

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Island countries

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Helping the countries of the South Pacific to ensure that they are viable, and sustainable, will remain a considerable challenge for Australia. ... Our development assistance program, and our emphasis on governance and reducing poverty in the region, will continue to play an important role. ¹

A. SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS OF THE SUBMISSION

This submission examines some general aid delivery strategies, and then looks in more detail at the development assistance needs of youth and women.

The 1997 Committee to Review the Australian Aid Program identified a number of elements essential for program and project effectiveness. These included an emphasis on local ownership and participation, sustainability of development benefits, capacity building, and shared partnership to promote good governance at all levels. Five years on, the challenges facing Australia's development assistance program in Papua New Guinea and other South Pacific nations still reflect the need to ensure that these essential elements for an effective program or project are being addressed.

1. Strategies to make Australian aid more effective and appropriate include:

- a. Retaining and building on corporate wisdom in AusAID and its related agencies;
- b. Increasing understanding among project planners of the complex nature of continuity and change in Papua New Guinea and other South Pacific countries;
- c. Accepting a more flexible implementation schedule so that projects can be adapted to meet new circumstances;

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¹ *'Advancing the National Interest'* speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hon. Alexander Downer MP, 7 May 2002.

- d. Strengthening partnership and support for local initiatives and non-government agencies, so that community leaders, and those impacted by project activities, can more fully participate;
- e. Evaluating ‘success’ or ‘failure’ from a longer time frame, taking into account the value of the total experience.

2. In order to more effectively address the needs of youth, development assistance should:

- a. Focus on strengthening the capacity of families, communities and civil society to work with young people;
- b. Provide crisis management assistance and capacity building to support government, non-government personnel, and other members of the civil society working with violent youth;
- c. Identify and address issues of political corruption and problems of governance, which contribute to youth alienation and violence;
- d. Ensure that there is sufficient flexibility within implementation guidelines to meet the overall development needs of this volatile and politically vulnerable group.

3. Sustainable assistance strategies to address constraints on women’s development include:

- a. Maintaining and strengthening Australian Development Assistance contributions to women’s education and health;
- b. Ensuring that the position and development needs of women are not assessed in isolation from their communities;
- c. Working with all stakeholders to appropriately address domestic and other violence which constrain women’s ability to actively participate in economic, political and social development;
- d. Identifying and building on women’s productive contributions in the informal sector.

B. SUBMISSION

Introduction

The 1997 Committee to Review the Australian Aid Program identified a number of elements essential for program and project effectiveness. These included an emphasis on local ownership and participation, sustainability of development benefits, capacity building, and shared partnership to promote good governance at all levels. While government to government negotiations were seen as an essential element in the planning process, the Committee cautioned that:

Participation must be wider than the government level. Central governments are only one actor in the development process. Local private sectors must be engaged as should regional administrations and, most importantly, local communities. This is a time consuming process, but essential to sustainability. The temptation to cut corners by dispensing with participatory design has to be resisted.¹

Five years on, the challenges facing Australia's development assistance program in Papua New Guinea and other South Pacific nations still reflect the need to ensure that these essential elements for an effective program or project are being addressed. However, increased corruption and lack of political and bureaucratic accountability have weakened the capacity of many national institutions to deliver basic services. Ideals of shared partnership may have to be weighed against the likelihood that development assistance will be used to promote political, group or individual ends, rather than for the good of the target beneficiaries.

In Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and, even if to a lesser extent, other Pacific Island nations, pervasive security problems, and the use of violence and intimidation by groups or individuals also have to be taken into account. This is particularly evident when working towards increasing political or economic participation by youth, women, or other vulnerable local groups. In some communities, the involvement of churches, non-government agencies and other members of civil society has done a great deal to counter these problems. However, armed confrontation has sometimes led to the destruction or abandonment of many worthwhile development projects, or to a climate of fear and uncertainty, in which focussed development planning is impossible.

¹ *One Clear Objective: poverty reduction through sustainable development*, Committee to Review the Australian Overseas Program, *Report*, Canberra, 1997:163.

Given these ongoing and seemingly intractable problems, it would be easy to abandon notions of respect for cultural diversity, and a commitment to community participation and empowerment, in favour of a more donor directed and managed approach. On the other hand an alternative approach may be to approach development assistance from an integrated and holistic perspective, which links broader governance and law and justice issues with local level service delivery and community development priorities.

