

RESPONSE TO CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS ON AUSTRALIA'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

AVI welcomes this opportunity to contribute to shaping Australia's new international development policy. This submission reflects AVI's long engagement in the Asia Pacific region and builds on our [response to DFAT's review of Australia's soft power strengths and capabilities](#).

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Australia and the Asia Pacific region face two sets of interlinked challenges. On the one hand, many countries in our region face ongoing development challenges: slowing economic growth, unequal distribution of wealth, poor access to health, education and other services, and inequality between women and men. These challenges are exacerbated by conflict and the impacts of climate change.

Recent times have also seen the emergence of ideological challenges: rising nationalism, polarisation within and between societies, and challenges to rights and freedoms and to international principles. These pose significant risks for the political and economic stability of our region, and in turn for Australia's own economic prosperity. These challenges also risk undermining the openness, inclusiveness and democracy.

Addressing these challenges effectively means that Australia needs to continue to increase its focus on the way it engages with other countries and with the people of Australia. We need to develop new, deeper and long-term respectful relationships, based on social, cultural and economic ties and on a more collaborative approach to addressing shared challenges.

This is distinct from the kinds of relationships which many Australian agencies and organisations currently have with counterparts in the region, which are often based on aid or charity, paternalism, or the transfer of resources.¹ This approach is out of step with the changing strategic, political and economic order, and with how those countries want to engage with us.

Moreover, despite many decades of investment, this approach has had limited impact on social and economic development and on effective governance. Short-term projects come and go, their objectives and activities largely imposed on other countries, often without recognising and building on past evidence.²

There is also a widespread lack of understanding among Australians about the aid we provide. The [2018 Lowy Institute Poll](#) found that the average Australian believes we invest about 14% of the federal budget on foreign aid. In reality, aid expenditure is around 0.8%. Based on this misperception, almost half of Australians think we should [decrease our spending on foreign aid](#). Despite this, a majority (70%) say that giving foreign aid helps our relationships with other countries.

The new development policy presents an opportunity to put in place the foundations for a different and more effective way of working, based on a renewed emphasis on people to people links. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate the value and importance of our international development efforts.

WHAT IS RESPONQUIRED FOR A NEW DEVELOPMENT POLICY?

AVI's experience over almost 70 years of deep engagement in the Asia Pacific region has reinforced our view that strong, mature partnerships based on trust and respect between nations are built on relationships between people. Australia's 2017 [Foreign Policy White Paper](#) also recognises the importance of people-to-people links in underpinning bilateral relationships.

¹ Rosalind Eyben (2010) Hiding relations: The irony of 'effective aid', *European Journal of Development Research*, 22: 382–397.

² Marcus Cox & Gemma Norrington-Davies (2019) *Technical assistance: New thinking on an old problem*, Agulhas Applied Knowledge and The Open Society Foundations. See also Rebecca Simpson (2013) Does technical assistance need a makeover? *The Guardian* (20 June), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/jun/19/technical-assistance-government-public-sector>

AVI's people-centred approach recognises that organisations, governments, businesses, and communities are made up of individuals and that these individuals shape the societies in which they live. This includes whether women and girls have equal opportunities, how governments engage with their citizens, or how communities address conflict. Progressive change necessitates changes in how individuals see the world, how they see others and how they behave.

Australian agencies often work through national governments, seeking to influence change through support to politicians and the bureaucracy. As Alan Gyngell has [recently noted](#), personal interaction between senior leaders in our region has historically been a key driver of change. This is reflected in the Australian government's focus on overseas visits over the last year, including by the Prime Minister and senior Ministers.

However, our experience – and evidence from across the world - suggests that senior leaders and governments are only one driver of change. Multiple relationships between different people and across formal and informal institutions (churches, businesses, women's groups, sports organisations and others) are required to build networks and momentum for social and economic change.³ Moreover, the quality and character of those relationships is crucial, as are the attitudes and approaches brought to them. Too many interactions are still based on a one-way transaction that leaves little afterwards.

A people-centred approach is therefore a strategic response to both the foreign policy and development challenges that Australia and the Asia Pacific region face. This is because:

- It is effective. Individual relationships and exchanges are the building blocks of the coalitions, networks and alliances which have historically driven change in our region, and which will be required to address the complex challenges we face. For example, AVI's long-term engagement with the Bougainville Women's Federation has supported women leaders to form a collective voice to address the social and development issues facing the region. As a result, women leaders have played an important role in the peace process.
- It promotes our key values - democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and gender equality – whether this is through exemplifying new norms and challenging people's assumptions and expectations⁴ or through supporting initiatives like [Timor-Leste's Alola Foundation](#) to advocate for the rights of women and children and nurture female leaders.
- It establishes relationships and ways of working which shape broader values and which can address common challenges. For example, working together to find solutions to [environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change](#) in Fiji models the internationalism that Australia wants to promote.
- It can be deployed within and across all sectors: business, government, and civil society.

WHAT HAS AVI LEARNED ABOUT EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT?

There are several important elements to the approach that we propose. These are based on AVI's experience and on international evidence about what makes for effective partnerships and effective development.

