the private contractor sector needs to be fundamentally revised. Government contracting practice has been short sighted and not focused sufficiently on fluidity in the local context. In contrast to the rhetoric of bilateral agreement, many contracts are very time constrained (short contracting periods) and financially driven (the cheaper the better).

From the private contractor's perspective, profit and cost cutting are often the driving forces rather than laying a foundation for long term sustainability and local ownership. Contractors have been encouraged by the system of contracting to become fewer and increasingly larger and more dominant in aid delivery. Commercial interests have been prioritised over contractor profits. The effectiveness of aid has been beholden to priorities other than achieving the stated development goals. This is systemic rather than incidental.

It has long been argued that private contractor share of the total development budget is not transparent to the public including to the recipient partner and that this should remain so. This does not necessarily need to be the case. Currently there is far more transparency in programs such as ANCP and other contributions through the non-government sector. There are also multiple community organisations and associations who provide a wide range of development assistance that are considerably more transparent.

In this submission I propose that an approach that prioritises the interests of the regional partner will lead to greater transparency and accountability.

7. The Role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting partner development.

Strength-based approaches such as Appreciative Inquiry, Asset-based Community Development, Co-production, and Positive Deviance, have now become a widely accepted way of doing business, building organisational capacity, and delivering basic services in the developed world. Strengths-based approaches have also been increasingly applied to disaster risk reduction and to humanitarian response to natural disasters and civil unrest. However, the international development sector is most reluctant to acknowledge this mindset and consequent way of working. Is it because the nature of the sector is seen to be about giving rather than empowering? Is it because effectiveness is measure not by sustainability or efficiency but by the giver's need to own short-term outcomes? Is it because those who design aid programs are not the ones who deliver their designs? Is it because those involved in both designing and implementing – the International Development worker – are driven by 'doing good' rather than taking a back seat and being supportive? Is it because the researchers and the development workers consider themselves 'the experts' and so know the solutions better than those for whom the solution is required? Is it because controlling inputs makes it easier to manage expectations? I have confronted all these reasons why people and agencies still refuse

to fully embrace the change in mindset and practice towards a strengths-based approach to international development.

If taking a strengths-based approach to organisational change and service delivery is now becoming so central to the way we manage ourselves, then surely it is equally relevant to the way we support our regional partners manage themselves.

Author: Christopher Dureau, 28 November 2022