

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade development of a new policy to guide our international development cooperation

Submission from **Richard Mathews, former Consul-General Makassar.**

## Background

I am a former Australian diplomat, having served thirty years in Canberra and various locations overseas. My final posting was as Australia's first Consul-General in Makassar, eastern Indonesia (2016-2020).

I am concerned about the effects of climate change on future generations and future life on this planet. In September 2021 I established Diplomats for Climate Action Now to lobby for a stronger Australian position on climate change in advance of COP26 in Glasgow<sup>1</sup>. In December 2021 our group published a proposal for a Climate Focused-Foreign Policy for Australia, as a full-page advertisement in The Australian newspaper, and signed by over 100 former Ambassadors, High Commissioners, Consuls-General, Consuls, other diplomats and foreign, trade and development policy officers.

Because of the short time frame available for submissions, I have decided to submit a **personal submission**. This submission does not necessarily reflect the views of all members of Diplomats for Climate Action Now. (The general views of our members on climate change and foreign policy can be found on our website:

[https://www.diplomatsforclimate.org/a\\_climate\\_focused\\_foreign\\_policy\\_for\\_australia](https://www.diplomatsforclimate.org/a_climate_focused_foreign_policy_for_australia)).

Since the May 2022 election, I have been pleased to see the positive actions that the new Australian government has taken on climate change and the environment.

But the urgency of acting on climate-change has not diminished, nor has the need for a more nuanced and targeted Australian foreign policy framework which puts climate change front and centre of our international development cooperation programs and national security interests.

## Recommendation: Australia's international development programs should prioritise supporting partners to decarbonise their economies and adapt to climate change.

Climate change poses an existential threat to humanity, a threat that ignores borders and which requires deep and urgent international collaboration to resolve.

Despite the commitment of the new government to treat climate change seriously and to act on it, we are still not treating the issue as an urgent existential threat. We are not moving fast enough to reduce our CO2 and other GHG emissions: for example, in FY 2021-22 Australia provided more in subsidies to the fossil fuel sector than it spent on public education<sup>2</sup> and the new government has yet to change this. We are not moving fast enough to transition our economies away from fossil fuels to renewables; and we are not doing enough to support our regional partners to transition their economies and adapt to the ravages of climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.diplomatsforclimate.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/australian-fossil-fuel-subsidies-surge-to-11-6-billion-in-2021-22/#:~:text=Fossil%20fuel%20subsidies%20cost%20Australians,to%20new%20Australia%20Institute%20research.>

The recent IPCC WGII report noted in its chapter on Asia that: “Overall, the fundamental challenges that Asia will see exacerbated under climate change are around water and food insecurity, poverty and inequality, and increased frequency and severity of extreme events.”<sup>3</sup>

Extreme weather events across our region are increasing. Most Asian coastal cities are facing the threat of long-term, major flooding that will displace millions from their homes. Many of our Pacific Island neighbours are facing the very real threat of disappearing due to sea-level rise. Climate change will increase poverty; and economies which cannot transition rapidly to renewables-based economies and energy systems will face declining standards of living as the cost of fossil fuels increases, and as trading partners penalise producers of inefficient, high CO2 embedded goods.

Conversely, a rapid and efficient transition to a renewables-based economic system will increase energy security and resilience in our regional development partners; provide many new, sustainable jobs; and help reduce CO2 emissions.

If our key development partners are unable to transition their economies to renewables rapidly and efficiently, and if they are unable to adapt to the effects of climate change, then no amount of poverty reduction programming will mitigate the misery that millions of people in our region will face. **Australia’s new international development policy must prioritise supporting our development partners to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, decarbonise their economies and adapt to the threats of climate change.**

With major development partners such as Indonesia, PNG, Timor-Leste and the Pacific, Australia should focus on building new programs that focus on:

- sharing Australian expertise and experience and supporting regional capacity in accelerating and managing the energy transition
- building regional capacity to identify and assist communities most at risk of extreme weather events, and developing strategies to help communities adapt to these risks
- developing collaborative and innovative finance models that will bring together development partners, private sector investors, communities and governments to rapidly accelerate programs to mitigate and adapt to climate change
- supporting efforts to build region-wide programs that will mitigate the worst effects of climate change.

## Recommendation: Enhance Australia’s role in preparedness for and response to increasingly severe climate disasters in our region

In recent years Australia has seen a series of increasingly severe climate change related natural disasters that have caused serious trauma and dislocation to communities. So have many countries in our region: we have recently seen serious flooding in Pakistan and severe landslides across Indonesia resulting in significant loss of life.