1. Making Australian aid more effective and appropriate

Over the past two decades, the way in which Australian aid is delivered to Papua New Guinea and other smaller Pacific Island nations has shifted towards a more out-sourced arms-length system. The overall policy of downsizing Australian government departments and making greater use of commercial and non-government services has inevitable consequences – both good and bad – for the planning and implementation of a wide variety of projects. On the one hand, the move to greater private sector involvement provides access to a broader range of experts and resources. These can be targeted to meet the needs of particular geographic areas, sections of the community, or aspects of governance.

This means that the role of Australian development assistance staff has shifted towards overall administration and liaison. Their task is to ensure that a project or programme is being implemented according to approved policy- guidelines and within budget, and that reports and other assessments are received, and are on time. At the same time, AusAID staffing and budgetary constraints make it more feasible to outsource administrative oversight of small-scale community or non-government projects, which are often in more remote locations.

It is therefore not surprising that, as the private sector takes over greater responsibility for the delivery of aid, there has been a parallel decline in government knowledge and skills related to the provision of development aid in the South Pacific. Projects are completed and other commercial or non-profit agencies are contracted to carry out particular services or assessments. Often the knowledge agencies have gained from working on a project or in a specific community disappears with the departing contractors, or is reduced to an official report which maximises the good work done by the agency and minimises the problematic and ephemeral value of what has really been achieved.

Commercial agencies and individual consultants know that successful completion of a contract is essential for their corporate or individual success. Non-profit

agencies and other voluntary groups hope to obtain further donor support for particular projects. This means that final reports are more likely to stress the positive value of their contribution and the need for their continuing presence, with less emphasis on negative results or alternative approaches.

The diverse and often changing nature of Papua New Guinea and other South Pacific societies means that knowledge and understanding must be constantly updated. Experts who have provided initial advice may not be aware of significant social, political, or economic changes, which have taken place since they last visited a particular area. The way a particular community or group reacts to change also reflects deeper cultural values and traditions, not always evident to a newcomer with only limited knowledge of a particular society.

To counter the inevitable outsider/insider differences in perspective, partnership and participation with local beneficiaries and all stakeholders are core elements in the development assistance program. This applies just as much to consultations with senior government officials, as to local community leaders, and members of a youth or women's group. In the early planning stages, officials may have been reluctant to point to security concerns, local conflicts, their own inadequacies, or other problems. It may take time to gain their trust and discover that the project needs to be rethought or approached in a different way.

This means that a degree of flexibility has to be built into implementation guidelines. Those who are in charge of implementation must be reassured that, once they face the reality of what is happening on the ground, some changes in project strategies, timetables or internal budget allocations, will be possible. For the contracting agencies, this reality also presents a considerable challenge. Their profit margin may be reduced, and AusAID liaison and monitoring staff must be convinced that the proposed changes are acceptable.

Success and failure may be assessed quite differently. Local officials and community leaders may approve a particular project because of its political value, rather than any lasting economic or social benefit. Given all these uncertainties it is inevitable that some projects, which were initiated with great optimism, may still fail to achieve the desired objectives of the development assistance program. However, it is important to keep in mind that the experience gained from an earlier 'failure' may give community members and other stakeholders the experience and knowledge they need to successfully implement a subsequent project.

Strategies to make Australian aid more effective and appropriate include:

- a. Retaining and building on corporate wisdom in AusAID and its related agencies;
- b. Increasing understanding among project planners of the complex nature of continuity and change in Papua New Guinea and other South Pacific countries;
- c. Accepting a more flexible implementation schedule so that projects can be adapted to meet new circumstances;
- d. Strengthening partnership and support for local initiatives and non-government agencies so that community leaders, and those impacted by project activities, can more fully participate.
- e. Evaluating 'success' or 'failure' from a longer time frame, taking into account the value of the total experience.

2. Youth as an integral part of the community.

Nowhere is an understanding of the processes of continuity and change more important than when considering appropriate strategies to assist young people. Some observers point to the weakening of traditional authority and of community support systems, and relate this to the impact of Western-style education and other influences. Others emphasize the lack of resources, employment, or other economic opportunities as more significant. In their view, these practical problems have led to the increasing marginalization and disaffection of young men and their readiness to turn to violence to achieve political and economic goals. Both points of view may well be correct and need to be taken into account, with an emphasis on identifying the situation in a particular society.

