SUBMISSION ON AUSTRALIA'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Background

EAROPH Australia is the Australian Chapter of the Eastern Regional Organisation for Planning and Human Settlements, which is the UN registered peak body for the Asia Pacific Region in relation to the built environment. We are a multi-disciplinary group of professionals working and engaging with partners in the Asia Pacific Region. We collaborate with EAROPH Chapters in different parts of Asia, and we have sponsored the formation of a new Pacific Chapter. Our members are actively working as expert advisers in different parts of the region, particularly including Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and most countries in the Pacific region.

EAROPH is a member of the Pacific Urban Partnership which facilitates the Pacific Urban Forum, and the Penang Platform which organises the Asia Pacific Urban Forum. The outcomes of these two events feed into the World Urban Forum, at which we have regularly made presentations. We are also an active member of the Habitat Professionals Forum through which we previously contributed to development of the global New Urban Agenda, and we currently support a new post-COVID Roadmap for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our members have been involved in supporting various Asian and Pacific countries in building their capacity to address the SDGs, working with the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, the Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility (PRIF), ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability) and various UN agencies. We are also actively engaged in initiatives that build resilience to climate change, previously facilitating a number of webinar events that contributed to the COP 26 dialogue, presenting at the 2022 World Urban Forum and planning for future events in 2023.

EAROPH Australia very much welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Australia's new International Development Strategy, and our suggestions address the terms of reference as follows.

1. 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?

Addressing climate change is the top priority for most Pacific communities as well as many communities in South and Southeast Asia. The Green Climate Fund has been established for global assistance but this is proving impossible to access for small-scale community-led solutions. We have been active in exploring practical ways of addressing the issue of Loss and Damages (given the lack of progress through the COP mechanisms) and there are some useful strategies that can be pursued at a local level. For example there are small scale models for producing biochar from coconut waste that can be used to address salinity in soils and water supply systems on small atoll islands, greatly enhancing their food and water security. This is critical to enabling continued occupation of the most vulnerable atoll islands. Another initiative that appears productive is development of guidelines for making self-built houses more resilient to storm damage (with a start on this made by Australia's RMIT university operating in the Solomon Islands, but needing funding support for implementation).

A further strategy for mitigating adverse impacts on marine resources is seaweed farming, which can provide a feedstock for compost, biochar, livestock fodder as well as remediating polluted inshore waters, also reducing ocean temperature and acidification. One possibility for addressing climate change on a global basis would be to incentivise and upscale "blue carbon" across the Pacific, as seaweed farming can sequester 20-30 times as much carbon as land based forestry, and extensive marine waters are a key resource of the most vulnerable Pacific islands. As an example in South Tarawa, where seaweed farming was practiced in the past, re-establishing seaweed farming across around a third of the Tarawa lagoon would be likely to offset the whole of Kiribati's current greenhouse gas emissions. An incentivised financial model for purchasing blue carbon credits might provide Small Island Developing States with resources to mitigate climate impacts, as well as providing global benefits.

Improvements to water and sanitation are critical in many communities, particularly informal settlements throughout the Asia Pacific region. While many development partners are working with national government to address large scale infrastructure needs, there is a clear gap in assisting local governments to fulfil their responsibilities in these areas. There are community-led solutions which have been designed and which are locally supported, such as community managed septic tanks in areas without sewerage, small scale water desalination filters and community based recycling enterprises. However these often lack a funding mechanism. In all infrastructure programs, large and small, it is highly desirable to consider long term asset management from the start. This is often forgotten and results in rapid asset degradation. In many communities, the lack of clean water together with poor sanitation is a major contribution to poor health, and investment in improving health service delivery needs to be balanced with strategies to address these causal factors.

Promoting economic development is often a priority for development assistance, but this often focuses on the formal economy, especially export-oriented activities, which are actually a small component of many developing economies. Our members have been promoting a much better understanding of the informal economy, and identifying ways of making this more productive. This has the potential for much greater impact on poverty reduction, through increasing livelihood opportunities as well as establishing more affordable local goods and services. Building local economies and associated livelihoods can also play an important part in reducing economic inequalities, criminal activity and domestic political tensions.

Infrastructure maintenance is crucial to functioning economies, preserving the value of development partner investment in the region. Recent recognition of the need for assessing the operational and maintenance costs to be borne by governments as a result of development partner investment is a first step, but this also needs to be thoroughly institutionalised

We are aware that in some countries the Australian Government has prioritised health and education services, particularly those that address the needs of women and girls, and we do not suggest that this work is unimportant. However, these needs vary from country to country, requiring careful adjustment to the cultural context, while the issues identified above seem to be more common priorities across the Asia Pacific region as well as providing practical vehicles for promoting socially inclusive development.

2. What development capabilities will Australia need to respond to these challenges?

To date the focus of Australia's aid programs has been on large scale programs delivered by large Australian consultancy firms, with the Government at arm's length. While there are some successes arising from this approach, it has removed the agility required to respond to new opportunities for high impact initiatives. Some of these require specialist expertise that are not necessarily found

within the major development firms, for example soil science, regenerative agriculture, regenerative mariculture, oceanography, sustainable asset management. Better engagement with non-government organisations, not for profit organisations and Australian universities, as well as a flexibility around recruiting non-Australian expertise would add value by breaking down the current "closed shop".