Greg Mullins, who heads Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, has recently said that Australia’s professional and volunteer emergency services are inadequately prepared for the severity of future climate-related natural disasters. The emergency services in our regional development partners are likely to be even less prepared for managing serious climate-related disasters.

Our development partners, especially in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, will look to Australia for assistance in the event of major flooding, landslides and forest fires; and most in our

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<sup>3</sup> IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, WGII, chapter 10 Asia, p.78

domestic constituencies would expect us to respond and assist rapidly and generously. But are our humanitarian preparedness and response and recovery programs sufficient to meet these demands? Most Asian coastal cities are facing the threat of long-term, major flooding that will displace millions from their homes. How would Australia respond to a major flooding event that displaced over one million people in an Asian city?

A major disaster of such a huge scale would not only be a humanitarian tragedy, but also could become a national security threat if it were to lead to mass, unregulated population movements. What investments should Australia make now to prepare for a high risk, high impact event such as this?

I would suggest that the review of our new development policy be coordinated with the concurrent **Defence Strategic Review**, with a view to ensuring our national HADR capabilities are fit for future purpose.

### **Recommendation: deepen our engagement with Indonesia on climate change mitigation through the aid program, especially in making the transition to a renewable energy-based economy.**

When I was Consul-General in Makassar we were constrained by the former Australian government's policies in how much effort and funding we could put into working with governments and NGO partners on development assistance programs that contributed towards Indonesia's climate change response. Yet there was and is a huge and growing demand for assistance and cooperation in this area.

Indonesia has made some admirable emissions reduction commitments, the best of which is dependent on receiving sufficient climate finance support. This will change over the next few years: for example, at the recent G20 Summit in Bali, US President Joe Biden and Indonesian President Joko Widodo announced a climate finance deal providing USD20 billion to help Indonesia transition away from dependence on coal power to renewables.

Clearly Australia does not have the financial capability to come anywhere close to that level of assistance for our regional development partners. But we do have much experience in making the energy transition. While the former federal government was reluctant to act on climate, the state governments were building renewable energy zones, private investment was pouring into new renewable energy projects, and private solar rooftop installations grew rapidly across the nation. We also have a growing capability in battery manufacture and developing the resources required for EVs, batteries and renewable energy generation.

Indonesia has very little installed renewable energy, and faces many serious challenges, not least of which is lack of expertise and understanding of renewable energy systems, few incentives for the private sector to mobilise investment in renewable energy, and inadequate legislation and regulation.

These are areas where Australia can assist: we can share our experience of the energy transition and provide niche support where required. We could assist with governance, developing legislation and regulation, mobilising investment, training and educating practitioners (eg electricians) and policy makers, and consulting with communities and civil society.

An appropriate approach for Australia would be to focus its efforts in renewable energy on a specific region or set of provinces. For example, we could propose to Indonesia that we focus our efforts on assisting Bali, Nusa Tenggara Barat and Nusa Tenggara Timur to build

renewable energy zones and make the energy transition. These are the closest provinces to northern Australia, share similar features such as high levels of insolation, and we already have very good links with these provinces. Focusing our efforts on specific regions would have a greater impact.

It would also be important to coordinate our efforts with other donors – eg the US, UK, Germany and other EU countries which are already heavily focused on supporting Indonesia through the energy transition, and in its ambition to become a major battery and EV manufacturing centre.

## Other ideas

(Maybe outside your mandate, but worth throwing into the ring.)

- All officers, prior to being posted overseas, should be required to complete a course or briefings on Australia's climate change policies. If being posted to a developing partner country, they should also understand Australia's development assistance program priorities, including our climate change/renewable energy support programs. This should be for all streams: consular/admin officers at a post can make just as strong a contribution in this field as seasoned policy officers. Good ideas on how to mitigate and adapt to the threat of climate change can come from anyone.
- All overseas posts should explore the possibility of installing solar rooftop and battery systems to reduce GHG emissions from our overseas diplomatic footprint. Posts should also explore the option of replacing the car fleet with electric vehicles. This could be a policy mandated by the foreign minister.

## Conclusion

I wish to reiterate: if our development partners are unable to adapt to the effects of climate change, then no amount of poverty reduction programming will mitigate the misery that millions of people in our region will face. Thus, supporting development partners to decarbonise their economies and adapt to climate change should be a key focus of our new international development policy.

I hope the ideas contained in this submission, poorly expressed as they are, will help in your review of Australia's new international development policy.

Richard Mathews

Canberra, 29 November 2022.