Often the focus has been on countering the negative impact of youth alienation. Yet youth are not always the enemy, and the continuing involvement of many troubled young people with their families and other community members is a common, if often overlooked, feature of life in towns and villages in the South Pacific. The role of family and community needs to be taken into account so that strategies for youth education and employment do not separate or further isolate young people from their communities.

The participation of all members of urban and rural communities is much more than the endorsement of already determined projects and activities. It requires time and patience and the ability to negotiate competing claims so that men and women, the old and the young, have a role to play in ensuring that the project benefits the whole community.

Disaffected unemployed youth are seen as a major cause of the deteriorating law-and-order situation in many towns and rural communities in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and other South Pacific countries. Governments and non-government agencies are called on to respond to this problem by providing direct support for economic or other projects. Local leaders and national politicians may use their influence to ensure that 'their' youth are given preferential treatment. Often, there is the implicit threat that, if this assistance is not provided quickly, there will be an increase in violent crime.

In order to ensure that Australian aid is appropriate and has long-term benefits, project planners, implementers and aid administrators need to be aware of the potential impact of the proposed activity on the whole community. The politicization of out-of-school youth is a fact of life in many communities in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Local politicians may promote a project to maintain electoral support. It is also a fact of life that some political or other leaders benefit from the violence of their youthful supporters. This may mean that it is not in their interests to re-integrate young people back into the community.

Others hope to regain community control in the face of the lack of respect from young men who have turned to violence. Youth workers, police, and juvenile correctional officers may seek assistance to regain individual or institutional credibility, and weaken the authority of gang leaders. Given the stridency of proponents of external social control, it may be difficult to gain equal time for the proposition that better and more lasting solutions may be found within the local community.

In addition to these more dramatic situations, education, employment, basic health services and sport and recreational activities are all important aspects of any integrated community based youth program. Projects which simply target 'youth' often fail to take into account that they are an integral part of a community in which all ages participate in a multiplicity of activities. At a youth meeting in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, one venerable old man responded to my query as to why he wished to attend the meeting by declaring: '*Mipela olgeta, mipela yut*'. [All of us, we are youth].

This suggests that aid workers need to be aware of, and take into account the overall impact on the rest of the community. Projects which focus exclusively on youth place competing demands on local and regional leaders, and create resource imbalances between different groups in the community. Yet, the aid contractor or project manager, who knows that back in Australia ‘success’ will be seen very differently, may ignore these problems. Changes in direction cannot be undertaken mid-project, so it is better to just forge ahead, as the only other option is to abandon the project.

In order to more effectively address the needs of youth, development assistance should:

- a. Focus on strengthening the capacity of families, communities and civil society to work with young people;
- b. Provide crisis management assistance and capacity building to support government, non-government personnel, and other members of the civil society working with violent youth:
- c. Identify and address issues of political corruption and problems of governance which contribute to youth alienation and violence;
- d. Ensure that there is sufficient flexibility within implementation guidelines to meet the overall development needs of this volatile and politically vulnerable group.

Gender and Development

The 1997 Review of the Australian Aid Program pointed out that:

Ensuring that men and women have equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, development remains one of the most significant challenges facing donors and recipients.¹

¹ *One Clear Objective*, report of the Committee of Review, 1997:239.

To be effective and appropriate, development assistance aid for women must take into account the realities of the daily lives of women in both urban and rural communities. While there has been considerable progress in improving access to basic education, in most Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands communities women have lower literacy rates than men. Maternal mortality rates remain unacceptably high. Rural women, particularly in remoter areas, have less access to non-formal education, government extension services and the wider society. This means that, for the foreseeable future, it is essential that Australian development assistance continues in these areas.¹

Projects to enable women to participate more fully in economic and social development need to include practical strategies, which are both accessible and acceptable, and greater access to technical and management training. Success may bring its own problems, if the accepted order and authority in a community is threatened. High levels of domestic violence are endemic in many communities. Those seeking to improve women's economic or political access must be aware that some women will pay a high price for their participation. Security dangers for themselves and their families also mean that capable and effective women leaders may be reluctant to stand for political office, or to be seen as the initiators of change within a community.

