

Submission from the Institute for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University to inform the Australian Government's new International Development Policy, 30 November 2022

The Institute is a research centre at La Trobe University which seeks to better understand, support and enable the practice of positive social change, with a particular focus on Indigenous Australia, the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Over the last decade we have worked with a wide range of individuals, organisations and networks that are involved in social change and international development including a number of DFAT funded programs, notably: the Pacific Leadership Program, the Developmental Leadership Program, the PNG–Australia Governance Partnership, the Solomon Islands Resource Facility, the Australian Pacific Training Coalition, and the Women's Leadership Initiative, as well as with a large number of Australian NGOs. We have also been involved in DFAT program designs, evaluations and training. This submission is informed by this hands-on engagement with development practice.

1. Trends and Challenges

Apart from the broad political and economic trends outlined in the Terms of Reference for submissions – which provide a good summary of many of the most pressing development challenges – we would add one more which we believe to be of particular significance.

That is the growing recognition of, and push for, **locally-led development**. What had been a relatively technical debate about local ownership under the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action in the early 2000s, and localisation in the humanitarian arena following the Grand Bargain agreements in Istanbul in 2016, has been transformed by broader political trends related to the black lives matter movement, debates on decolonisation and racism in the sector, and the growing recognition of the importance of Indigenous knowledge in helping to address issues like climate change.

Our research¹ on how local development practitioners in the Pacific experienced the natural experiment of the withdrawal of international staff during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates not only the potential for more locally-led development but the demand for it is not going to go away. The genie is out of the bottle. Vested interests in the sector which have to date been resistant to change are under renewed pressure to #ShiftThePower and Australia could position itself as being responsive to this challenge by acknowledging this trend explicitly in its new Development Policy and making commitments to act on it (some ideas on how to do this below).

2. Lessons from Australia's past development efforts

Australia's back catalogue includes a number of development programs that have successfully promoted locally-led development in politically savvy ways, as well as a body of research² it has funded which explores not only how and why these programs worked, but also what was required for them to be effectively supported.³

¹ See Roche and Denney (2021) [COVID-19: An opportunity to localise and reimagine development in the Pacific?](#); and [A window of opportunity: learning from COVID-19 to progress locally led response and development](#)

² See the Developmental Leadership Program (<https://www.dlprog.org/>)

³ See Roche and Denney (2021) [How Can Developmental Leadership Be Supported?](#)

Coalitions for Change in the Philippines, The Pacific Leadership Program, the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, MAMPU in Indonesia, and a number of other programs demonstrate that DFAT and managing contractors are capable of successfully supporting this kind of work. As a number of researchers and practitioners have noted⁴ these kinds of programs have the following characteristics:

- Strong contextual understandings and ability to establish long-term relationships usually through local staff;
- Local leadership of development programs;
- Seek to expand and nurture spaces for change;
- Effective conveners and brokers of relationships and coalitions;
- Learn and adapt to changing circumstances and feedback;
- Create and maintain an authorising environment within DFAT which enables and incentivises the above.

However, DFAT has been less capable of distilling the strategic lessons from these initiatives to shift wider programming. As a result, these program examples remain islands of success amongst other more conventional programming. Expanding these successful examples will require DFAT to change its own broader policy, practice and institutional cultures. This for example could be done by undertaking a ‘positive deviance’ inquiry⁵ or positive outlier exercise which explored how these successful initiatives were supported and enabled and what elements of the organisations systems and processes assisted in the process, and which needed to be ‘got around’ in order to be successful. This method if done strategically can not only leverage the tacit knowledge of those involved, but can at the same time be used to shift the norms and systems preventing more of these initiatives emerging. Some of the existing practices and cultures which this may mean addressing include:

- A tendency to privilege the knowledge and relationships of expatriate staff and external consultants (both of whom are usually short term) with local forms of expertise and knowledge undervalued.
- Accountabilities that are overly focused on donor compliance, rather than holding programs accountable for learning about how best to support locally led developmental change and building accountability to peers and local constituencies.
- A preference for more engineered and predictable processes than less certain and emergent ones. And pressures to spend and meet pre-determined and easily communicable, short term, tangible targets.
- A risk-averse, compliance culture which seeks a high level of ‘control’, associated with high levels of discomfort with uncertainty and unpredictability.
- A constrained space for development agencies to work in flexible adaptable ways way based on domestic political interests and assumptions about public attitudes to aid and the degree to which the public are ill-informed and politically salient.

Practical commitments to address these systemic shortcomings might include:

- A target for a certain percentage of Team Leaders of Australian development programs to be national staff of the country the program operates in; as well as targets for percentages of senior program staff and technical advisors that are nationals of the country the program operates in.

⁴ See Roche and Denney (2021) [How Can Developmental Leadership Be Supported?](#) for a summary of this

⁵ See for example the Positive Deviance Initiative <https://positivedeviance.org/> or this resource guide <https://involve.org.uk/resources/methods/positive-deviance>

- Proactive exploration of innovative implementation arrangements that put managing contractors in a support role to a locally-engaged core program team (as has occurred in the Vanuatu Skills Program, for instance). This could be part of a ‘positive deviance inquiry’ (see above)
- Guidance and performance management for DFAT staff at Post (or as part of pre-posting) on respectful relationship management both with locally-engaged staff and implementing partners to promote mutual accountabilities for both compliance *and* learning, and a shift away from the top-down managerial control that is often experienced. This might involve seeking confidential feedback from implementing partners that DFAT staff manage as part of DFAT staffs’ performance assessments. This would help to demonstrate that respectful relationship management is a priority requirement of all DFAT staff that they are held to account for.
- An understanding of development processes as uncertain and thus requiring learning-oriented approaches, with accountability to DFAT focused much more strongly on *learning*, rather than compliance.

