



# Funding for Public Research into Foreign Policy Issues

SUBMISSION TO FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES  
COMMITTEE

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1 April 2021

## INTRODUCTION

Save the Children is pleased to contribute this submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee's Inquiry into Funding for Public Research into Foreign Policy Issues.

Our submission should be read in the context of our close engagement with Australia's international development cooperation program and its many points of connection with the foreign policy issues set out in the Australian Government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.<sup>1</sup> Since the onset of COVID-19, our work has also aligned with the pivot in the Australian Government's international development policy, Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response.<sup>2</sup>

Save the Children is a civil society organisation (CSO) with a wide Indo-Pacific footprint and a 100-year history of working to protect children and advance children's rights all around the world. Since the onset of COVID-19, we have argued that Australia should enhance its focus on assisting our neighbours to assemble the "social" infrastructure they will require to rebuild their societies and economies in the wake of the pandemic's intersecting health and economic impacts. We argue for the primacy of human security considerations, especially the safety and wellbeing of children, in Australia's approach to foreign policy, and for Australia's international development program to have more prominence in discussions of Australian statecraft and geostrategy.

This submission was prepared by Dr Amrita Malhi, Senior Adviser Geoeconomics. Save the Children would be delighted to build or elaborate further on the points we make in this submission.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. International development programs and projects funded by Official Development Assistance (ODA) should allow for a 5 per cent research and policy advocacy weighting in the assessment of all funding to be invested in research, policy development, and policy advocacy that is integrated into operational activity.
2. Australia should establish an independent institution and standing fund that would invest in programs and projects aimed at understanding human security challenges and strengthening democratic institutions and cultures around the Indo-Pacific.
3. The Australian Government should fund a visits program that extends opportunities to Australian leaders to deepen their understanding of foreign policy by experiencing regional human security challenges first-hand, adopting the model of Save the Children's Australian Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI).

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<sup>1</sup> See Australian Government. Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper/fpwhitepaper/pdf/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See Australian Government. Partnerships for Recovery: Australia's COVID-19 Development Response, 2020: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/aid/partnerships-recovery-australias-covid-19-development-response>

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

The inquiry addresses “the contribution of government funding for public research into current and emerging foreign policy issues affecting Australia, with a focus on our key interests in the Indo-Pacific, including examining:

- a) current funding by Australian Government departments and agencies in this area;
- b) the quality and diversity of publicly funded think tanks focused on foreign policy;
- c) ways of enhancing greater public understanding of foreign policy issues;
- d) how the Australian Government involves states, business, civil society, unions, universities, think tanks, diasporas, and the wider community in developing and implementing foreign policy;
- e) strategies the Australian Government should adopt to build the knowledge needed to support more effective future foreign policy; and
- f) any related issues.”

These Terms of Reference are addressed within a single narrative below. Save the Children would be delighted to build or elaborate further on the points we make in this submission.

## SUBMISSION

This inquiry is timely in the context of a number of Indo-Pacific human security crises that are both intensifying and proliferating, while also complicating the state-centric view of security that generally dominates public discussion of foreign policy in Australia. These crises include COVID-19 and its health and economic impacts, which are now resulting in a public health emergency in our close neighbour PNG and significant economic crises across countries including Vanuatu, Fiji, and Solomon Islands.<sup>3</sup> Further, the pandemic is producing an increased sense of urgency for donors like Australia to begin building and enhancing social protection systems in Pacific nations like PNG, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands, and Southeast Asian nations like Indonesia and the Philippines.<sup>4</sup> They also include the forced displacement of Rohingya and now the military coup in Myanmar, and the range of additional political and humanitarian crisis possibilities, both national and geopolitical, that the coup may trigger.<sup>5</sup> Further, the rate of democratic backsliding in Asia – whose societies, according to international democracy monitor Freedom House are largely moving away from democracy – poses serious challenges for local and regional civil society organisations seeking to respond, including in partnerships with local counterparts whose actions may be constrained.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Howes & Sherman Surandiran, “COVID-19: Economic Damage and Pacific Strengths,” DevPolicy Blog, 18 August 2020. Available at: <https://devpolicy.org/covid-19-economic-damage-pacific-20200818/>.

<sup>4</sup> We have been active in calling for social protection systems to be built or enhanced across the Indo-Pacific, for example in recent submissions. Refer to Save the Children. ‘Strengthening Australia’s Relationships with Countries in the Pacific Region: Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade,’ 20 July 2020, available at: [https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/ec3d00ae-b5e7-43ad-baea-c617007ac015/sub-59-save-the-children\\_redacted.pdf.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/ec3d00ae-b5e7-43ad-baea-c617007ac015/sub-59-save-the-children_redacted.pdf.aspx); and Save the Children. ‘2021-22 Budget Submission to the Department of the Treasury,’ 2 February 2021, available on request.

