

AUSTRALIA'S AID PROGRAM

Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry

This submission has been prepared by the Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee (QPLC) in consultation with Quaker Service Australia (QSA). It reflects the longstanding commitment of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) to peace and justice. QPLC is the national peace group for Australian Quakers, and QSA is the development agency which focuses on overseas aid and support for Indigenous communities.

The submission includes an overview of our approach to aid and development, and then a series of specific responses to the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

Overview

1. We see the role of Australia in foreign policy as giving priority to removing the causes of war through nonviolent action for peace and justice, strengthening the rule of law and democracy, and using the skills and experience of Australians in building the structures of peace and conflict resolution, especially in our region. This involves enhancing the existing processes for international cooperation (especially the United Nations), working for fairer trade, increasing aid, strengthening communities, and supporting peace research, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.
2. There appears to be an over-emphasis on military security threats in the current Australian foreign policy, to the detriment of diplomatic and non-military responses. This tends to emphasise military action by Australia as part of the American Alliance, leading to engagement in overseas wars, and does not give sufficient attention and resources to the factors that generate military threats. Examples are the dire treatment of asylum seekers in defiance of the refugee convention, the refusal to support a nuclear weapons ban treaty that might contribute to a safer world, the expansion of arms production and export in contrast to official support for arms trade treaties, and the reduction in

aid funding that undermines the commitment to empower women and reduce poverty in a multi-faceted approach.

3. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 at the United Nations, and supported by Australia, give a comprehensive framework for aid policies, yet receive insufficient promotion by the Australian Government within the wider community. There needs to be greater focus on how Australia's aid policies relate to the SDGs and what measures are being used to monitor our national response to them – by government, business and civil society. Rather than asking other countries to increase their aid in the Indo-Pacific, we should be working harder to ensure that our policies contribute more to the building of a peaceful region. The reduction of poverty and promoting sustainability and the SDGs are complementary, and are closely related to not only our interests in regional security but also to our commitment and responsibilities as a recently-elected member of the UN Human Rights Council.
4. The decline in the level of official aid given by Australia to its lowest point ever in relation to GDP indicates how far we have lost ground in matching our performance with our rhetoric on poverty reduction, empowerment of women, environmental protection, conflict resolution, strengthening international law, and encouraging our neighbours to build resilience in their societies and economies. The time has come for a significant reversal of this trend if we as a country are to rebuild our reputation as a good international citizen in our region.
5. Above all, the current situation reflects poorly on the heritage of the substantial role Australia and Australians have had in building the international system, especially the United Nations and its agencies. Our people have been committed to reaching beyond our shores in constructive ways to engage with other peoples and countries in achieving development, justice and peace. Our values of freedom, respect, equality and democracy give us a strong basis for further peace-driven work in removing the threats that face our region.
6. Australian government aid policy needs to be geared to building trust in the region that our commitment is ongoing. This implies that our program is more long-term in focus, more comprehensive in its concept of development, more transparent and accountable, more attuned to poverty alleviation, cautious of trade-aid links, and based on best practice as regards innovation and sustainability.

Comments on Terms of Reference

Terms of reference

The Committee shall inquire into the implementation and efficacy of:

- increased private sector and trade development outcomes;

There is a concern about the lack of transparency and accountability related to private sector and trade spending and initiatives and who it ultimately benefits. Linking development and trade often assumes an outdated and unsubstantiated theory of 'trickle-down' economics that has not proven to benefit a large number of people let alone in comparison to rights-based development programs, thereby affecting the overall value for money.

Private sector and trade development may exacerbate the income divide in the developing country unless issues of distribution and inequality are considered.

- increased emphasis on outcomes for women and girls; and

The emphasis is encouraged but requires more than tokenistic and piecemeal efforts in order to realise significant and sustainable progress. Notwithstanding, these TOR imply that certain issues are not featuring in Australia's aid program, such as human rights and specifically child protection issues.

- innovation in Australia's aid program.

Encouragement for innovation is a good initiative but should not be pursued at the expense of best practice and other approaches. Also innovation does need to be clearly defined to enable it to become a useful and key component rather than 'anything we have not thought of'.

This follows the introduction of Australia's aid policy *Australian aid: promoting prosperity, reducing poverty, enhancing stability* and the aid performance framework, *Making Performance Count: enhancing the accountability and effectiveness of Australian aid* in 2014.

The Committee will have specific regard to the role, implementation, efficacy, impact, outcomes and/or evaluation of:

- Australia's aid program in terms of strategic and development goals;

In effect, this suggests that only SDG numbers 8 and 9 are the only ones to feature in Australia's aid program which we would hope was more encompassing. Certainly other features such as environmental and climate change issues and child protection could be considered as appropriate lenses through which the economic aspects could be viewed.

- the role Australia's aid program plays in building influence as a trusted development partner;

Australia's government budget and abrupt changes to program resulting in unplanned halting of

development support creates an opinion outside of Australia that it is not trustworthy, is not invested in sustainability or interested in long term support. It demonstrates a weakness in government and government policy being subject to short-sightedness and the political cycle to the exclusion of everything else.

- Australia's aid program in fostering confidence, stability, sustainability, capacity, community-determined goals and best outcomes, particularly by utilising local procurement and smaller/local entities;

Sustainability of development programs are not feasible with aggregate economic growth as the sole pivotal focus. A broader and more inclusive concept of development is required for the achievement of stability and sustainability. A private sector orientation has significant potential to conflict with community-determined goals and local capacity-building and procurement.

- innovation in Australia's aid program through the innovationXchange;
- the Aid for Trade program, including a re-examination of the target percentage;

This raises huge issues regarding transparency and accountability, and has the potential to distort program design to achieve the politically desired outcomes rather than addressing the specific and expressed needs of the community.

- the role and integration of cooperation chapters in free trade agreements;
- increasing the participation and engagement of women in private sector development opportunities;
- business partnerships, social enterprise and community investment in delivering development outcomes, with a focus on local entities; and

Regional security and programs in Australia's interests deflect opinion and activity away from poverty alleviation. This has been demonstrated as being in the Australian community's focus with such campaigns as the Make Poverty History and Australian Aid, which are attracting widespread support.

- the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) in delivering development outcomes, particularly with regard to the linkages between food security, biosecurity and national security issues.

ACIAR model appears to be university and research focussed, with an emphasis on manufactured chemical inputs for agriculture which have environmental consequences, and environmental concerns do not feature in these TOR which we consider to be an omission to be corrected and made a more explicit lens for the review.