3. Development and Institutional Capabilities

The government has already foreshadowed enhancing the development capabilities of DFAT staff which is important, and the above sections provide an indication of the kind of capacities that will be required, notably around the ability to manage projects and programs in ways that allow for locally-led, adaptive and contextually tailored initiatives. This in turn clearly requires staff with long-term development expertise and experience.

In addition to these generalist skills required across all elements of the development program, governance, conflict and justice, in particular, are thematic areas that require a rejuvenation of expertise within DFAT. This is especially important in light of DFAT’s investments in these thematic areas, as well as given the challenge of rising authoritarianism in the region.

However, as Dan Honig and Nalima Gulrajani⁶ and others have noted, if there is not a more fundamental shift in culture and day-to-day practices then a focus on capabilities is likely to be not only ineffective but unlikely to be sustained. This requires effective modelling from senior staff of the the practices the organisation deems to be important i.e. effective partnership, inclusion and gender equity, or respect for development and contextual knowledge, not just in policies and strategies but in day to day interactions.

A high-quality development program does not just depend on good quality development expertise, but also a more supportive enabling approach to processes of development such as being able to build respectful, long-term relationships, soft skills of communication, negotiation, cross-cultural sensitivity, brokering and the ability to ‘lead from behind’ – knowing when to step back and enable others to lead. And it requires a departmental culture and systems and processes that embody these qualities. This requires adopting a less transactional relationship with implementing partners, not micro-managing, taking mutual responsibility for programs and privileging the local political economy over DFAT’s own internal political economy.

In particular, we believe that there is much mileage to be gained in harnessing the commitments the the Government has made to embedding Indigenous perspectives, experiences, interests and people into foreign policy. Reconciling with the First Australians necessarily requires the government to not only listen to, but also seek to understand and value, the different ways of knowing and being that Indigenous communities hold. This appreciation of our domestic multi-cultural experience in turn can

⁶ See Honig & Gulrajani, (2018) [“Making good on donors’ desire to Do Development Differently,”](#) *Third World Quarterly*, 39:1, pp. 68-84.

provide Australia with an enhanced ability to genuinely partner internationally in respectful ways and to look for and value the particular perspectives that other Indigenous knowledges and worldviews can bring to the resolution of common challenges. In this way Australia's ability to be a respected and legitimate international citizen in our region is closely linked to its domestic capabilities to reconcile with its on First Nations people and their meaningful involvement in foreign policy and development.

4. Performance and delivery systems: learning and accountability

In order to promote locally led development, and the institutional capabilities required to do this requires a revitalised monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) function within DFAT. In particular we would suggest that this will require:

- Updating DFAT's evaluation policy and guidelines in ways which are consistent with emerging understandings of effective evaluative practice related to locally led adaptive development⁷ and systems change⁸ i.e. promoting MERL practice which better recognises the importance of learning and feedback as the program evolves; which is better able to explain the 'why' and 'how' of what works for who and under what conditions; which genuinely seeks the input and feedback of partners and those that the aid program seeks to benefit, and which focuses as much on questions of sense-making and 'use' of findings as on the questions of data collection and methods;
- Better recognising the need to, and importance of, weaving together different forms and types of knowledge and information. Whilst there is a general acknowledgement that 'mixed method' approaches are needed, that 'big data' and thick 'data' are both required, and indigenous and local knowledge does need to be better factored into evaluative practice there are still a number of challenges which need addressing for these matters to be properly addressed. Perhaps the most important of which is the fact that some stakeholders are able to insist on their preferences for certain types and forms of knowledge (succinct, quantifiable, unequivocal) whilst others are not able to insist on what they kinds of knowledge they need (contextual, qualitative, ambivalent). Being honest that like all other domains MERL is subject to power, politics and interests is perhaps the first step for recognising as others have argued⁹ that ensuring the effective and inclusive governance of MERL processes is particularly important, not least when it comes to promoting accountability for the use (and mis-use) of evaluation and research findings. Something that needs to be factored into proposals for an independent evaluation body, as well as for project and program evaluations.
- It is clearly important that there is transparency to both the Australian public and the populations of partner countries about Australia's aid program. Both will require some effort to not only share learning by publishing, as standard practice, all MERL documentation and reports unless there is a valid reason not to do so, but to make this information more digestible to the general public. As we know the basic level of understanding of the public in Australia about both the scale and the quality of the program is weak. Simply publishing more information is unlikely to change this very dramatically. More imaginative solutions are probably required here and perhaps this inspiration might come from youth initiatives in other places which seek to inform, entertain and mobilise the same time¹⁰.

⁷ See for example <https://publications.wri.org/reshaping-locally-led-adaptation>

⁸ See for example <https://www.fsg.org/blog/how-do-you-evaluate-systems-change-place-start/> and <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/evaluating-impact-evaluating-systems-change>

⁹ See Justin Parkhurst for example on the good governance of evidence https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68604/1/Parkhurst_The%20Politics%20of%20Evidence.pdf

¹⁰ See for example Wansmolbag <https://www.wansmolbag.org/> Shujazz <https://www.shujaazinc.com/our-ventures/>

Conclusion

Australia's new government has a clear opportunity to refresh and reimagine its contribution to development in our region. This will be mean focusing on 'how' we relate to our neighbours and contribute to their goals and ambitions, as well as 'who' we are: our identity as a nation, as much as what we do. Implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart and reconciling with First Nation's people and focusing on supporting locally-led inclusive development are critical parts of not only who we are but how we perceived. This would be of incalculable value to both Australia and the region.