

50+ Regional Voices – Development Policy **Submission.**



At The Lab, we're convinced that great development cooperation comes from unusual collaborations, inspired leadership, good-natured debate, and cracking analysis.

We also believe the most effective development policy should start with the insights and intelligence of people who live, breathe, lead and deliver development – particularly those operating in the countries we seek to assist. To deliver on that, the Lab spoke to more than **50 Indo-Pacific regional experts**, seeking their views on Australia's development program, and what needs to change – or stay the same – to ensure it's as effective as possible.

This submission is a distillation of those views. It provides the Department with an insight into where the region considers Australia's development priorities should lie, and what needs to change.

The time is ripe for connecting Canberra policy makers to the people who can share frank and crucial insights into Australia's role in the region. We can choose to carry on with the status quo, or we can change the way international development is conducted and address some of the issues covered in this submission.

This submission is authored by the more than **50 regional experts** consulted on this project, collated by **Bridi Rice** (CEO), **Izzy Coleman** (Project Assistant) and **Jason Staines** (Production Manager).

Regional leaders describe Australian development as ...

At the Lab, we're not always convinced that Australia sees itself and our development approach clearly. So, we asked our regional experts how they would describe Australian development to their friends. As expected, there was a mix of positive and negative responses, painting a diverse tapestry of regional experience of Australian development.

The good sounded like ...

Australia is a “key **development cooperation partner** for the Pacific region”.

There was high regard for Australia’s “**consistent investment in education and the provision of scholarships** have been good”.

And most groups we spoke to noted Australia is “always there in times of **disaster and emergency**”.

The not so good sounded like ...

Australian development always “aligns to **Australia’s political interests**, which may not necessarily be in the national or community interests”.

And a few experts mentioned that Australia is generally “well-meaning, but sometimes **misguided and opportunistic**. Often good, but sometimes harmful (unintentionally)”.

And one expert gave us a taste of reality, indicating that they’d describe Australia to their friend as “at times – **irrelevant**”.

The strengths sounded like ...

Our experts saw the strengths of Australia’s aid and development program being our focus on delivering **high-quality** projects, **gender** and diversity focus, prioritising the **Pacific**, and **long-term** engagement.

The weaknesses sounded like ...

Our experts said the areas that needed greatest improvement in Australia’s aid and development program were our lack of skill and know-how in **cooperating effectively** and being **flexible**.

The Lab’s take from discussions ...

On the one hand, it’s good news that Australia’s current approach to development focuses on the quality of support and that we are known for high-quality projects as well as gender and diversity. On the other, there is no doubt scepticism that is borne of regional experience of a transactional, misguided or opportunistic Australia. For some, the call was for Australia to be more honest, open and blunt about its interests – be they commercial, geopolitical or otherwise.

Government should consider how the new development policy honestly and responsibly addresses geopolitical realities and the way Australia’s development policy interacts with a range of Australian national interests.

The top factors influencing my country's development are ...

At the Lab, we respect that every nation's development is dictated first and foremost by its own people and the unique barriers to development the nation faces. We think this is the most important starting point for effective development – not just what assistance Australia can or wants to provide. So, we asked our regional experts what would influence their country's development the most. As expected, local leadership conditions dominated the conversation, followed by the climate crisis and a call for better coordination with donors.

Domestic leadership and governance sounded like ...

Each group of experts identified their domestic “**GOOD GOVERNANCE** – independence of the judiciary, rule of law, strong accountability and integrity institutions”, and the “barrier of corruption to development” as top factors influencing development. One noted that “it's **hard to ensure equitable development in a corrupt system**”.

“National debt. National Planning. **Political stability and good governance.** Strong environmental management.”

“Better **preparation and strategies** by our leaders.”

Climate change sounded like ...

“Climate change is here. We are watching your domestic politics on this, not just your international.”

“Climate change is a big factor. Come **sit and listen** to us.”

“... **Climate change is a reality** and driving inequalities further ...”

Better coordination sounded like ...

“More **coordinated efforts** from donors on support provided.”

