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Submission New International Development Policy

Riverreach Consulting (sole trader company of Frederick Bouckaert, PhD) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in response to Australia's New International Development Policy.

In the next decades to come, water security will become an increasing focus of the Indo-Pacific Region, including Australia, as a result of the amplifying effect climate change will have on droughts and floods, extreme events that can impact in equal measures on water security management for drinking water, sanitation, irrigation, land use and energy.

Australia has started an engagement initiative with Indo-Pacific nations through the establishment of the Australian Water Partnership, connecting demand for integrated water management services with Australian water professional expertise. This knowledge brokering facility linking demand and supply has steadily grown over the last five years or so since its inception.

In addition, DFAT has also started to engage directly with Indo-Pacific partner countries on funding water initiatives as part of its ODA, with an emphasis on targeted assistance that complements efforts from other developing nations. These initiatives are highly commendable and can serve as a template to further build and renew its international development policy.

In particular, assisting in achieving the sustainable development goal SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation will play a key role in progressing towards targets for other interlinked SDG indicators. Not only does Australia have much to offer in terms of our expertise in integrated water resource management, but our country also faces unprecedented challenges that will require equal partnerships where we can learn from our Indo-Pacific neighbours, as well as from our Indigenous Nations.

Water diplomacy is an excellent gateway to build stable, respectful relationships with the countries in our region. It is based on discussing practical challenges of negotiating transboundary resource allocations, and therefore helps to build trust and collaboration

that may over time extend to other geopolitical issues and tensions that require resolution. Many river systems in South Asia and South-East Asia face transboundary issues, and originate in the Hindu-Kush-Himalaya region, sometimes referred to as the 'third' pole because of its significance in generating freshwater resources. Transboundary issues connect countries such as China, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, but also Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar. Island nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, PICS, etc.) may not have transboundary river basin issues, but face different common challenges, such as saltwater intrusion, sea level rise, groundwater contamination and limited supply affecting urbanisation.

Increasingly, natural disasters will affect many of the poor who may be displaced and become climate 'refugees'. This was the key discussion point of COP27 and may require a regional or global disaster funding framework to be established, to tackle problems of disaster repair, displacement, crisis health supply, building back better, sustainable investments and safety nets. These are all issues Australian are experiencing within our internal country boundaries, for which we are aiming to develop sustainable solutions.

Many other countries face similar challenges; bringing our challenges together through diplomatic bilateral and multilateral channels in a setting of mutual respect and understanding will result in regional solutions emerging that can complement and significantly enhance national and subnational policies of each participating country.

Australia is well connected to many international fora regarding governance, financing, NGO and private sector and can capitalise on its renewed diplomatic engagement since the start of the Labor Government six months ago. Much international/regional information exists already that can be used as building blocks to address key challenges. Examples are the UNDP Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index, the UNDP Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2019) and World Bank governance indicators, as well as indicators on water security such as the Asia Water Development Outlook five key dimensions (ADB, 2020) used to profile Indo-Pacific countries for integrated river basin management (Bouckaert and Tilleard, 2021, see Appendix 1). By bring together enabling governance conditions and water security challenges, conditions can be established for making measurable, quantified improvements that can be linked to ODA project initiatives with key performance indicators. The approach can be extended to other development challenges, such as sustainable agriculture, food security, education, etc. For each of those areas the foundation would be to make better use of existing data, information and indicators to set up policy dialogues. An example is the Asia Water Scarcity Program of FAO, which is focussing on real water savings at the river basin and subcatchment scales.

In summary, it is recommended that DFAT would develop a water diplomacy policy, which can be used to:

- Build a regional alliance based on addressing real and urgent water security issues, as part of working towards climate change mitigation
- Build diplomatic trust and long-term relationships, which will assist in dialogues about broader security issues, including with our largest trading partner China.

- Address the issues of disaster management, climate mitigation and adaptation, and contributes to integrating domestic and international water management challenges
- Build on existing data, information and DFAT water initiatives, by establishing a broader framework that can be used to launch the water diplomacy initiative.
- Integrate the government's domestic water commitments (National Water Commission, National Water Grid, 5 pt plan to safeguard the Murray-Darling Basin, and restoration of urban rivers and catchments) with an international, regional policy approach.

I believe that DFAT is already undertaking many initiatives that point in this direction, and I would suggest that DFAT seeks to use an engagement approach with multiple stakeholders from regional countries and from within Australia from the public, private and civic sectors of society. The establishment of an external advisory group would provide an excellent starting point for an engagement strategy where multiple stakeholders can provide input and assist DFAT in implementing a water diploma policy.

Yours sincerely,



Frederick Bouckaert

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Appendix 1: *Readiness indicators can help Indo-Pacific countries plan for water security.*
Alluvium discussion paper.

