

Submission to the Australian Foreign Policy White Paper by Mark Rice

Introduction

I am pleased to have an opportunity to provide input to the Australian Foreign Policy White Paper, as a member of the public who has a long-time interest in Australia's contribution to increasing living standards and reducing poverty through its engagement with other countries. Over many years, I have worked as both a volunteer and paid advocate for Australia to increase its contribution to reducing poverty globally.

The preparation of the White Paper this year is timely for the following reasons:

- Many changes in the world's economic, political and humanitarian challenges have taken place since the previous Foreign Policy White Paper in 2003;
- In Australia and other countries, increasing numbers of commentators and elected representatives present international cooperation and support for other countries as being contrary to the national interest. The White Paper is a chance for Australia to emphasise that international cooperation and assistance is also in our national interest.

The White Paper is intended to be a statement of direction in the various aspects of Australia's foreign policy, so the following sections do not set out detailed policy and funding proposals. However, they do include some specific policy and funding priorities to increase Australia's contribution to poverty reduction and increased living standards in the coming years.

Increasing action on poverty reduction

Australia is one of the 193 countries which has endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call for the elimination of extreme poverty, as well as ensuring healthy lives for everyone, and promoting universal access to education and lifelong learning.

The policies which will contribute to achieving the SDGs include international development assistance, trade, environment, migration and security policies. Therefore, increasing and improving Australia's overseas aid is one of the range of actions Australia needs to take to support countries in the Asia-Pacific region achieve these ambitious and important goals.

It is essential for the policy objectives for Australian overseas aid in the White Paper to make poverty reduction the highest priority, so the objectives of the aid program would be to: reduce poverty; build inclusive prosperity; and enhance human security.

Supporting these goals will also require rebuilding the level of Australia's development assistance. In recent years, the Australian aid program has been reduced after inflation by nearly 30%, and in 2016-17 is at its lowest level in real terms since 2007-08, and is also at its lowest proportion of the Gross National Income (GNI) on record.

If Australia is to make a significant contribution to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, it will be essential for Australia to commit to a growth path which initially reverses cuts to the aid program in recent years, and increases development assistance to a level of approximately \$10 billion per year by the mid 2020s. This will enable Australia to contribute to each of the important objectives for the aid program without these objectives competing with each other for scarce resources.

Recommendation 1 – The objectives for Australian aid to be slightly revised to be: reduce poverty; build inclusive prosperity; and enhance human security.

Recommendation 2 – That Australia commit to sustained growth in the resources for overseas aid, reaching \$10 billion per year by the mid 2020s.

Priority actions for reducing poverty internationally

Development assistance to multiple sectors (health, education, rural development, small enterprise development, water and sanitation and transport) contributes to reducing poverty and building inclusive prosperity. The following sections outline actions which should receive an increase in the share of resources for development assistance:

- Ensure that Australia's health assistance is adequate and effective in addressing regional health challenges.
- Supporting child development through nutrition and education.

Priorities for health assistance

The Asia-Pacific region, which is the primary focus of Australia's aid, is home to 60% of the world's poor and undernourished people. Examples of the challenges for the Asia-Pacific region are:

- The region is still home to two-thirds of the world's poor, over 750 million people.
- Timor-Leste has the highest proportion of underweight children in the world. Malnutrition weakens the immune system and can lead to a heightened risk of illness and disease.

Overcoming these challenges requires improving health systems in the region, so each country has an increased capacity to both prevent and respond to the toll of diseases.

Specific initiatives to improve health outcomes in the region are:

Making increased contributions to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria: The Global Fund has been the leading contributor to the reduction in deaths from HIV, TB and Malaria by half since 2000.

In the last 13 years, Australia has contributed \$610 million to the Global Fund, and in turn the Global Fund has invested \$8.75 billion in total in the Asia-Pacific region, showing the leverage of Australia's contribution.

Since 2002, the Global Fund's investment in the Asia-Pacific region has

- supported distribution of 142 million mosquito nets to prevent malaria;
- 9.5 million tuberculosis treatments; and
- helped 3.2 million people access anti-retroviral HIV medicine.

With drug resistance becoming an increased problem for both TB and malaria, Australia needs to increase its support for disease prevention and treatment by the Global Fund, and research into improved testing and treatment for each disease.

To ensure the Global Fund meets its goals of increasing access to treatment and saving lives, it is important for Australia to provide continued and increased support for the Global Fund during and beyond the current replenishment for 2017 to 2019.

Recommendation 3: That Australia continue and increase its support for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria beyond 2020.

