

I write this submission as someone with a long-standing interest in international development. This interest has led me into the developing world: countless times, for travel, particularly in our region; on several occasions to Bangladesh for work – on my first visit, as a then-AusAID Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD) – and to both Timor-Leste and Myanmar, where I have been proud to serve as an Australian volunteer civilian election observer. It has led me, too, to further study in this field: first, a Master of International Public Health and then a PhD in Public Health. I also have experience as a Board member (of Oxfam Australia, 2008-12) and a grant-maker (for Graduate Women International). I am privileged enough to bring together my passion, experience and knowledge in my current job as the Global Health Campaign Manager for RESULTS International (Australia), an international development advocacy organisation. I am also a member of the RESULTS Sydney City group.

Thus it should be no surprise that my principal concern in this submission is the values and principles that underlie the official development assistance (ODA or ‘foreign aid’) component of Australia’s foreign policy. I would like to speak to several of these briefly and in turn.

First, I want Australian ODA in particular – and our foreign policy in general – to be *courageous*. The politics of many high-income nations is particularly ill-served by the present ‘inward turn’, and Australia should forge a different path. We must engage more not less, and at all levels, with our regional neighbours and with nations beyond, seeking to understand them better. The opportunity for ‘people-to-people contact’ offered by the New Colombo Plan is one such example. In the past it was simple enough to speak of problems ‘poor countries’ that ‘we’ did not suffer: famine, social unrest, environmental degradation and extreme inequality. Increasingly, however, the futures of all who share this planet will be shaped by problems that are both ‘here’ and ‘there’: climate change, the challenges of raising sufficient national revenues to provide the levels of public services that citizens expect and increasing economic inequality, among others.

Courage can be demonstrated by, among other things, acting with *justice*, and this is the second principle that I want to have underpin Australian ODA. In particular, I believe that the main goal of Australia’s aid programme should be ending poverty, and only secondarily promoting our national interest. The recent and deep cuts to our ODA must be halted and, in coming years, the Australian aid programme should be judiciously expanded. As ODA helps individuals, families and communities in our region reach their potential, the foreign policy of which it is part can assist in promoting cross-border initiatives in human security and international trade, to the benefit of both Australia and the nations near us.

The greatest practical and moral challenge facing humanity is surely climate change. It is at once a threat to Australia’s prosperity, the stability of the Asia-Pacific region and the sustainability of the natural resources we all share – food, fuel and water. Keeping global warming below the crucial 1.5 degree Celsius threshold by meeting global emissions targets, by banning new domestic fossil-fuel power generation and transitioning to the use of the renewable sources of energy with which Australia is so abundantly blessed, and by using Australian aid to assist our regional neighbours to adapt to the impacts of climate change, are all in our collective human interest. Nations in our region newly emerging from poverty did not cause climate change, and it is not right that they suffer the very worst of its impacts.

Closer to home, I want to see Australia negotiate fair maritime boundaries with its neighbour Timor-Leste. Since Timor-Leste’s independence in 2002, Australia has consistently refused to recognise a mid-line boundary between our countries, and enforced resource-sharing arrangements that rob Timor-Leste of potential for future prosperity. This is to Australia’s discredit, and should not be allowed to stand. A just border with Timor-Leste would both acknowledge that country’s

dignity as a sovereign nation and, by facilitating financial self-determination, assist Timor-Leste to help itself in precisely the way that Australia claims we want countries that receive our aid to do.

I am also concerned that Australia be just in its financial dealings with developing nations – both in our region, who are the major recipients of our aid, and those beyond. The Australian government, too, confronts revenue constraints as it seeks to continue delivering a certain standard of public services, but has at its disposal a sophisticated tax-collection system with skilled staff. Many developing countries are still working to build capacity in these functions of government. Australia could support a minimum tax on corporate income, thereby helping to stop currently-legal practices of questionable justice that permit corporations to shift profits – often several orders of magnitude larger than donor aid contributions – to low-tax jurisdictions.

The third principle I would like at the bedrock of Australia's ODA is *equality*. While it is impossible for our aid programme – or any other government endeavour – to guarantee equality of outcome, we can make certain that equality (sameness) of opportunity is one of its guiding tenets. This approach will also help ensure equity (fairness) in our dealings with nations that receive our aid.

Australia's ODA rightly emphasises economic empowerment for those who benefit as a result of our aid programme. But rising GDPs throughout our region often mask great economic inequality (a problem with which Australia, too, is grappling domestically) which, like poverty itself, can be a source of social instability. Economic opportunities for all – not just for those already well-placed to seize on new prospects – and inclusive growth is to the advantage of both the Asia-Pacific as a whole and Australia, as new markets are created and then expand.

Further, as Australia's ODA also emphasises the importance of women and girls, and in light of recent international political developments, we must commit to not ever again going down the road of tying funding for family planning and contraception – women's health and lives – to the exigencies of domestic politics. We have done so before, in the recent past, and it is to our shame.

Finally, Australia has a strong economy, a stable population and is in a position to welcome people from across the globe who seek refuge away from their home countries. We should look to expand our refugee intake and to resettle these new migrants onshore, with the kind of support services that will allow them to become full members of Australian society as quickly as possible. To class offshore detention facilities under the aid programme is to diminish it: offshore detention is not 'development', it is not just, nor is it in Australia's strategic interest.

'The interests of others' and 'national interest' – in that order, as the focus of our aid programme – need not be mutually exclusive. Helping to facilitate human flourishing is ultimately in everyone's interests and I want Australian ODA, as part of our wider foreign policy, to do this by being *courageous, just and equitable*.

Dr Michelle Imison
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