

UNICEF submission to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's new International Development Policy

Key trends and challenges in the Indo-Pacific region and globally over the next five to ten years

The following key trends and challenges have been identified by UNICEF country offices and Regional Offices in East Asia and the Pacific and HQ, based on situation analysis, and consultations with governments, partners and young people in the region.

Climate Crisis

The climate crisis is a children's crisis: It is affecting children's survival, wellbeing, learning opportunities, safety and stability. Virtually every child on earth is affected by at least one climate or environmental hazard. One billion children globally are at extremely high risk due to climate change - they face a combination of exposure to extreme hazards, such as droughts, floods and heatwaves, and are least-equipped to deal with the impacts due to a lack of access to key services. Climate change and environmental degradation pose a threat to children's health, nutrition, education, protection, development, and their very survival. The East Asia and Pacific region is the hardest hit region globally to climate and environmental hazards, shocks and stresses. UNICEF's consultations with young people have shown that the climate crisis is the greatest source of concern for children and young people around the world, including in East Asia and the Pacific. **UNICEF encourages Australia to amplify the voices and concerns of children and young people and ensure that national policy decisions and the corresponding global normative framework are responsive to their needs and concerns. We also encourage Australia to ensure that issues such as the climate crisis are not addressed solely from a preparedness and response perspective, but that principles such as rights and equity (including intergenerational justice) are mainstreamed in policy responses.**

Humanitarian crises

A record number of people globally – 235 million – required humanitarian assistance in 2021, a number that is expected to rise to 274 million in 2022. For children, this alarming reality means being malnourished, missing school, lacking clean water to drink or adequate facilities for hygiene and living at risk of violence. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges. Millions of children and families needed humanitarian support to have adequate nutrition, access preventive health care and recover from illness and injury, enjoy an education, cope with displacement and remain safe from the harms and the worst effects of conflict and climate change. **UNICEF encourages Australia not only to continue supporting humanitarian action around the world, but also to provide policy and material support to strengthening programming in the nexus of humanitarian and development action and contributions to peacebuilding and sustaining peace, ideally by ensuring that all Australia's humanitarian support is complemented by action to build systems and capacities, while also addressing underlying issues such as social cohesion within countries and communities.**

Education and the Learning Crisis

The global learning crisis existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and was further exacerbated by it. The focus on foundational learning, as well as integrating mental health and psychosocial wellbeing and climate change adaptation into the education sector, is a global commitment. In low- and middle-income countries, 70% of 10-year-olds are estimated to be in 'learning poverty' and are unable to read and understand a simple text. In East Asia and Pacific, 20% of children, or 80 million, could not be reached by digital and broadcast remote learning during the pandemic. This leads to **deepening a digital divide**

among and within countries where many children lack internet access, devices and adequate digital literacy, and teachers lack the necessary skills to use digital tools. **UNICEF encourages Australia to include Education as a priority in the new development policy, and include focus on (1) innovation, including testing and applying world-class digital learning solutions, (2) improving internet connectivity for every school and community, (3) increasing access to devices for learning, (4) providing affordable content and data, (5) engaging young people as agents of change.**

Setbacks in Early Childhood Development

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a setback on the significant advances made in early childhood development (ECD), resulting in increasing inequalities and threatening the wellbeing, development and learning for children globally, including in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Investment in the early years is more critical now than ever to mitigate the impact of the pandemic across different aspects of child development (from health and nutrition deficits, learning crisis, losses in cognitive and non-cognitive development, to behavioral changes and mental health issues). **UNICEF encourages Australia to prioritize Early Childhood Development in the new development policy, as evidence has shown that these investments represent bigger economic and social returns than any other social policy investment.** Investing in ECD represents a significant opportunity to make major sustainable impacts. Huge gains can be achieved by countries if they invest sufficiently and timely in policies and programmes related to the earlier years, so advocacy from Australia on this to governments in the region could bring about real benefits to children.

Rights and Discrimination

Multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities continue to underpin the rights and development challenges facing children around the world, including in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. This continues to encompass heightened risk of discrimination and neglect related to such factors as disability, racism, xenophobia, sexual orientation and gender identity. UNICEF encourages its partners, to shift towards a transformative, intersectional approach to rights, inequality and discrimination to address their underlying drivers by transforming structures and norms. **UNICEF encourages Australia to join with UNICEF and other agencies in promoting and protecting the full range of rights reflected in the global normative framework, including with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights.**