Increasing support for vaccinating children worldwide: Nearly 6 million children die every year, mostly from preventable diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria. Gavi, The Vaccines alliance carries out the two actions we can take to prevent these avoidable, deaths: first, vaccinate against dangerous diseases, such as pneumococcal pneumonia and rotavirus diarrhoea; and second, strengthen the capacity of local integrated health systems to provide and manage their own disease prevention and treatment systems, including routine immunisations.

Gavi has had a significant impact in our region, including the rollout of the locally-produced five-in-one vaccine in Indonesia, and the introduction of pneumococcal vaccine in Papua New Guinea and Laos recently. By 2015 Gavi had immunised half a billion children, resulting in more than nine million lives being saved by the end of the current decade.

Recently Gavi launched an initiative to improve cold chain systems and equipment such as fridges in health care centres and refrigerated trucks or containers used to move vaccines. **Without these, children in the poorest and most remote communities will not have access to life-saving vaccines.** The cold chain needs are greatest for countries with large numbers of people living in rural areas such as Cambodia, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, India and Bangladesh.

Recommendation 4: That Australia continue and increase its financial support for Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance beyond 2020.

Recommendation 5: The Australia provide support for improved vaccine supply chains in the Asia-Pacific region.

Ensuring polio is eradicated: Since the Global Polio Eradication Initiative began in 1988, the number of new cases of polio has fallen from 350,000 per year to only 37 in 2016. It is likely that new cases of the poliovirus can be stopped by mid 2017. This initiative has seen nearly three billion children immunised, and has spared ten million children from paralysis and deformity.

Polio has the chance to be only the second disease after smallpox that humans have ever eradicated globally. This would set a precedent which may inspire work towards eradicating other diseases. The work which has been done to eradicate polio will also strengthen health systems, assisting to prevent other diseases and ensuring that no country in the world will ever have to spend money on treating polio again, saving billions of dollars.

Within the period covered by the Foreign Policy White Paper, the final stage of the polio eradication campaign is a short-term priority. However, the impact of eradicating polio in strengthening health systems and freeing resources for other programs makes this a task that Australia and other countries must complete.

Recommendation 6: That Australian maintain the level of its contribution to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative for another two years, to support finishing the task of polio eradication.

Priorities for education and nutrition assistance

Investing in education: Increasing the participation in and quality of education has multiple benefits for individuals and their societies, including improved employment and income earning prospects, better health outcomes and increased social participation.

However, today 61 million children are *not* in primary school and 65 million adolescents are *not* in lower secondary school. A further 250 million children who are in school are graduating without having learnt even basic numeracy and literacy skills. Despite these shortfalls in education delivery and demand for education rising steadily, global commitments for education funding are declining.

Successive Australian Governments have recognised the value of education, especially basic education, as part of Australia's development assistance. However, Australia's assistance for education has been reduced as part of the overall reduction in development assistance in recent years.

Therefore, in the coming years, Australia should recommit to providing a minimum of 20% of total official development assistance (ODA) to education. As part of a focus of resources on basic education, Australia should continue and increase support for the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), which has an important role in supporting developing countries to ensure that every child receives a quality basic education, with a priority for the poorest, most vulnerable and those living in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

Recommendation 7: That Australia maintain education support at a minimum of 20% of ODA and increase support for the Global Partnership for Education.

Increased support for nutrition: Malnutrition in all forms is **directly or indirectly responsible for approximately 3 million of the 6 million deaths of children under the age of 5 each year**, making it one of the largest causes of child mortality.

In 2014, an estimated 159 million children were stunted, or too short for their age. Most countries are making progress in reducing the number of children who are stunted, but overall progress remains slow. Approximately 8% of children under the age of 5 have severe acute malnutrition (SAM), which leads to wasting (the child is severely underweight for their height). While a child may recover, with sufficient help, from wasting, the impacts of stunting are irreversible.

Countries in the Asia-Pacific have among the highest rates of malnutrition in the world. For example, 49% of children in Papua-New Guinea and 58% of children in Timor Leste have had their growth stunted. This means more than half of an entire generation of children in these countries will fail to reach their full physical or mental potential.

Nutrition accounts for a small proportion of aid spending by most donors. In 2014, Australia spent \$23 million per year on nutrition-specific measures (which address directly adequate food and nutrient intake, feeding, caregiving and parenting practices, and minimising infectious diseases), and \$97 million per year on overall nutrition measures, including broader factors such as food security; access to health services and a safe and hygienic environment.

To reduce the impact of malnutrition, particularly for countries in our region, Australia needs to increase its investment in both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive programs, which would ensure our support for programs such as water and sanitation and agriculture complemented direct action to address nutrition.

Recommendation 8: Australia should increase its support for both nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive measures in Australian development assistance.