<sup>5</sup> For an outline of these possibilities, see Gerard McDermott. ‘Have the Gates of Hell Been Opened Upon Myanmar?’ The Diplomat, 22 March 2021, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/have-the-gates-of-hell-been-opened-upon-myanmar/>. See also Michael Vatikiotis. ‘The Geopolitics of Myanmar’s Black Swan Coup’ Asia Times, 30 March 2021, available at: <https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/the-geopolitics-of-myanmars-black-swan-coup/>.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Freedom House and its Global Freedom Status Map at <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2021>

## Publicly Funded Research by Civil Society Organisations

Working in this increasingly challenging context is generating new questions, the answers to which will only be found with considered and expert research and debate. One such question that has arisen with the pandemic is to what extent do households in Pacific nations face difficult choices such as pulling children out of education to make their budgets stretch further? Yet, to our knowledge, there is no standing pool of funding for research on current and emerging foreign policy issues affecting Australia in which CSOs can participate to answer such questions, despite our strong contribution to Australian activity across the Indo-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> What research funding exists is targeted instead towards an important, yet exclusive, range of institutions. This funding includes:

- a) annual research funding rounds run by the Australian Research Council (ARC), in which foreign policy-oriented research must compete with a range of other projects and in which only universities can compete. CSOs can only play a supporting role by sponsoring ARC Linkage grants, and the process is slow, subject to ministerial veto, requires significant in-kind contributions and often leads to no funding support, or the scale of competitive projects is too large or requires years to complete;
- b) Ad hoc funding by other government departments, either channelled through the ARC (as seen in the 2020 funding round sponsored by the Office of National Intelligence), or packaged as grants and tenders for specific initiatives such as the Pacific Security College based at the Australian National University (ANU); and
- c) Funding for thinktanks that are often focused on issues prioritised by states, and whose products are created for consumption by specific communities of policy stakeholders and industry funders. These products are also consumed by CSOs, to the extent that they help us understand how these communities of stakeholders and funders are likely to frame issues.

Because of this uneven access to appropriate pools of dedicated funding, CSOs active in Australia's international development program across the Indo-Pacific can be hampered from participating in foreign policy research and debate. This problem stems from the fact that many of the funding pools to which we do have access, from both the Australian Government and a range of other donors, strongly incentivise narrow, top-down approaches to project delivery. Compounded by the scarcity of funding, the granting environment in Australia leads CSOs to prioritise the needs of their program teams over their contribution to public debate. The resulting tight distribution of resources limits CSOs' capacity to direct a large enough proportion of our operational funding towards foreign policy research and advocacy, even when it directly relates to the conditions in which we perform our daily work. As a result, organisations like CIVICUS and the United Nations Special Rapporteur have found in recent years that CSOs in Australia operate in a civic space that is "narrowed."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We do have access to research conducted by other organisations, although it does not always come out as quickly as it could if we could simply commission or conduct it, leaving a responsiveness gap between the onset of the problem and our capacity to address it. See, for example, the World Bank finding that 52 per cent of PNG households have indicated reducing the number of children attending school because of reduced incomes. World Bank. 'Papua New Guinea High Frequency Phone Survey On COVID-19: Results from Round 1,' 2020. Available at: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/459511607010120078/pdf/Papua-New-Guinea-High-Frequency-Survey-on-COVID-19-First-Round-Results.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> For Save the Children's position on CSOs, refer to the Australian Council For International Development (ACFID) Conference Resolution 4-2019 on the role of Official Development Assistance in Defending Civil Society Space, available at: <https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/ACFID%20Resolution%204%202019.pdf>. See also CIVICUS Monitor: Tracking Civic Space. Australia, 23 July 2020, available at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/australia/>.

This situation stands in stark contrast to the argument advanced in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, which recognised the importance of a range of human security issues to the increasing insecurity of the Indo-Pacific, including in terms of our neighbour nations' international and regional political dynamics. This difficulty means there can be a lack of high-quality, Australian-led research and policy debate on the conditions experienced by many of the affected communities in the nations of the Indo-Pacific, even where these conditions begin to pose geostrategic challenges to states. It is equally challenging to quickly access new knowledge on these nations' records of responsiveness to human security concerns, or discursive and institutional cultures of democracy, governance, and human rights. Yet where CSO-led research is supported, for example for our recent report on the trafficking and commercial exploitation of children in Solomon Islands, outcomes have been extremely positive. Our findings supported the development of further tailored advocacy and programming activities and even the ratification of child protection protocols. The research has also led to additional program funding, including from the European Union and the International Organisation for Migration.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, Save the Children is recommending that:

1. International development programs and projects funded by Official Development Assistance (ODA) should allow for a 5 per cent research and policy advocacy weighting in the assessment of all funding to be invested in research, policy development, and policy advocacy that is integrated into operational activity.