Disability and Inclusion

Fifteen per cent of the global population are persons with disabilities and they are disproportionately represented amongst the poorest and underserved and are significantly impacted by humanitarian crises. The COVID pandemic has been catastrophic for persons with disabilities. Australia has an opportunity, through development assistance, to support persons with disabilities to recover the access and rights that were lost during the pandemic. Research funded by DFAT found that climate change is amplifying the risks and exclusion of persons with disabilities and creating new risks and barriers in the Pacific. A disability inclusive approach throughout the new development policy and ensuing programmes is needed to safeguard the rights of children with disabilities. **UNICEF welcomes the announcement that the Government of Australia will develop a new disability strategy for the new development programme. For the new policy, UNICEF encourages DFAT to support evidence use and data collection for policy change, towards prioritizing households with disabilities, in social protection programmes and systems.**

Gender Equality

Violence against women and girls is common in the East Asia and Pacific region, particularly in the Pacific, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste where almost half of partnered women have experienced intimate

partner violence in a 12-month period. Harmful attitudes to domestic violence are widespread. In several countries, barriers to women and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights negatively impact their health, wellbeing and bodily autonomy. There are high rates of maternal mortality to adolescent mothers, particularly in Papua New Guinea. In the education sector, girls in the region have higher attendance and completion rates for secondary school in most countries, however girls are twice as likely than boys to be not in education, employment, or training. Child marriage remains common in the region, particularly in the Pacific, Laos and Cambodia. Almost half of girls in Indonesia have been affected by FGM/C. **UNICEF encourages Australia to support multi-sectoral programming to advance the rights and wellbeing of adolescent girls through increased investments to: 1) Promoting girls' health and nutrition, including mental health; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and access to quality menstrual health and hygiene information and services; 2) Advancing girls' right to education and skills, including through skills building, mentoring, and coaching opportunities; and 3) Protecting every girl from violence, exploitation, and abuse and preventing harmful practices.**

Development capabilities Australia will need to respond to these challenges

Ensuring Australia's development programme can draw upon robust internal technical expertise for delivery is a benefit, as well as creating diversified partnerships with a range of local and international institutions, civil society and other technical partners, including multilateral institutions like UNICEF, to assist with robust on-the-ground programme delivery and results attainment. Dedicated technical capacity on gender issues and support to women and girls' led organizations is encouraged. Expertise on disability inclusion within DFAT and partnerships with organisations of persons with disabilities is also encouraged to ensure that persons with disabilities are included in the aid programme and is in line Australia's obligations under the Convention on the *Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

Honouring the commitments made through the Funding Compact is critical, including maintaining core funding at 30% of overall contributions and increasing the level of thematic funding. More funding opportunities and more flexible, diverse modalities for countries and partners to access them; and larger scale and longer-term investments are needed to respond to challenges faced by children. Providing flexible funding facilitates longer-term planning and sustainability, and reduces transaction costs, leaving more resources to achieve results for children. In countries affected by humanitarian crisis, it also allows for a faster, more agile and cost-effective response.

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

Australia is acknowledged within the development sector as being a partner concerned with addressing exclusions and inequities, with a focus on assisting women, people with disabilities and disadvantaged and marginalised people, including ethnic/indigenous minorities. Australia's experience and expertise in these areas means that it is considered a robust technical partner both in terms of thought leadership and sector policy dialogue, knowledge generation and in creating and setting standards with its implementing partners to push the boundaries on addressing a range of gender, equity, disability and social inclusion matters. Australia's strength in this area should be maintained through its new development policy, as addressing rising inequities and exclusions will be critical for the ongoing peace, stability and prosperity of the region. Australia's academic and technical institutions have a strong reputation and networks in the Asia and Pacific region. In view of this, Australia's new development policy should enable an expansion of connections at institutional and individual levels, focused on building human resource capacities, both at national and subnational levels. Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and University of

Melbourne are consistent partners for UNICEF in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region. These are national strengths that can be leveraged to support progress in the region.

How the new policy should reflect the Government's commitment to build partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, founded on mutual trust, respect and shared values of fairness and equality

Australia has a strong comparative advantage of facilitating not only North-South cooperation but also South-South and Pacific-Pacific cooperation in EAP, including brokering non-traditional partnerships. The new policy should emphasize the Government's commitment to building partnerships not only with Australia at the center, but also fostering and facilitating direct cooperation between countries and communities in the region that may not have engaged directly in a significant manner previously, where there may be traditional economic or political barriers.

Building on Australia as a regional leader, Australia's contributions can be strategically positioned not only to fill in gaps in global and regional funding trends, but to remain a vocal advocate for regional needs, speaking for the marginalized; thereby strengthening ties and mutual cooperation between countries in the region.