“Partnership work with our key development bodies including **our communities.**”

“It's always been doing development for the people, but it should be doing development **with the people.**”

The Lab's take from discussions ...

On the one hand, it's good news that Australia's approach on climate change has shifted so dramatically and is now signposted as a centrepiece of a new development policy. On the other hand, our experts are sounding the alarm on something Australia must remember at every step of its development planning and execution: local systems of leadership and governance are **the key** determinant of development. When we surveyed Australian experts, they echoed a call for renewed respect and support for accountable governance work under the new development program – this will be something we'll be watching for along with our regional experts.

The things that need to change in Australian development are ...

At the Lab, we know it's easy for experts to say: 'more of this, more of that' and much harder to make tough choices about what should be stopped or what must change. So, we asked our regional experts if there was one thing they would change about Australia's development approach, what would it be? Decolonisation and localisation of Australia's approach to development was the clear demand from our experts. But this rich discussion gave rise to a range of other potential reforms.

Decolonisation and localisation sounded like ...

Australia should “**deal directly with local organisations**, rather than coming through international and regional agencies”.

“[Australia] needs to focus on **developing local expertise** on a range of thematic areas instead of bringing outsiders or so-called external experts. The sustainability of Australia's aid program is dependent on strengthening and supporting local expertise.”

“Enough of using overseas consultants on a high salary to come and more or less coordinate the implementation of Australia aid money when we can do it. Overseas consultants should act more as a **secretary to support and guide the program.**”

Engage more with informal structures and at multiple levels sounded like ...

Experts told Australia to “explore partnering with **non-traditional development partners** in-countries e.g. churches”.

“Australian aid is often through **formal structures** – these formal structures are at the mercy of INGOs etc that aren't people-centred – not holistic.”

Some experts wanted “**more opportunities for trade and exchange** opportunities for people between Australia and my country or partner countries”.

And many spoke about non-ODA means for development such as “**no requirement for a visa to travel to Australia** to show that they are part of the Pacific family”.

Relationships sounded like ...

Experts spoke a lot about the individual interactions they have with the Australian Government and delivery partners, urging Australia “to be **less transactional** and genuinely build relationships and have dialogue about development issues”.

They wanted a “genuine partnership model built on **mutual respect and positive development commitments** for the greater Pacific region”.

They also wanted Australia to “see the Pacific as an equal. Australia in particular needs to be more **culturally competent** when engaging with the region – listening more to the voices of the people”.

And they saw potential for Australia (if we deliver these changes) to become “a **truly trusted ally** and a member of the Pacific family”.

DFAT sounded like ...

One day, perhaps “**the Pacific would be a ‘destination’ posting** rather than a stepping-stone for Australian diplomats, DFAT officials, government officials etc”.

If DFAT was a world-class development agency, then we would be able to have “... robust discussions with/in DFAT **about decolonisation and locally led development** and diplomats would position themselves as being **here to learn more than they are here to impart knowledge**”.

Financial reform sounded like ...

How Australia finances its development was top of mind as experts urged Australia to “look at a **sustainability framework** for projects”.

Australia should “set up a system, for countries to access development funds. **It’s not easy to access** these through the normal government/university financial systems right now”.

Australia should “commit to significant domestic climate targets. We are now talking loss and damages because of inaction. And money for **climate change financing must be managed by the countries themselves**”.

The Lab’s take from discussions ...

On the one hand, it’s clear that there is demand and an expectation for drastic change in Australia’s approach to cultivating development relationships and delivering a more localised development program. On the other hand, it’s fascinating to see that when faced with a choice, the bulk of our experts indicated that they would change more about the *way* Australia does development, rather than the *what*.

Government will need to deeply consider not just its position on establishing a formal localisation strategy and roadmap, but how it will build a culture of development (and the capability to match) that delivers on the relational demands of the region.

Appendix: About this submission

Development Intelligence Lab collected this data as part of its Pulse Check | 2022 Development Strategy. More results can be viewed at <https://www.devintelligencelab.com/pulse-check>

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All quotes taken from participants appear here verbatim. Any adjustments are only grammatical in nature.