Structuring grants in this way would allow Australian foreign policy stakeholders to better access the deep pool of foreign affairs and foreign policy expertise that resides in CSOs because we will be better equipped to participate in public policy debates in a more systematic manner. Our operational and policy teams are engaged with regional human security issues and experience the contraction of civic and democratic space in many of the countries we work in, every day. Equipping us with the resources to perform fast and responsive research projects will make a real difference to the lives of Indo-Pacific communities and the soft power benefits will accrue to Australia.

### **Creating an Independent Fund and Think Tank for Human Security and Democracy**

In addition to the constraints on the research and advocacy capacity of individual CSOs that we describe above, Australia does not possess the high-level national capability to draw together and amplify the insights of communities of experts working in CSOs. These experts sometimes work in formal and informal associations with universities, and/or are often supported by long periods of time working in-country, and/or they might be local leaders born and raised in Indo-Pacific nations. They often have a good knowledge of local languages and political dynamics, and the quality and sophistication of their knowledge often far surpasses that held in thinktanks, for example, which do not aim to grow deep roots in Indo-Pacific communities. Yet because this knowledge is often held in teams working on operational responses – for example, those delivering humanitarian responses or development projects – the result is a fractured, fragmented, and privatised knowledge base, unable to coordinate to pursue greater aims.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information, refer to Save the Children's input to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on the new International Strategy on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery, 1 May 2020, available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/b7b6bb8b-f036-4137-a4bc-bc2cb45e2598/2020-05-01-submission-to-dfat-consultation-on-trafficking-strategy.pdf.aspx>.

Compounding this fragmentation, Australian CSOs are finding their international networks affected by democratic backsliding, even as donors like Australia and the United States are re-centring CSOs in their aid and development responses, including in difficult circumstances like post-coup Myanmar. Despite major disruptions from the coup, CSOs have continued to operate in Myanmar and pivoted programmes to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable groups. Indeed, we are the go-to channel for the delivery of aid when it is no longer tenable for donor governments to direct financial resources through the Tatmadaw.<sup>10</sup> CSOs operating in Myanmar have been able to advocate privately to the Australian government, while also speaking out publicly against the killing and illegal detention of children. In fact, precisely because we are capable of responding quickly to fulfill urgent community needs, we are also in a position to respond quickly and forthrightly about the Tatmadaw's violation of child rights and the psychosocial effects on children of the military-led violence.<sup>11</sup> As CSOs' recent experience in Myanmar illustrates, this is precisely when CSOs' democratic and community-linked character rises to prominence, demonstrating that we are more than our service-delivery capability.

Further, in a more general sense, our special position at times of crisis relates to the uncoerced nature of civil society action, which supports and enables citizens to collaborate around social and economic problems, including by demonstrating, as we do, how these problems affect children. The work that CSOs do is intrinsic to the very culture of democracy and supporting CSOs greatly enhances Australia's reputation for norm promotion in its advocacy for a rules-based order. CSOs extend and deepen social capacity to build more inclusive institutions; analyse and monitor the actions of state and market actors; and participate in multi-sector partnerships. Our capacity to mobilise social capital can lead to improved systems and standards of governance across a range of institutions. Strong CSOs are better placed to respond to authoritarianism and populism in developing countries; and can better mobilise resources to respond locally to disasters and drive sustainable development.

It is for these reasons that there is a growing need for Australia to support new arrangements that enable the research and advocacy that CSOs perform. Yet there is, at present, no dedicated Indo-Pacific human security-oriented think tank, or university partnership, for argument's sake, that can harness a consortium of CSO voices, despite many of our staff holding all the requisite qualifications and willingness to collaborate with other institutions. This is part of the reason that the Australian public's understanding of foreign policy issues is often shaped by voices that are overwhelmingly drawn from similar, tightly defined, strategic policy circles, with all the equity and diversity challenges that can accompany such concentration of resources. Yet some diversification could be incentivised by increasing the range of opportunities available through CSOs, or CSO-linked research and policy and advocacy, including through a think tank or research partnership that can fund and support projects related to human security and democracy.

Australian CSOs are channels for diverse voices and exemplify the liberal democratic values that Australia holds. Through our structures, we represent a multitude of secular, and/or faith-based, and/or Indo-Pacific diaspora constituencies present in Australia and operate in a range of

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<sup>10</sup> Refer to White House Briefing Room Fact Sheet, 'Biden-Harris Administration Actions in Response to the Coup in Burma,' 11 February 2021, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/11/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-actions-in-response-to-the-coup-in-burma/>; and Senator the Hon Marise Payne, 'Statement on Myanmar,' 7 March 2021, available at: <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/statement-myanmar-0>.