Australia should prioritize further its partnerships with multilateral partners, like UNICEF, which share Australia's values of fairness and equality. Deepening these kinds of partnerships can allow for greater flexibility when times demand; enhanced capability to pivot programming as significant issues arise (such as the recent experience with COVID-19 response); and would allow for the creation of innovative ways of working (such as through different kinds of financing modalities). Furthermore, multilateral agencies, such as UNICEF, can work effectively, with strong results orientation, in the hardest to reach locations, including conflict affected areas, giving Australia the assurance that the most disadvantaged and marginalised populations are being reached and assisted. UNICEF's presence on the ground throughout the Pacific provides Australia access to our networks to ensure the diverse needs of the Pacific are heard and understood. This includes UNICEF's networks with Pacific Island youth, who have views on the policies that shape their lives and communities. UNICEF's existing infrastructure elevates the voices of young people to policymakers, particularly through our youth digital social monitoring platform, U-Report.

Lessons from Australia's past development efforts

Australia's efficiency and quick action in the COVID-19 pandemic response in the Indo-Pacific region is a good lesson that should inform the country's new development policy. The new development policy should provide a framework that would continue to enable Australia to work in a flexible but purposeful manner, to deliver practical on-the-ground solutions to complex development challenges over sustained and realistic timeframes to enable the realisation of substantive outcomes. In this context, Australia's new development policy should articulate an intention to continue to invest in systems strengthening, building on Australia's past and current experience in this area. Through its past development efforts, Australia had a reputation as an innovator, with a well calibrated approach toward acceptable risk. The need for innovation to reach the most disadvantaged populations has never been greater; and with COVID-19, the opportunities for innovation have never been more present, particularly with respect to digital transformation. Australia's new development policy should feature a strong component dedicated to evidence and knowledge generation. This should include investment in local institutions' capacity to generate evidence and knowledge to respond to the most pressing issues on the ground.

The reduced DFAT workforce has been a challenge as posts do not have the bandwidth to fully engage in the development and management of programmes and has had to defer to some extent to contractors.

Australia's recent reliance on management contractors has created a highly projectized approach that has not been conducive to advancing comprehensive and strategic support, coordination with other partners, government ownership, or the strengthening of systems to sustain over the long term.

Education was not a priority in the last development policy. This was a gap felt very strongly by countries and development partners. UNICEF calls for Australia to include education as a priority in the new development policy. On disability inclusive programming, in 2009, the launch of the Development for All strategy made Australia the first donor country with a standalone strategy on disability inclusive development. Since this time, Australia has been a leader in policy, commitment, and funding to disability inclusion. A third dedicated disability inclusive development policy is very welcome.

Design of performance and delivery systems to promote transparency and accountability, as well as effectiveness and learning in Australia's development assistance

UNICEF recommends Australia's performance framework should include clear intended results linked to the betterment of the situation of children and adolescents. This could be approached by drawing upon the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as an integral part of the framework; which already have a high degree of transparency and accountability attached to them given country-level global reporting requirements and mechanisms. To fully assess the effectiveness of Australia's development assistance, it will be important for the new development policy to include performance measures that combine concrete results indicators and process indicators as systems improvements take time. Additionally, performance measures under the new policy should take into account direct and indirect impacts as well as those results that have been catalysed through Australia's investment. Australia's new development policy performance and delivery systems should be orientated towards better understanding and closer monitoring of the quality and effectiveness of partner country public expenditure, which may take, as a benchmark, the form of public spending that meets the needs of children and other disadvantaged groups. They should promote opportunities for joint monitoring amongst Australia's implementing partners and government partners, enabling key partners to develop greater knowledge of constraints and challenges to implementation, and to identify workable solutions. Taking an open and transparent approach in this way would promote greater mutual accountability in the delivery of Australia's development assistance.

Addressing the role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting the development of regional partner

Global economic recovery from the pandemic involves intensifying inflationary pressures. As a result, governments will face limited fiscal space in 2023 and beyond. In this context, the role of ODA and non-ODA will be important in addressing pressing socio-economic issues. UNICEF encourages Australia to increase the levels of ODA on a consistent basis up to 0.7% and ensure that it is strategically utilized in ways that can lead to leveraging complementary government financial resources, particularly at sub-national level. UNICEF encourages Australia to dedicate 10% of the Education ODA to early childhood education as per the global benchmark. Also, in 2020, less than 0.2% of projects funded by Australian ODA had a major disability focus and UNICEF would like to encourage Australia to promote this to above the international average of near 2%.

More **financing opportunities are needed beyond traditional ODA** grants to expand public-private sector and innovative financing partnerships to make up lost ground on the SDGs and UNICEF will contribute to the development finance review to this end.