



PACIFIC ISLANDS COUNCIL QLD INC

This submission is the collective voice of the Pacific diaspora communities living in Qld who recognise and appreciate the mammoth contributions that Australia has made to the Pacific Islands sovereign states and region. Pacific Islands Council of Qld (PICQ) has also contributed to the joint submission by the partners of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Community Connections Program which was focused specifically on PALM.

PICQ is a mandated voice for all Pacific Islanders and communities in Qld. As a voice, it contributes to calls of submissions by governments (state & federal), provides opportunities for communities to access government funding, facilitates development of key initiatives that are relevant to Pacific Islands communities and advocates for communities and peoples on issues that affect them. PICQ is also a representative for Australian Pacific Diaspora in the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) civil society organisations (CSO)/ non state actors forum and dialogues¹. PICQ has been involved and included in discussions and dialogues with civil society organisations and non-state actors in the Pacific region as facilitated by PIFS since 2018. A significant part of 2021-2022 CSO dialogues was spent on the contributions of civil society and non-state actors in PIFS 2050 Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent².

From the outset, the Qld Pacific Diaspora communities supports the efforts of the Albanese Labour government in deepening relations with the Pacific region. Deepening relations (apart from the aid located) needs to focus on mending and strengthening relations and allowing Pacific nations decide what is best for them and tailoring Australian international development policies to meet the needs of our neighbours. This submission will centre around the questions provided in the guidelines.

The key trends and challenges include i) Climate Change (Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Change Action Now)³; ii) presence of countries like China in the Pacific Island nations harnessing a reliance on the vulnerabilities of island nations; iii) greater movement of Pacific labour to Australia to fill the labour demand in Australia and the associated brain drain or work force shortage in Pacific island nations; iv) Pacific Islands increasing debts that forces these countries to rely on rich nations whose idea of international development assistance are a form of loans to countries; v) Australian international aid is dictated by what we think is best for our Asia-Pacific region⁴.

1. <https://www.forumsec.org/civil-society-4/>

2. <https://www.forumsec.org/2050strategy/>

3. <https://www.forumsec.org/pacific-will-hold-collective-solidarity-towards-a-1-5-oceans-climate-future-closing-statement-kainaki-to-cop26-high-level-roundtable/>

The risks in Australia continuing to operate as it has been in the last decade may result in Pacific nations seeking aid support from countries like China⁴. Climate Change is an



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existential risk for our Pacific neighbours. Points ii, iv, and v are risks that need to be managed well through policies that can assist the Asia-Pacific region with better involvement of the governments and Civil Societies working alongside each other. There are opportunities for Australia to create meaningful partnerships in the design (and co-design) of developmental programs which should involve qualified Australian Asia-Pacific diaspora people who can provide greater knowledge of how engagement should take place. There are also opportunities through the Pacific Engagement Visa category which focuses on PALM schemes. The Qld Pacific leaders have recommended that the Pacific Engagement Visa be open to any Pacific Islander wishing to visit Australia. There are opportunities in the Pacific Engagement Visa for expansion to allow any Pacific Islander wishing to visit Australia to travel without a visa, similar arrangement that New Zealand has with Australia. This conversation needs to take place sooner than later as there may also be a need to take in Pacific Islanders affected by climate catastrophe. When Pacific Islanders are provided the opportunities to travel freely to Australia and for some, New Zealand, there is greater trust and better interdependence that can be had.

This review will highlight what has and hasn't worked in the Asia-Pacific region. It is also important that the review carry out a mapping of Australia international development programs for the Asia-Pacific region and to engage the respective governments and civil societies in the region. The mapping will give a better understanding of how Australia aid works (or not) in the respective countries. An important capability development is in strengthening of civil society organisations and groups in the Pacific region who are the development partners or end users of Australia's aid. In addition, there is a need to develop the capabilities and infrastructure of Australian and Pacific departments that are tasked to manage and monitor programs. For example, PALM domestic operations is the responsibility of Dept. Employment and Work Relations (DEWR) which needs to be better equipped with staff and the expertise to deal with Pacific workers. The Dept. of Home Affairs (Immigration Dept) will also need some capabilities development to enable it to function well with the growing numbers of visa applications in light of PALM. Some Pacific nations get their Australian visa processed in another country like Fiji. Australia needs to look at better, low cost-effective ways for applicants who live in 3rd world Pacific countries. Australia's operating systems for immigration in the Pacific need to be reviewed. This is an important aspect of engaging with our Pacific neighbours.