Most Papua New Guineans have developed a range of responses and strategies to minimise personal, family or group risks. In some cases these are just accepted, as part of normal day-to-day living requirements and the need for members of the family and the wider network of friends to look out for each other. They know that family and community awareness and support are essential if they are to cope with even minor law and order incidents.

All these strategies have costs as well as benefits. The security value of interdependence on members of one's extended family may be offset by the economic and social stresses involved in overcrowded houses, and the need to 'turn a blind eye' to unsociable or illegal behavior. If social gatherings and celebrations cannot be scheduled during daylight hours, all guests may have to stay the night, whatever the cost. Young working women or students often need male protection. Sometimes this means that unsatisfactory or violent relationships are formed, and endured, as the alternative is no protection at all.

¹ A number of projects which address these and related education and health issues are outlined in *Papua New Guinea- Program profiles 2001-2002*, AusAID, Canberra 2002:20-29.

These are continuing problems which illustrate the holistic nature of the development equation. At the same time, family and community efforts to work together to address problems and strengthen social cohesiveness have had very positive spin-offs. Effective and sustainable strategies to improve the position of women must take into account how these activities will impact on all members of the community. And, as noted by the 1997 Review Committee, this suggests that:¹

Policymakers must be prepared to address the structural and systemic constraints that produce uneven development and ongoing discrimination against women. In addition consideration must be given to the impact of all development activities on the lives of women, not just activities in those areas that are considered 'women's issues'.

When assessing mining and forestry and other large scale projects, the impact of women's contribution to the informal economic sector has often been overlooked. In addition, the increasing role which women now play in professional and public sector employment cannot be seen in isolation from the rest of society. Their ability to participate may be equally constrained by cultural, security or political issues, not always visible to, or shared with, outside development assistance planners.

Sustainable assistance strategies to address constraints on women's development include:

- a. Maintaining and strengthening Australian Development Assistance contributions to women's education and health;
- b. Ensuring that the position and development needs of women are not assessed in isolation from their communities;
- c. Working with all stakeholders to appropriately address domestic and other violence which constrain women's ability to actively participate in economic, political and social development;
- d. Identifying and building on women's productive contributions in the informal sector.

¹ *One Clear Objective*, Report of the Review Committee, 1997:240.

Conclusion: Strengthening the Development Assistance Program

Critics have sometimes pointed out that many bi-lateral donor sponsored projects and programs are imbued with a type of colonial approach. This may filter through to all stakeholders in the assistance program, donor and recipient officials and project supervisors alike. Those, whose skills, knowledge or resources are to be enhanced by the proposed activity, may have little or no opportunity to adapt, revise or challenge the basic assumptions, especially when goals and implementation processes have been documented in often quite terrifyingly technical and incomprehensible English.

In many situations, these problems are exacerbated by the involvement of donor government and private enterprise agencies on the one hand, and national government agencies on the other. In these circumstances it is not surprising that local level community participation in the planning stages is minimal. Yet the very success of an aid project may depend upon the degree of 'fit' between its goals and implementation guidelines and the realities on the ground.

Finding answers to the urgent development needs of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and other South Pacific countries may seem as elusive now as when the 1997 Committee of Review examined the Australian Development Assistance Program. An alternative view is that new solutions to old problems often reflect an ability to '*draw upon the best from indigenous and foreign traditions and deploy them in creative ways*'.¹ The 1999 AusAID survey of community initiatives in Papua New Guinea documented many potentially valuable examples of this integration of the old and the new.²

We need to retain and build upon the wisdom and experience gained from what has already been accomplished. With the benefit of hindsight, we may be more prepared for the next crisis, and learn from past successes and failures. This is our neighbourhood, so, however frustrating and challenging the task, it cannot be abandoned.

¹ Sinclair Dinnen, 'Violence and Governance in Melanesia' *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 14(1), 1999:71.

² *Papua New Guinea Law and Justice Baseline Survey of Community Initiatives*, prepared by ACIL Australia Pty Ltd for AusAID, UNDP and the Papua New Guinea Office of National Planning, 1999.