Supporting, not driving change

A growing body of evidence suggests that donors and other external actors are most effective when they support locally-owned and locally-led processes of change, rather than seeking to drive change themselves.⁵ This is at the heart of AVI's approach.⁶

³ See for example Centre for the Future State (2010) *An upside-down view of governance*, Institute of Development Studies.

⁴ See for example Benjamin J. Lough & Lenore E. Matthew (2014) *International volunteering and governance*, United Nations Volunteers and International Forum for Volunteering in Development, p. 7-9.

⁵ See for example David Booth & Sue Unsworth (2014) *Politically smart, locally led development*, Discussion Paper, Overseas Development Institute and Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett & Michael Woolcock (2012) *Escaping capability traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)*, Working Paper No. 299, Center for Global Development.

⁶ See AVI (n.d) *Theory of change*, Australian Volunteers International.

'Best practice' solutions are seldom successful when transported into countries with very different social, cultural, economic and political institutions.⁷ Working in genuine partnership means actively listening to what partners want. Many development programs are designed by technical experts and involve only minimal consultation with local partners. These designs impose ideas and rigid plans, leaving limited room for those implementing them on the ground to work with their local counterparts to identify problems to be solved and co-create solutions drawing on their different skills and knowledge. As a result, many programs struggle to generate 'buy-in' from local partners, and to respond and adapt during implementation.

However, while calls for support to locally-led processes of change are growing, there is a dearth of practical advice and support to practitioners and organisations seeking to work in this way. AVI's experience provides rich body of knowledge in this area. Our [Practice Note on Responsible Volunteering for Development](#) documents the lessons we have learned and provides practical guidance for other organisations. This includes with local partner organisations and communities determining their goals and objectives, as well as their skill and knowledge needs to build their capacity.

The quality of relationships matters for effectiveness

A large proportion of Australia's development budget is spent on short-term 'fly-in, fly out' technical advisers. Many of these work in partner government agencies, where their role largely involves providing technical assistance, with some capacity building of peers.

But there is limited attention given to the ability of these advisers to build the kinds of relationships that are fundamental to effective partnerships and sustainable development, and the time and skills that are required to do so.⁸ This often means that technical assistance is not as effective as it should be, with implications for value for money for Australian taxpayers.

AVI believes that effective people to people links require attention to the quality and attributes of relationships.⁹ This includes the interpersonal and communication skills and cultural understanding brought to the interaction. Our experience of effective capacity building – and international evidence – suggests that a range of other competencies are equally if not more important than technical skills: flexibility, cross-cultural sensitivity, communication, self-awareness, problem solving ability, and ability to work with and for the development of others.¹⁰ People with these skills are able to operate in challenging and volatile environments, tailor support in ways which are appropriate to their host organisation, and engage in two-way learning processes, rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge.¹¹ Moreover, by living in the community as their local counterparts do, they are able to develop interpersonal relationships built on mutual trust and respect.¹² It is the quality of their day-to-day interactions with others that enables more strategic relationships to emerge.

Finding people with these skills cannot be left to chance. AVI's experience demonstrates the importance of assessing and developing the necessary interpersonal competencies and skills as a key part of recruitment and

⁷ Matt Andrews (2013) *The limits of institutional reform in development: changing rules for realistic solutions*, Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Niels Keijzer & Piet de Lange (2015) 'Who's in charge here? Interrogating reform resistance in capacity development support', *Capacity Development Beyond Aid*, European Centre for Development Policy Management, p.36.

⁹ See AVI (n.d) *Theory of change*, Australian Volunteers International.

¹⁰ These were found to be key attributes of successful volunteers in the Office of Development Effectiveness' [2014 Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development program](#). See also Anthony Fee, Helena Heizmann & Sidney J. Gray (2017) Towards a theory of effective cross-cultural capacity development: the experiences of Australian international NGO expatriates in Vietnam, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 28:14, 2036-2061 and Ajoy Datta, Louise Shaxson & Arnaldo Pellini (2012) *Capacity, complexity and consulting: lessons from managing capacity development projects*, Working Paper 344, Overseas Development Institute.

¹¹ See Danny Burns, Alexandra Picken, Elizabeth Hacker, Jody Aked, Katie Turner, Simon Lewis, & Erika Lopez Franco (2015) *The role of volunteering in sustainable development*, VSO International and the Institute of Development Studies, p. 27.

¹² See Benjamin J. Lough & Lenore E. Matthew (2014) *International volunteering and governance*, The United Nations Volunteers programme and the International Forum for Volunteering in Development, p. 38-39.

training processes.¹³ It is also critical to support deployees to continue to develop these skills throughout their placement as they learn and adapt to their new environment. Our experience also emphasises the importance of understanding and valuing local culture and context, finding out what matters to local people, and building on local strengths.

Long-term, responsive engagement

The best outcomes are achieved through long-term relationships with people and organisations. Consistent support is important, even if the shape of that support changes over time. Relationships need to be maintained through good and bad times, not defined by project time-frames or funding cycles.