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

EAROPH Australia has worked in a number of situations where different development agencies are crying out for better coordination to avoid duplication of effort. The support for the Pacific Data Hub is a first step, but it needs the support of local librarians to capture, record and make accessible the work already complete. A well funded national library in each PIC could provide development partners, individual consultants and government employees with access to completed reports, maps and plans (including plans of built infrastructure, seabed characteristics etc). A reliable record of who is doing and has done what would help governments and their development partners to identify the critical gaps in support, building on work already done as well as capturing the opportunities for resource pooling. As an example, there are currently numerous programs encouraging adoption of renewable energy, with considerable overlap and lack of coordinated planning. Working to develop an ongoing professional information management capability would better enable coordination and collaborative planning within each country and enable much more effective use of resources. It would benefit national governments which at present have to deal separately with numerous development agencies. It would also address the problem that occurs when there is a turnover of personnel within governments or development partners, there is commonly no formal information management structure to pass on the accumulated knowledge.

Due to Australia's historically high level of urbanisation there is a strong national skillset in the built environment professions, including but not limited to project management, architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, urban design, and civil engineering. This is supported by world class tertiary education and research in these areas, adding further depth and future focus in fields such as urban infrastructure, mobility, urban greening, public realm design and delivery. There is potential to support the growing urbanisation of many of our Pacific neighbours with expertise, education, capability building and open exchange that can be mutually beneficial in adapting urban environments to better deliver on the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

Hand in hand with the need to accommodate ongoing urban growth in a complex multi-stakeholder environment, Australia has developed contemporary inclusive engagement methodologies over the recent decades. These bring communities, stakeholders and professionals together to co-design solutions sought through urban renewal and development projects. Collectively these are known as inclusive engagement processes where experts work with communities and stakeholders to bring technical knowledge and skills and lived experience insights together to better understand need and aspirations for place. These processes are proving very useful in addressing Pacific urbanisation challenges, particularly in the context of Building Back Better in the post-COVID recovery period.

4. How should the new 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?

There are networking opportunities that have been ignored by the previous Government, which could raise Australia's profile as a willing development partner. A starting point might be to engage

with the Pacific Urban Forum, the Asia Pacific Forum and the World Urban Forum events, with sponsorship of the regional activities and presentations about Australia's contributions to achieving the SDGs at the World Urban Forum. Sponsorship of other regional networking events could also emphasis how the Australian Government is repositioning itself as a partner of choice. As an example, it might be advantageous for the Australian Government to publicly support EAROPH Australia in its planned workshop on climate action in Cairns (April 2023) to promote networking between Australian First Nations communities and Pacific communities in advocating over issues of mutual concern, leading into a parallel event at the Pacific Urban Forum (August 2023) which will also engage with EAROPH's Asian Chapters.

It is noted that the previous Australian Government withdrew its longer term funding for the Pacific Regional Division of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) to work on building the capacity of local government throughout the region, which has meant that this highly effective organisation now relies solely on shorter ad hoc projects that are grant funded. CLGF has excellent reach within national and local governments throughout the Pacific, not limited to Commonwealth nations. Removal of longer term funding limits its capacity to initiate regional activities that strategically build the capacity of local governments.

Support provided to cross-Pacific organisations that are embedded in the member nations, such as the South Pacific Community (SPC), PRIF, ICLEI and CLGF can minimise the negative perceptions that are sometimes associated with 'fly-in consultants' with limited time to understand the local context. Where possible this type of embedded support should be better valued so that Australia gains recognition for its investment in a better Pacific.

Support for United Nations agencies and multilateral organisations has been successful in addressing regional issues and should continue.

5. What lessons from Australia's past development efforts should inform the policy? What is Australia seen to be doing comparatively well?

EAROPH Australia is very familiar with the DFAT funded programs throughout Melanesia, which are supporting improvements to municipal markets. Our members have worked with the UN Women offices in Papua New Guinea and Fiji to implement DFAT funded programs over the past ten years, and this has seen significant improvements for the economic and social wellbeing of women, as well as local food security. Another program that appears to be very successful in building international relationships and development capacity involves provision of scholarships for postgraduate study in Australia, particularly in skill areas that are important for international development. These programs demonstrate the benefits from supporting local aspirations that have high impact on community wellbeing.

One lesson from past experience is the apparent reticence of many development partners, including Australia, to engage in ensuring that each country has the capability to fully manage wastes imported and generated as a result of local economic development. Hazardous and contaminating wastes pollute landfills, damage local marine and terrestrial ecologies, and pose a high risk to local populations. Solutions posed by external agencies often rely on exporting these wastes to non-existent regional reprocessing hubs, but there are multiple problems in achieving this. If the current political aversion to engaging in waste management projects can be overcome, support for more circular resource management regimes is likely to be welcomed by national and local governments.

6. How should the performance and delivery systems be designed to promote transparency and accountability, as well as effectiveness and learning in Australia's development assistance?

While most programs have requirements for monitoring and evaluation, these are often highly prescriptive, but limited to delivery process rather than outcomes. As an example, the huge investments made in building the physical infrastructure for municipal markets in various PICs have often lacked information from pre- and post- occupancy user surveys. As a result there have been some instances where these investments have actually led to the market vendors being economically worse off, and in some cases unwilling to move into the new markets. Program evaluation needs to look beyond the brief for unintended consequences, and to learn from both positive and negative outcomes. We would suggest that any programs involving built infrastructure should be supported by pre- and post-commissioning surveys of users.

7. How should the new policy address the role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting the development of our regional partners?

We suggest the following roles and functions:

- Non-ODA support for regional networking should build relationships and assist in developing a strategic framework for ODA (including collaborative networking with other development partners),

- ODA support for regional, national and local programs should be designed to address the strategic framework, recognising how to best complement the activities of other development partners in meeting different national or regional needs, and

- ODA should also be available to respond opportunistically to community-led initiatives that have not been anticipated in ODA program design, but which appear to have high impact on community wellbeing, especially where these may result in models for regional replication.

We feel that the previous focus has increasingly been on large ODA programs often designed in isolation from other development partners, and that a more balanced investment that embraces innovation would have improved outcomes for the Australian Government and the beneficiary communities.