Australia has a growing multicultural society where the Asian-Pacific diaspora population are of some significant numbers. It is imperative that Australia utilises the Asia-Pacific diaspora communities and individuals in its international development programs in these regions.

[4.https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australias-confused-approach-to-engagement-with-the-pacific/](https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australias-confused-approach-to-engagement-with-the-pacific/)



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The last decade has seen development programs designed, managed, and implemented in the Pacific with little or no involvement of Australian diaspora Pacific Islanders. In addition, Australia established the Pacific office and ethnic councils through DFAT with little or no designated consultative body for the Pacific. DFAT has informed PICQ that there are existing consultative groups already for the Pacific, namely, Pacific Church Leaders Program, PALM Advisory group and etc. For better coordination and meaningful engagement in the Pacific region, it is imperative that DFAT establishes a Pacific Council like that of the Australia-ASEAN Council. The Pacific Council could be responsible for advising Government of the mechanisms for engagement and other tasks that the current consultative mechanisms, do not cover.

The new policy will need to focus on: I) By building meaningful relationships, understanding that each country in the region has its own way of dealing with its issues (there are cultural differences so it is important to build relations with each country – this is where the Australian Asian and Pacific Diaspora from those countries should be involved in initiatives in their countries of origin), and utilising Australia's strengths to support countries in humanitarian assistance. II) Australia's new policy should refrain from colonialist mindset where the thinking and implementation needs to shift from a colonialist mentality to one that strengthens meaningful engagement with regional partners. It is vital that those involved in the role out of such policy in the region should include Australian Asia-Pacific diaspora peoples who can provide deeper relationship building rather than the superficial ones built in the past. III) It is important that when the new policy is implemented, organisational structure in DFAT will need to change to show the people of Australia that it is making the necessary mindset changes that includes having a lot more qualified Australian Asia-Pacific Diaspora peoples working in DFAT and more importantly in Assistant Secretaries positions. There should be at least 1 (through merit) person of the Asia Pacific in these most senior positions. In addition, the Pacific Office in DFAT needs to be led by someone (through merit) who is of Pacific heritage. IV) The new policy also needs to have better processes for DFAT to coordinate, monitor and review international development programs in the Pacific region. There also needs to be better mechanisms for opportunities for local Asia-Pacific diaspora communities to partner with international NGOs who have the organisational infrastructure.

Lessons from Australia's past development efforts: Firstly, Australia needs to refrain and stop operating as a colonialist nation especially with Pacific Island nations. There needs to be a mindset shift in dealing with the Asia-Pacific region. Pacific nations have always been treated by Australia as the smaller and poorer cousins/ family members in the region. This is reflected in the development and implementation of programs where too often only Australians (Caucasian) are good enough to manage and run the Australian funded



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programs in Pacific Island countries (comments from Pacific Islanders in the region). The question is, why does Australia often recruit only Australians (Caucasians) for the job? Past mistakes in development programs have shown that in most international development programs funded by Australia in the Pacific, the program team leader or manager is always a white person who quite often was recruited through connections with DFAT (comments from Pacific Islanders in the region). Australia needs to bring into these programs people of the same heritage of the target countries or those from the same region qualified to carry out the task. Also, successful development has been through Australia partnering with its regional counterparts to develop and co-design development for their respective countries. Australia has success in providing humanitarian assistance in natural disasters in a timely manner. That shows the abilities that Australia has in helping the Asia-Pacific nations in their time of need. It is also important to note that the Australian Defence Force have also recruited people from our Pacific Diaspora. That move by Australia Defence is welcomed by our leaders and people.

ODA programs don't normally have the same monitoring and review requirements as the non-ODA programs. The new policy needs to include processes that address greater accountability and transparency for ODA programs. In addition, there needs to be better monitoring mechanisms for ODA programs involving human resources and mechanisms in protecting the target users and stakeholders. For example, the PALM program has highlighted the need for annual independent review of the program to identify the gaps that need to be addressed and more importantly protect the workers that are vulnerable to exploitation of employers that recruit them. When an ODA program allows the continuous breach in worker relations and human rights mechanisms for economic wins of trading partners, therein, lies the lack of accountability and transparency for such programs. Better independent monitoring and review of ODA programs is needed and that a separate body such as the External Advisory Group, be responsible for identifying the reviewers. Also, the same Department should not be allowed to review its own programs.