Consistent, long-term support for particular sectors, networks, communities or organisations recognises that development challenges are complex and cannot be solved in the three- to five- year time frames of many development programs.¹⁴ For example, between 2007 and 2014, AVI deployed 10 volunteers to work with local organisations in support of [disability inclusion in Lesotho](#). Disability inclusion is a complex issue, requiring changes in social and cultural attitudes as well as in policy and legislation.

Volunteers worked in a range of organisations within the disability sector: local and international NGOs, government departments and educational institutions. Their roles included developing technical skills and capacity as well as advocacy and organisational strengthening. AVI and its volunteers also helped create links between the partner organisations and with Australian NGOs. This multi-layered, long-term approach meant that the overall impact on the disability movement in Lesotho was worth more than the sum of the individual efforts of volunteers. It has also been more sustainable over the longer-term.

International Australian volunteers

In addition to the over 1,000 participants in the Australian Volunteers Program, 44 ACFID member INGOs deployed another 1,558 volunteers overseas to their development projects¹⁵. Although current data is not available, many more Australians are volunteering overseas.

AVI has led the development of ACFID's Responsible International Volunteering for Development Practice Note¹⁶ and, with funds raised from its supporters, has developed an online tool to enable INGOs to achieve good practice which will be launched in March 2020.

There is a valuable opportunity to harness the life changing experience of Australians volunteering for development overseas (especially on DFAT funded programs or INGOs) in advocating for international development in Australia by joining up to DFAT's successful Returned Australian Volunteer Network (RAVN) which is managed by AVI under the Australian Volunteers Program.

Utilising local expertise

The effectiveness of AVI's model relies on experienced local staff based in the countries where we work. These staff have a deep understanding of the development challenges their countries face, and of their local culture and context. They have built up relationships of mutual respect and trust with local partners over time and are able to navigate the complexities of local systems.

In March 2019, AVI launched **AVI Pacific People**, a recruitment and workforce development business based in Suva, Fiji, working with partners across the Pacific Islands to provide an integrated Pacific-wide service to increase the number of local people in TA and manager roles, including in the development sector.

¹³ See Andrew Hawkins, Emily Verstege and Tania Flood (2013) *Volunteering for international development: approaches and impact*, AusAID.

¹⁴ Ben Ramalingam (2013) *Aid on the edge of chaos*, Oxford University Press

¹⁵ ACFID Annual Survey of Members 2017/18

¹⁶ https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource_document/ACFID%20Practice%20Note-%20Volunteering%20for%20International%20Development.pdf

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR A NEW DEVELOPMENT POLICY?

There is an opportunity for Australia to build more effective relationships in the region through more and better people-to-people initiatives in ways that can enhance development outcomes, diplomatic relationships, economic growth and international cooperation. If this potential is to be realised, AVI proposes that:

1. People-to-people links are embedded in Australia's new development policy as a **cross cutting theme**. This should be done in ways that learn from, and build on, the strengths and weaknesses of DFAT's approaches to gender and disability mainstreaming across the agency.
2. The **effectiveness of people-to-people links and development be improved** through a clearly defined approach that recognises the personal skills and processes necessary for lasting and empowering relationships. This includes appropriate assignment requirements, recruitment, selection, training, support, monitoring and evaluation. These elements should be built into the design of future Australian government development programs and projects, and in particular those using technical assistance as a key element.
3. Australian development programs are designed and implemented in a way that enables partner governments, community organisations and businesses to **determine agendas for change and drive change processes**. This would entail genuine co-design and co-management of programs as well as greater leadership by local staff, with opportunities for professional development where there are gaps in capacity. This will need to be balanced against the risk of displacing the internal capacity of partner organisations.
4. Australian development programs and projects recognise the importance of continuity, long-term relationships and engagement, with **program designs and associated contracts being a minimum of five years**. This will need to be accompanied by a shift away from a focus on short-term, quantifiable results and a recognition that sustainable change is incremental and that the changes it requires are often qualitative.
5. A new **online portal with information, evaluations, resources, and tools**, combined with **communities of practice**, that is already produced by the Australian government's development programs and projects. This online resource can be made available for free and by request to the moderator before joining in a community of practice. This, in turn, builds up a database that DFAT can communicate its messages to in future. With the cycle of programs and projects starting and ceasing, this online resource would provide an enhanced level of continuity and presence for the Australian Government, as well as foster connections and relationships between Australians and in-country practitioners and policy makers. Whilst some oversight is required, AVI's experience is that each community of practice is self-managing and vibrant, with online discussions, requests and offers, information sharing and events organised. In this way, the Australian government ensures continuity and maintains and develops its presence, connections and relationships with its projects and programs adding to the participants and resources.
6. Communication of the ODA be enhanced in Australia with content produced by DFAT highlighting the human interest stories, as occurs with the Australian Volunteer Program and similar to the videos made by UK Aid) and then shared by all INGOs to their supporters. AVI also suggests a new **International Australian of the Year** award be added to the existing Australia Day honours categories, recognising the contribution of Australians to our region.
7. Harness the life changing experience of Australians volunteering for development overseas, including with ACFID members, in advocating for international development in Australia by allowing these volunteers to participate in DFAT's successful **Returned Australian Volunteer Network (RAVN)** which is managed by AVI under the Australian Volunteers Program