



Informing the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) New Development Policy - Inputs from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) congratulates the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) for carrying out a consultation process to guide its new international development policy and is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to it. IFES has been providing technical assistance in the democracy, rights, and governance space for more than 35 years and is a long-term implementer of DFAT-funded projects across the Asia-Pacific region. IFES' regional and global experience make us well placed to provide inputs that will increase the effectiveness and sustainability of DFAT's new policy.

Question: 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?

IFES Response: As is the case all around the globe, *closing spaces and the rise of authoritarianism* are major challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2022 report](#) shows that the three countries experiencing the biggest drops in freedom scores are in Asia: Myanmar (-19 points), Afghanistan (-17 points), and Hong Kong (-9 points). Military coups and other power grabs, the rise of authoritarian leaders, and foreign illiberal influences all represent serious threats to democracy in the region. While democratic backsliding is a major problem across the world, democratic countries are organizing and formalizing their commitments to addressing the issue, both internally and abroad. Australia has a crucial role to play in these networks, sharing its lessons learned, and supporting countries in need.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Penny Wong has recently conveyed that, while Australia should always advance its values, it will not frame its foreign policy around a contest between democracy and autocracy. The country would focus instead on an alignment of interests and the potential for positive outcomes stemming from engagement with different countries in the region regardless of political systems. By leveraging windows of opportunity in these countries to help bring or expand democracy-driven benefits in the region, Australia can maximize the success of its strategy. Overwhelming evidence now indicates that democratic countries tend to present better economic indices (e.g., Acemoglu et al., 2019; Knutsen, 2020); to better deliver public goods, such as access to safe water (Lake and Baum, 2001) and electricity (Boräng et al., 2016); and to better curb corruption (McMann et al., 2020). All of this is in addition to the well-known correlations between democratic systems and peace and security (e.g., Altman et al., 2020). Thus, while democratic advancement should not be a pre-condition to development assistance, Australian efforts to support better quality of life (including for minority groups) are best secured and sustained through complementary investment in the health of democratic systems. While not refraining from engaging with non-democratic actors, Australia should play an even more active role in promoting democratic norms in the region and advancing progress on issues such as **electoral integrity assurance, digital**



disinformation resilience, inclusion, anticorruption, and support for pro-democracy civil society groups and independent media.

Another major problem the world is currently facing is the ***cooption of democratic institutions*** and the ***spread of electoral denialism***. According to the [Varieties of Democracy's \(V-Dem\) 2022 report](#), governments blatantly undermined the autonomy of electoral management bodies (EMBs) in 25 countries over the past ten years. Government officials are solely responsible for appointment processes and EMB mandates but by trying to undermine their independence by, for example, making biased appointments or changing their mandate, they have also sowed distrust in electoral processes and unfavorable results among other stakeholders. These patterns might continue in the next years, which means that EMBs will need the support from partners such as DFAT to strengthen their capacity to perform well and transparently, to enhance their strategic communications capabilities, and build resilience against these attacks. The same report shows Malaysia as a positive example of a country that showed improvements in the level of EMB autonomy in the past ten years. Encouraging a deeper understanding of what measures and strategies are working in the region can help inform positive developments in neighboring countries also through regional partnerships and networks. EMB autonomy is just one of the many factors that can contribute to strong electoral processes and help curb the [crisis of trust in democracy](#). In addition to trusting democratic institutions, citizens want to trust the officials they are electing and the fairness of procedures through which they are electing these individuals. DFAT can contribute to building this trust by supporting EMBs and other democracy defenders in the region to enhance their performance, increase the transparency of processes, and improve communication and outreach strategies.

Related to the crisis of trust is the ***erosion of information integrity*** and its impact on ***exacerbating political polarization***. Mis and disinformation; algorithms that create echo chambers, elevate diatribe over dialogue, and deepen political divides; and the use of social media and surveillance by autocratic governments all work against information integrity and disrupt democratic processes. While not a new problem, the severity of its impact requires renewed efforts and a commitment from democratic countries to invest in understanding and addressing the phenomenon. DFAT can be at the forefront of these efforts to safeguard information integrity by, for example, supporting media literacy programs, helping actors identify sources of mis and disinformation, and implementing strategies to prevent or limit the spread of malicious narratives.

