

Response to Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Consultation Paper: Performance Benchmarks for Australian Aid

Vision 2020 Australia commends the Australian Government for undertaking this consultation and establishing a system of benchmarks to encourage more diligence around aid evaluation and effectiveness. Vision 2020 Australia on behalf of members, would like to thank the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for this opportunity to provide general comment on this important matter and brief response to selected items of the Consultation Paper.

About Vision 2020 Australia

Established in October 2000, Vision 2020 Australia is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. Vision 2020 Australia is the peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, leading advocacy efforts within Australia and globally, and raising community awareness about eye health and vision care. We provide a collaborative platform for our members - representing over 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support.

The global policy and programming functions of Vision 2020 Australia are led by the Global Committee and Global Consortium respectively. The Global Committee, made up of member organisations committed to eliminating avoidable blindness and reducing the impact of vision loss in developing countries, combines the expertise from across the sector in advocacy and awareness raising efforts. The Global Consortium, a partnership of seven Australian eye health and vision care organisations, is the programming arm of Vision 2020 Australia which is currently delivering programs under the Australian Government's East Asia Avoidable Blindness Initiative.

General comments

Given the paramount importance of both the Department and program implementers to have a clear mutual understanding of expectations and obligations, it is essential that Government allocates sufficient time and resources to this process to ensure it is undertaken effectively and with appropriate dialogue with the aid and development sector. It is our principal recommendation that should new benchmarks be introduced in the 2014-2015 Federal Budget, that every effort be made to ensure these are well understood by all affected prior to the implementation of programs.

Recommendation 1

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that Government allocate sufficient time and resources to the development of effective benchmarks in collaboration with the aid and development sector.

Support for ACFID's report on benchmarks

As you are aware, the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), of which Vision 2020 Australia is a Code Signatory and Affiliate Member, has released a paper addressing the development of benchmarks titled, *Benchmarks for an Effective and Accountable Australian Aid Program*. Vision 2020 Australia supports this paper, and supports the development of performance benchmarks to ensure effective and efficient outcomes for all aspects of the aid program.

Recommendation 2

Vision 2020 Australia supports the performance benchmarks as recommended by ACFID in their report '*Benchmarks for an Effective and Accountable Australian Aid Program*' and we recommend that DFAT consider these recommendations going forward.

In addition to these general comments, Vision 2020 Australia makes four further recommendations in direct response to the Department's consultation paper.

Performance Benchmarks: How should performance of the aid program be defined and assessed?

- Vision 2020 Australia and members believe that it is important that benchmarking takes place at a whole-of-aid level, spanning from governments to non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Consideration should be given to those mechanisms already in place and also to who will have the main responsibility for providing the information to be assessed. At lower levels where the reporting onus will be borne by NGOs, requirements may substantially increase the work burden for project design, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and ultimately affect budget. Therefore, M&E budgets will need to be revised. Furthermore, it should be noted that short term funding cycles and projects do not allow for effective programming, and bringing in the additional need to manage benchmarking will be quite onerous.
- The whole-of-aid level approach to benchmarking will also act as a safeguard against situations where a project may be considered 'poor performing' in one country, but not necessarily so in another country or context, as it will provide individual benchmarks across all levels of the aid program. This will avoid the cancellation of projects, particularly in fragile and complex environments, that may lead to an unfavourable situation where agencies avoid taking on tougher assignments and countries in most need miss out on receiving assistance.
- It must be noted that poverty is multi-dimensional and involves access to education, employment, clean water and sanitation, and access to services - it is not just monetary. Therefore, pathways to overcome poverty are about overcoming inequality generally, not just about realising economic development as this does not necessarily lead to poverty reduction.

Recommendation 3

- Vision 2020 Australia recommends that the development of benchmarks be considered from a whole-of-aid perspective, is cognisant of existing budgetary, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and mindful of differing geographic, cultural, thematic and program conditions.

Budget Consequences: How could performance be linked to the aid budget?

- Linking predefined performance benchmarks to the aid budget may, as an unintended consequence, lead to the de-prioritisation of program areas where some funding recipients are (negatively) impacted by the (poor) performance of others. This could also lead to programming in much needed areas declining due to a perceived inability to meet targets.
- NGOs and other funding recipients will be more likely to use aid and development funds for safe projects that have low risk and offer quick wins, rather than long term development and sustainability. Cancelling and discouraging programs, projects, organisations and/or countries that are underperforming may not lead to good development practices. Aid and development are implemented in regions and countries with fragile environments. Often those in most need require the most support and long term capacity building to realise long term benefits. In such regions and countries, quick wins are ineffective. The Government should be encouraging transparency and publicise lessons learnt - whether good or bad as this will allow others to learn and not make the same mistakes.
- Finally, the Government should encourage innovation and pilot projects. Only funding and incentivising programs and projects that do well will negatively affect innovation as funding recipients look to more safe options.

Recommendation 4

- Vision 2020 Australia recommends that the development of benchmarks does not prioritise quick wins at the expense of long term development and sustainability that are often required in fragile environments, as this will affect program effectiveness, transparency and project innovation.

Improving Implementing Partner Performance: How can the assessment of the performance of our implementing partners be improved?

- While projects that are achieving the best results may provide great opportunities to be scaled up and may indicate effective implementing partners where funding can be securely directed to, such projects could also provide an opportunity for aid and NGO dependence to be transitioned out of a country. For example, if eye health and vision care services are integrated into the broader national health framework of a recipient country and is supported by local government, the need for international NGO assistance is dramatically reduced. The funds originally used to support that project could be rolled out elsewhere, rather than countering local ownership and perpetuating aid dependence.
- The existing systems used to assess the performance of the aid program's implementing partners requires revision, and should include the review of ANCP funding to be more inclusive and accessible to meet and uphold the whole-of-aid objectives.

Recommendation 5

- Vision 2020 Australia recommends that while the most effective implementing partners should be recognised for their work, consideration should be given to whether effective programs provide an opportunity for aid and NGO dependence to be transitioned out of a country and the funds rolled out elsewhere.

Recommendation 6

- Vision 2020 Australia recommends the review of performance assessment mechanisms for implementing partners, including the review of ANCP funding to ensure the access criteria is appropriate to meet the whole-of-aid objectives.

Conclusion

Vision 2020 Australia supports the establishment of clear performance benchmarks at a whole-of-aid level to encourage and strengthen a culture of aid evaluation and effectiveness. We further caution against shifting the pendulum too far towards counting numbers and activities as a measure of success.

We would be pleased to discuss any aspect of this submission in more detail should it be required.

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