

LOOKING FORWARD. UP. OUT: AUSTRALIA'S DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND PROGRAMME IN 2025

LEANNE SMITH

Chief of Policy and Best Practice (on sabbatical)

UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations

Associate Director

The Whitlam Institute

ABSTRACT/OVERVIEW

Coming from the perspective of an expat/outsider returning to the sphere of Australian domestic policy approaches, this contribution might raise more questions than answers about whether Australia is indeed well placed to be 'ahead of the curve' when it comes to how we engage with the world, particularly through our international development agenda. I hope this piece can provide some insight into the relevant global policy shifts of 2015 and 2016 as they relate to development, humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding and women, peace and security. The paper will also seek to draw linkages between international development, aid and broadening the conception of Australia's national interest, and propose some principles for getting to a 2025 vision of Australian international engagement.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT – LESSONS FOR AUSTRALIA

National Governments, regional organisations and multilateral institutions spent much of 2015 and 2016 making concerted efforts to learn lessons and identify methods for improving the way they engage and intervene around the world. These last two years have seen a range of reviews covering almost every aspect of international engagement. In the development context, it was the finalization and launch of the Sustainable Development Goals. In the humanitarian field, the buildup to and outcomes of the World Humanitarian Summit produced a plethora of such lessons and principles for future engagement. In the realm of international peace and security, two reviews were front and centre – the High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) and the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture¹². And relevant to all these sectors was the cross-cutting work done on women, peace and security leading to the Global Study on Security Council Resolution 1325³ and new Resolution 2242.

As a UN Secretariat official working across or alongside all of these processes, I found all of them to be interconnected. Each of these reviews had a similar scope and reflected many of the same drivers for change: frustration with lack of progress and innovation; lack of patience with continuing 'siloed' efforts in each sector and across different bilateral, regional and multilateral actors; pressures on national

¹ www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/16062015/HIPPO-report

² <http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/review2015.shtml>

³ wps.unwomen.org/

governments to show donor effectiveness and a sense of domestic voter donor fatigue; the need (or perceived need) for a new ‘grand bargain’; and a real sense of pressure in each sector that if we can’t do better, get it right, learn the lessons and deliver more effectively, then the time is coming when the whole international engagement system underpinning these efforts will lose all legitimacy and fall apart.

Across these sectors or this spectrum of interventions, from emergency humanitarian intervention to peacebuilding, and articulated in each of the review processes of recent years, a number of hard lessons and common themes were realized. I would categorise the trends into three broad and sometimes overlapping categories of **principles**, **focus areas** and **structures/processes**.

Need for better analysis	Effective partnership – multi, regional, bilateral, local	Enhanced collaboration and complementarity across all sectors	Focus on prevention and sustainability	Human Rights based approach and social inclusion	Measurement, Review and Evaluation
Focus on youth	Increasing Impact of climate change across all sectors	Flexibility in approach	Build on and complement local capacities	Development, Humanitarian aid, Peace and Security and Human Rights are interlinked	Engaging private sector
Transparency and Accountability	Impact of violent extremism (PVE)	Local ownership	Gender equality and Women’s empowerment	Role of Civil Society	More multi-year planning and funding

In terms of now well understood **principles**, the first I would recall is that we recognize that development, human rights and peace and security are not only interlinked but reliant on each other if we are to ensure sustainable peace and prosperity. Secondly, that when we contemplate intervening in one form or another, we must get better at working in partnership, at different levels and in different configurations based on both comparative advantage and mutual understanding. There can no longer be any excuse for not ‘joining the dots’ across different sectors and being cognizant of how they impact on each other. Finally across all the reviews there seems a strong requirement that we work smarter, with better analysis, to anticipate problems before they escalate and to design interventions that can produce sustainable outcomes.

When it comes to **substantive focus areas and themes**, I think one of the first to emerge with strong support across all areas is that taking a human rights-based approach is crucial to long term sustainability – we have to put people, all people, at the centre of our interventions. Hopefully moving beyond the platitudes we have all heard for so long, there is now also a real appreciation that women’s engagement and empowerment is essential to achieving success. Increasingly we see focus on disaffected youth as both a terrible problem of itself as well as a driver of many other problems, including violent extremism. Climate change is prominent across all the reviews as a cause of natural disasters as well as a driver of conflict – and also incredibly difficult to address in forward planning and programming, for reasons too numerous to explore here.

I believe the international community is generally moving away from imposing solutions onto countries and contexts we understand only very superficially – largely as a result of increasing respect and

appreciation for local ownership and knowledge. We are also less inclined to impose 'expertise' or to substitute capacity, seeking instead to avoid the 'brain drain' and local salary distortions that frequently accompany large-scale development interventions. We are learning that we need to operate beyond the nation-state system of engagement, to draw on the comparative strengths of local communities, civil society organisations, regional organisations and others.

Finally, in terms of what we have learned about **structures and processes**, the reviews point to several things. Firstly that expectations for success are much higher and tolerance for failure is running out. Secondly, we need to make our interventions more effective. Third, there is a demand for more predictability in the way we implement and transition our interventions but at the same time we are expected to be using less templated, and more flexible and responsive approaches based on real time and holistic analysis. Fourth, we are and will continue to be asked to measure more – making better use of benchmarks, indicators and evaluation to allow for responsive adaptation and enhanced effectiveness. This will require a skillset that many professionals in these fields of international engagement are not yet equipped with.

Many of these lessons resonate with challenges in the delivery of effective engagement of Australian foreign, defence, development and humanitarian assistance policies, in both our bilateral efforts and our participation in regional and multilateral organisations.