High levels of corruption, poor governance, and lack of effective accountability mechanisms are also contributing to distrust in democracy's potential to deliver. [Transparency International's 2022 corruption perception index](#) shows concerningly weak scores in some of the world's most populous countries, such as China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Mass movements against corruption have started to erupt in the past years, but so far these have yielded limited results or, worse, were coopted by populist leaders to gain power. Corrupt practices that involve officials abusing their power and diverting public resources for personal gain deteriorate the quality of governance and lead to more citizen dissatisfaction. DFAT can support anticorruption efforts in the region by helping strengthen independent anticorruption institutions and agencies, enhancing accountability mechanisms (both horizontal and vertical), increasing civil society's capacity to conduct effective oversight of government, and facilitating the coordination of anticorruption actors and strategies to maximize impact.

Climate change will also continue to have an impact across different sectors in the next five to ten years, from access to water and food to a country's infrastructure, conflict patterns, and citizens' capacity to exercise their democratic rights. One of the main risks is that climate change-related phenomena can affect large numbers of people at once, making it harder to provide timely and sufficient aid to all affected. But the fact that some of these risks and challenges are predictable represents an opportunity for Australia to invest in climate-resilient and climate-adaptable strategies. These include preparing for the flux of large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, supporting countries to protect their human rights, and enabling their participation in elections. IFES' publication on the [Electoral Rights of Environmentally Displaced Persons](#) offers some strategies to protect IDPs' and refugees' rights.

Barriers to the safe, meaningful, and equal participation of all people in economic, civic, public, and political life are, and will continue to be, a fundamental challenge for DFAT development policy and assistance in the Asia-Pacific region. Women, LGBTQI+ people, persons with disabilities, youth, members of religious and ethnic minorities, Indigenous people, and refugees and IDPs face societal discrimination, violence and exclusion which impacts their ability to participate in electoral and political processes. Gender-based violence, online and off, is a significant barrier to women and LGBTQI+ persons being able to exercise their rights as voters, candidates, and elected leaders. DFAT can help address these barriers to democratic governance by supporting EMBs to develop and adequately fund gender-sensitive electoral policies and processes; implement high-quality and inclusive civic and voter education and engagement campaigns; and ensure all staff and poll workers are trained and equipped to administer inclusive and accessible elections.

With DFAT support, IFES has worked with civil society partners to implement groundbreaking inclusion programming across the region -such as the General Election Network for Disability Access in Southeast Asia ([AGENDA](#)) or women's leadership trainings ([She Leads](#)) including work on social media campaigns to support women candidates who face online abuse. IFES also works with EMBs, other institutional actors and committees to develop gender and inclusion policies and action plans to improve the enabling environment for citizens' participation in civic, political, and public life.

DFAT could also help counter youth disengagement by enfranchising youth, enhancing the skills of youth leaders to advocate for reform, and supporting youth-led initiatives to engage more directly in the national debate, particularly in countries where there are currently not enough channels between democratic institutions and this sector of society.

Importantly, the challenges discussed above are not exhaustive. Threats to democracy – and thus to development, peace, economic prosperity, and overall quality of life – are constant and ever-evolving. As has become increasingly clear, democratic countries can no longer limit themselves to *reacting* when problems arise. They must take a more proactive and preemptive approach, anticipating new challenges and equipping themselves with the strategies, partnerships and institutional leadership and know-how to navigate and overcome them. DFAT can contribute to building such resilience by investing in research to better understand these challenges and leverage data to analyze what strategies are more likely to be effective and in which circumstances. This type of investment should contribute to optimizing development aid more broadly.



Question: What development capabilities will Australia need to respond to these challenges?

IFES Response: To respond to these challenges in a timely, effective, and sustainable manner, DFAT should leverage the experience of international and local partners who have a good track record on the ground and the expertise of Australian Embassy staff who have a solid grasp of country contexts and dynamics. While keeping donor collaborations to a reasonable size to remain agile and offer the speed of response required by resilience programming, DFAT should pursue multi-lateral approaches and initiatives with other donors with shared priorities to optimize investments, avoid duplication of efforts, and ensure maximum coverage.

