

Submission to Inquiry on Human Rights and Aid

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'...in the human rights approach to development assistance we expect no more and ask no more of governments than that they do what they have formally committed themselves to.' (HRC, 1995, p12)

While I support the indivisibility of all rights and would encourage the government to adopt a broad rights approach as the basis for its development work (as proposed by the Human Rights Council), in this submission I will be focusing on the rights to the basic social services of survival, health and basic education. I am focussing on this area as I know that civil and political rights will be well covered in other submissions and because I believe that these fundamental areas are often overlooked in rights discussions.

My concern is that although Australia has signed a number of international human rights treaties that accord the rights to survival, health and basic education (eg the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child) our nation has shown little real commitment to promoting these rights through our aid program.

To my mind a real commitment to these rights would involve at least the following:

- 1) *targeting development aid to those countries and peoples with the lowest health and survival rates and the lowest levels of education ie with the greatest need* - yet Australian aid is not focused on the poorest countries, it is focussed on countries of strategic importance to Australia. Only about 24% of our aid goes to the least developed countries while over 50% goes to those classified as lower middle income (DAC, 1999, pA57). (We could support both but this would require significantly more aid than our current meagre aid contribution of 0.25% of GNP.)
- 2) *providing adequate resources to ensure Australia pays its fair share in the meeting of these rights* - only about 14% of Australian ODA goes to the basic social services of basic health care, low cost water and sanitation and basic education. It is estimated that this level of funding would need to be doubled to about A\$400 m to meet Australia's fair share of the cost of providing basic social services for all people (Eurostep, 1998, p43). It should be noted that despite Australia's overall low level of aid we could still easily meet our fair share of basic social service costs within the present budget while leaving 70% of the budget for the achievement of other human rights and the promotion of economic growth.
- 3) *working in co-operation with other donors and countries to ensure that these rights are achieved* - Australia has failed to support a wide range of international agreements and co-operation mechanisms designed to enhance the rights to survival, health and basic education. These instruments include the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children, the 20/20 Initiative and the goals of the World Summit for Social Development. Australia has also failed to take any significant steps towards operationalising the DAC twenty-first century goals.

Instead of actively working with other nations to achieve the noble intentions of these

international agreements recent Australian aid ministers, parliamentary secretaries and senior AusAID staff have cynically argued against their usefulness in order to avoid having to make any significant commitment to their realisation.

- 4) *setting measurable and time-limited targets for the achievement of these goals in order to maximise our accountability to our commitments* - without clear, time-specific targets for the achievement of rights they become little more than vague aspirations. Unlike, for instance the UK aid department, DFID, AusAID has not set specific, measurable outcome targets based on either the rights commitments or the international development targets. The vagueness of our goals is a testament to our lack of commitment. A reading of the AusAID annual report for 99-00 shows just how vague Australia's aid commitments are. Rather than the reporting of significant outcome measures such as changes in child death rates or levels of access to water and sanitation we find the following: 'AusAID achieved its overall quality target, with more than 75 per cent of activities receiving a quality rating of satisfactory overall or higher.' (AusAID, 2000, p19).

Perhaps this sort of vagueness should be expected from an organisation with policy guidelines such as the following: 'Our education efforts will concentrate on providing a broad range of education assistance, with a particular focus on basic and technical education. Selective assistance for institutional strengthening, distance education and higher education are also priorities for Australian aid' (AusAID, 1997, p7).

In writing this submission I do not want to convey too negative an image of AusAID. I believe that the organisation has many skilled and committed staff and that there are signs of considerable improvement in the way that AusAID plans and implements its program. These improvements include a greater anti-poverty focus, better planning and targeting of programs, and a deepening commitment to participation and openness. I would also like to acknowledge the Government and Minister for their encouragement of these changes and the increased emphasis in the aid program on supporting civil and political rights.

However when we look at this fundamental issue of the right to basic social services I believe that Australian governments of both flavours and AusAID have fallen far short of their responsibilities. In signing the various instruments according economic, social and cultural rights we as a nation made a promise to the weakest and most deprived and exploited people on our planet. Among them are the 32,000 children who die of poverty each day and the many more that are permanently physically and mentally disabled by this poverty.

We have made a commitment to the poor but it is not being kept - even though it is easily affordable within present aid budgets. I believe that we as Australians all have a responsibility to keep this promise however it is the members of the Human Rights Sub-committee and your fellow federal parliamentarians that most directly have the power and the responsibility to make sure that this promise to the poor is honoured. Please do what you can to fulfil this responsibility.

I am happy to make an in-person or telephone appearance before the Sub-Committee if you think that this might be useful.

References

- AusAID 1997 *Better Aid for a Better Future* (AusAID, Canberra)
- AusAID 2000 *Annual report 1999-00* (AusAID, Canberra)
- DAC 1999 *Development Co-operation Report* (Development Assistance Committee, Paris)
- Eurostep 1998 *The Reality of Aid 1998/99* (Earthscan, London)
- HRC 1995 *The Rights Way to Development* (Human Rights Council, Marrickville)