<sup>11</sup> Refer to our recent media releases, including on 1 April 2021, 23 March 2021, 4 March 2021, and 22 February 2021, available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/media/media-releases>.

collaborative *and* contested relationships with governments and communities. The work that CSOs perform takes place in the context of the “densification” of international diplomacy and foreign policy debate, which now consists of more actors, working within multilateral networks as well as structured bilateral interactions, in the context of growing multipolarity. These actors, or the non-government and non-market organisations through which people organise themselves to pursue shared interests or values in the public domain, are critical to encouraging democratic participation in the region. They also connect Australia with a booming, global “third sector” that plays an increasingly important social and economic role in societies around the world. Worth at least USD \$2.2 trillion in operating expenditures and employing at least 56 million FTE workers globally, this sector runs a range of important human services including welfare and health care providers while promoting inclusive social innovation by state and market partners.<sup>12</sup>

This concentration of democratic credentials *and* policy as well as operational expertise in CSOs is the basis on which Save the Children makes its second recommendation:

2. Australia should establish an independent institution and standing fund that would invest in programs and projects aimed at understanding human security challenges and strengthening democratic institutions and cultures around the Indo-Pacific.

Harnessing and leveraging CSO expertise at a national scale would entail Australia establishing an institution and fund that would perform a combination of functions similar to the United Kingdom’s Overseas Development Institute, the trans-Atlantic Centre for Global Development, and the United States’ National Endowment for Democracy. This action would allow Australia to invest in projects and programs aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and cultures around the Indo-Pacific, an increasingly important priority in light of the extent of democratic backsliding evident across the region. It would also assist in resolving the fragmentation of national expertise related to Indo-Pacific human security issues, which causes a great deal of knowledge to be overlooked while public foreign policy debates remained narrowly focused on the interests of states.

There are Australian precedents for such initiatives, such as the Centre for Democratic Institutions that operated from the Australian National University for a period from 1998. Our recommendation, however, is for a new initiative that treats democracy as a human security issue, along with a range of other human security issues such as inequality, climate change, and state capacity to protect communities.

### **Leveraging Save the Children’s Australian Regional Leadership Initiative**

In the context of the various constraints on CSOs and the impact of these constraints on the quality and diversity of Australian foreign policy debate, it is often difficult to engage the Australian public in informed discussion about human security and development issues as they are far removed from the experience of most. These issues have also often been out of scope for parliamentarians and other Australian leaders, making it challenging for Australia to maintain a targeted and effective international development program to promote prosperity, reduce poverty, and enhance stability.

Unlike many other areas of taxpayer expenditure, politicians cannot easily visit and observe the impacts of the Australian aid program as its primary beneficiaries reside overseas. Yet increased

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<sup>12</sup> There is a paucity of accounting in relation to the value of the global third sector and this reference is to Salamon’s figures, which are based on a sample of 40 countries and published nearly a decade ago. Refer to Lester M. Salamon (2010), ‘Putting the Civil Society Sector on the Economic Map of the World,’ in *Annals of Public and Comparative Economics* 81:2, pp. 167-210.



parliamentary and public understanding of the impact and value of Australia's international development program will likely increase support for its prioritisation. Through our Australian Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI), Save the Children has been funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation since 2015 to lead parliamentary delegations to see firsthand the delivery of Australian aid and the human security challenges with which Australia is engaged across the Indo-Pacific. To date, we have taken nine delegations and nearly 50 parliamentarians to see the value of Australian aid for themselves in PNG, Cambodia, Solomon Islands, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Jordan, and Lebanon.

This program has been effective. An independent 2020 evaluation of ARLI concluded that the program has been effective in "raising awareness and highlighting the benefits of the aid program (especially in relation to health and nutrition) within the Australian Federal Parliament. There is significant evidence of the initiative improving knowledge and shifting attitudes of alumni"<sup>13</sup>. For this reason, our third recommendation seeks support from the Australian Government to invest in and increase ARLI's scale, while also leveraging alumni insights through the think tank we recommend above.

3. The Australian Government should fund a visits program that extends opportunities to Australian leaders to deepen their understanding of foreign policy by experiencing regional human security challenges first-hand, adopting the model of Save the Children's Australian Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI).

To conclude, we note that the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has recommended "additional funding for activities to raise awareness about the benefits of Australia's aid program."<sup>14</sup> In this submission, we have put forward ideas for three initiatives that could contribute to a richer, better-rounded Australian foreign policy debate that actively draws in expertise from a wider range of foreign policy actors than it does at present. We would be happy to speak further with the committee about these ideas.

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<sup>13</sup> Tamas Wells. "Australian Regional Leadership Initiative: Review." September 2020. Available on request.

<sup>14</sup> Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, "First Report: Inquiry into Australia's Aid Program in the Indo-Pacific," April 2019. Available at: [https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/Australiaaidprogram/Interim\\_Report](https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Australiaaidprogram/Interim_Report).