As alluded to in the first question, Australia should invest in research and innovation to design and implement evidence-based approaches for a more effective development assistance. Supporting the capacity of democratic institutions is insufficient without supporting institutional resilience to illiberal actors' attempts to dismantle their role and/or credibility as accountability mechanisms. Regionally, Australia should consider supporting democracy assistance organizations' initiatives to design and test new approaches and to accelerate needed program innovation for strengthening democratic resilience and countering democratic backsliding.

Question: How can Australia best utilize its national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities?

IFES Response: Australia has strong democratic institutions whose experiences and expertise can contribute to the success of regional partners. Australia's own history of credible elections and effective, inclusive electoral operations, for example, can be an asset in supporting elections in the region, replicating good practices and refining approaches to accommodate the unique needs of other countries. Where possible, DFAT should step up as a broker in countries and take the lead in donor coordination.

Australia could also leverage its expertise on gender equality, women's empowerment, cross-cultural sensitivity, and emphasis on Indigenous inclusion and indigenous rights. Given the country's recent experience and efforts to enhance cybersecurity, Australia could play a larger role also in building regional capacity to tackle cyber threats. DFAT should invest in protecting the integrity of political information working with tech and social media giants to coordinate with civil society organizations (CSOs) not just on fact-checking but utilizing their platforms effectively, creating attractive content to educate citizens to be discerning users of digital media, and emphasizing why democracy is important to protect freedoms and ensure more transparent and accountable governance across the region and globally.

Question: How should the new policy reflect the Government's commitment to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region, founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality?

IFES Response: DFAT should strengthen both its *regional and bilateral partnerships* as well as its work with *civil society communities of practice*. The DFAT-funded Disability Rights in ASEAN project, supporting the work of AGENDA (a regional association of organizations of persons with disabilities in ASEAN), is a good example of building a regional network of organizations of persons with disabilities and linking it to more formal bodies like ASEAN to push for and help enable government commitments to reform. Australia should look at



forming more bottom-up regional networks to constructively engage and influence regional organizations' policy priorities and frameworks. This regional progress can, in turn, increase the political will and opportunities for successful policy advocacy at the national level. This approach could be extended to other rightsholder groups such as youth and Indigenous Peoples, as well as networks comprising civil society groups with a common agenda in democracy-strengthening thematic areas such as anticorruption.

At the civil society level, **communities of practice** (or of listening) can be developed with Australian support, nationally and regionally, to engage both international implementers as well as local CSOs, which root solution development in local experience and trial and error. This can also support do-no-harm development policies. As we watch so many countries face democratic backsliding where local CSOs and activists often take the brunt of the crackdown, ensuring project activities are genuinely rooted in local interests and that there is a clear understanding of risks involved (especially for youth), can be managed through such communities and practice. This can also serve to build trust and shared values.

Question: 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?

IFES Response: To ensure higher effectiveness of delivery systems, particularly regarding democracy and governance, development support programs should be informed by systems thinking, political and contextual analysis, and a thorough understanding of stakeholder incentives and disincentives to support democratic reform and advancement. Analyses should examine deeply embedded foundational factors of the socio-political and economic landscape; rules and norms that shape actors' incentives, behavior and capacity for collective action; and current events that might create new opportunities or introduce new barriers to action and enable the flexibility required to seize upon changes in the operating environment. Development assistance programs should take into consideration the interplay of these factors and its implications for adjusting approaches to achieve impact. To effectively leverage these insights, Australia should aim to structure its democracy and governance assistance with the flexibility required by partners to quickly act upon changes in the operating environment.

DFAT should utilize evidence-based data from Australian government and academic sources to inform adaptive management approaches and link good global practice and regular assessments of political economy, security, and context. Incorporating lessons learned from the past few years on how programs in challenging contexts managed to pivot effectively to meet new demands could also be useful.