DEVELOPMENT, AID AND AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL INTEREST

I believe Australia desperately needs a more holistic analysis of the contexts for our engagements, relationships and interventions and how they relate to our national interest before determining the ways and means we engage or intervene. In an article I wrote for The Conversation in 2016⁴, I argued that it is important for Australia's international standing, our diplomatic relations and our place in the world that we shift our focus to make Australia less unpredictable in terms of our policies and engagement strategies and also to make Australia less reactive to short-term shocks. To that end, I believe Australia needs a clear bi-partisan vision of its role in the world and a strategic agenda for the long-term national interest.

We need to get better at analyzing what humanitarian assistance and development aid contribute in their own right to diplomacy, trade and security. We should think of what it contributes to diplomacy in contexts where we have no political clout, - look at the impact China's development assistance has made to their trading relations in Africa. And in terms of defence, we should consider how helping to build stable and prosperous nations, particularly in our region, benefits our own security.

I advocated that we need to think about our national interest more broadly, including by linking our purported values to our international positions. A case to consider might be our policy position on asylum seekers butting up against our foreign policy goal of a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. Countries such as New Zealand and the Nordic states provide good examples of better policy cohesion in this regard. It is time we ensured coherence between our political, trade, security, aid, development and

⁴ <https://theconversation.com/australian-foreign-policy-needs-a-broader-conception-of-our-national-interest-62092>

peacebuilding approaches to engagement. Each impacts on the others -- they can conflict or they can enhance each other's effectiveness, especially in country-specific scenarios.

A more holistic approach would of course support more coordinated government approaches to our foreign, security and development policies, but it would also broaden the policy space and take advantage of Australian knowledge and expertise wherever it exists – academia, think tanks, professional associations, NGOs and in regional and international organisations.

How can Australia better marry a values and principled approach with an outcome-driven, efficiency-based approach? Perhaps by focusing more on our core values and strengths, knowing our weaknesses and working in partnership, and based on our own comparative advantage. A longer-term conception of our national interest would see us focus more on what we can contribute to the global good, rather than just on considering what's in it for us. This would mean knowing what we are good at, sharing that knowledge and being more humble in acknowledging that other's experience – different partners, countries and regions – might have something of value to inform our own policy. Of course we need to define our contributions and spend our resources based on where we have the most direct interest and can be most effective but not at the expense of staying engaged globally, in good faith with an eye to the future.

Much has been said, most often critically, of the motivations behind and the state of implementation of the DFAT/AusAID merger. The union has been uneven, is unfinished and doesn't utilize respective comparative advantage to its best potential, including for that more holistic assessment and analysis. However perhaps through the Government's current Foreign Policy White Paper process there is room to generate support for a more genuine partnership that would lead to greater coherence in our international engagement.

A final thought in this regard, and going back to the point made earlier about voter fatigue when it comes to international development, it seems there is still much work to be done in making the case for international development. It is worth considering whether we as a sector are doing enough to show solidarity with the genuine and very real daily struggles of average Australians. It's imperative to recognize that Australians too might have difficulty accessing government services, good education and healthcare, shelter and so on, because this recognition can draw connections and build empathy with those struggling elsewhere. Perhaps we need to think more about how we as a sector make time to connect with such domestic concerns. The Sustainable Development Goals might be one such entry point.

PRINCIPLES FOR GETTING TO 2025: looking forward, up and out

Particularly in the context of the White Paper discussions, this sector needs to have in place some clear principles to underpin our strategic goals for getting to 2025. Here are but three to consider:

LOOKING FORWARD: Let's push for a bipartisan strategy for Australia's engagement with the world, along with a financial commitment for medium- and long-term engagement that can generate stability, coherence and efficiencies in delivery. This should also include a forward-looking community engagement strategy to keep and build support from Australians. It must also involve scenario-based planning and ongoing risk assessment and review mechanisms, particularly given the current state of geopolitics and environmental uncertainty.

LOOKING UP: We need to aim high and hold ourselves to account for delivering effectively to those in need. We must evaluate our efforts, seek out lessons and draw on best practice wherever it may be. We must hold ourselves to account for the people we intend to serve first and foremost, but also for our other stakeholders, including governments, taxpayers and voters. We must get better at documenting and demonstrating our impact.

LOOKING OUT: Australia will do itself no favours by pursuing an isolationist approach. Let's not limit our perspective by region or theme, but be open and engage in good faith. This does not mean overinvesting mindlessly across the globe of course, but we can work better with targeted interventions grounded in the global context, in partnership, learning from other experiences and contributing our own vast knowledge. There is much to be learned from looking at how others deal with similar challenges and seeking out strategic partnerships.

Australia needs a more robust, holistic and effective form of Australian international engagement. This might be supported by identifying or creating a policy space for debate and collaboration for Australian governments, academia, NGOs, private sector as well as Australian humanitarian, development, human rights and peace and security practitioners with experience across the globe. Such a space could be a place to share knowledge, lessons, good practice and experience on a given country situation (eg, Syria) or theme (such as preventing violent extremism) to improve policy positions. It could make Australian engagement better informed, more coherent and more effective.

This is not a new idea – several other similar-sized countries already do it very well, and we could draw from their approaches, for example, by supporting networks of Australians working in these sectors around the globe, or looking at how other countries develop their whole of government approaches through broader consultation. The space could be anything from a virtual hub to a centre of learning or a regular consultation forum.

One of Australia's strongest assets is its people, and there are plenty of them working at home and abroad who care deeply about the world and Australia's place in it. It's time to take advantage of this wealth.