

To whom it may concern,

[REDACTED]

I have recently returned from a six month stint working at an agency at the United Nations, which has heavily impacted my view on foreign policy and aid. Working in the Asia Pacific regional office gave me insight into Australia's position in the region from a diplomatic perspective. This was enhanced by the UN agency's position as a multi-disciplinary organisation and provider of technical assistance rather than a programme implementer. As a result, I was able to work with ministers and key stakeholders from around the AP region.

At my core, I am a proponent for fairness. I don't believe however that the rhetoric of the White Paper needs to appeal to benefit of saving lives - this work speaks for itself. Rather, in order to be prioritised by the private sector and the concept adopted across Australian social classes, aid needs to be redefined as investment or 'good' trade. This is an extremely important message I believe needs to be communicated and returned to throughout the paper, as I'm sure you are aware, aid is often thought of as 'charity' - making its worth difficult to justify in the public realm. The reality however, as mentioned in the foreword of Australia's current foreign policy paper, is that aid is not best thought of as strictly charity but an enhancer of Australia's International presence and power.

Aid is indeed powerful, especially given Australia's geographic position as a 'Westernised' OECD country in the AP region. This was illustrated to me as the UN agency's largest funder being DFAT, and because of this, a generous proportion of my time there went towards compiling reports and completing work as stipulated by Australia's priorities and targets. I evidently therefore believe that this kind of aid needs to continue.

Further, at a conference that I was lucky enough to attend, I rapporteured a session for which a representative of DFAT was the chair. The representative's deep knowledge of coherence, between DRR, Climate Change Adaptation, and the SDGs, was impressive, especially given the wealth of knowledge and experience of other speakers on stage.

This, to me, demonstrated Australia's commitment to aid that is preventative and resilience building over the traditional forms of reactive 'humanitarian aid'; which is a position I very much agree with. The cross-cutting issues emerging from the post-2015 development agenda highlights priorities to end extreme poverty and build resilient institutions and systems; developing a narrative that can be internationally supported by a wider range of treaties, documents, and agencies. Australia's knowledge of these cross-cutting issues must remain a priority, and be heavily integrated into our foreign policy.

Further, our position in the Pacific was often praised by our colleagues, and I commend DFAT for providing assistance to this region to the extent that Australia is now seen as an extremely valuable and positive force.

Despite this however, I saw that Australia's presence in Asia is lacking. The region is a rapidly emerging power, and Australia had little impact or influence among key leaders.

I believe, following many discussions, that this is due to our tendency to give bilateral over multilateral aid. And while I do believe bilateral aid plays a very important role in furthering our position in the AP region, our failure to increase our aid budget - such as demonstrated by recent cuts to Australian Aid, and only small increase to our Global Fund pledge - has bolstered the image of neighbouring countries on the international stage meanwhile Australia falls behind as we quietly commit to country-specific programs or awarding significant grants to undergraduate students whose work is yet to be informed or diplomatically inclined.

I also believe that a big challenge in the region right now is health, and subsequently, education. Health is a key driver of economy, and whilst dealing with such damaging epidemics as tuberculosis, the region will not be able to contribute within the international space to the level that it should. More investments need to be made in health systems and institutionalisation of health care to build resilience to these diseases. Further, immunisations and vaccines should be more readily accessible and available (through support of such multilateral donor programs as Gavi and the Global Fund, for example).

Education also unfortunately lacks funding globally, with 61 million and 65 million children not in lower or higher education schemes respectively. Further, over 250 children finish their schooling without basic literacy or numerical skills - UNESCO concerningly noting that less than one third of all countries meet Global Education Goals.

I have personally worked in schools in rural India, and after experiencing the levels of education provided by the Government schools, I strongly believe that disadvantaged students coming out of this system will not have the capacity or opportunities to meaningfully contribute to international discourse due to lacking critical thinking skills. Further, and in reference to my last point, children would often miss school due to illness, or more often, the illness of their parents resulting in their inability to pay school fees. Principles of social protection such as insurance need to be strengthened and enforced - the private sector needs to be consulted and innovation in loans and insurance systems sought.

Further, I believe our focus on the private industry, and SMEs especially, is lacking; which is an extremely significant contributor to Asia's economy. A significant gap currently exists between SME owners and resilience building practices, and this space, albeit challenging, is one that requires attention and innovation.

I therefore believe that our foreign policy should be guided by two main considerations:

1. We increase our aid budget generally to become competitive internationally - especially in Asia. We are in a very powerful position, at an extremely significant time, and we need to use our economic capacities to cement our importance in, and help to grow, a rapidly changing region that we need to be considered a part of. Further, this would allow investment in the future, with the aim of positioning Australia in Asia much in the way we are in the Pacific. This should focus on resilience building to poverty-related thematic inequalities.
2. We adopt a whole of society approach that is in line with the cross-cutting issues illustrated between the SDGs, Sendai Framework, and the Paris Agreement. This includes a focus on measures to reduce extreme poverty within which all stakeholders are considered. When implementing or guiding local and national level policy we must be always thinking of such key stakeholders as the private sector, science and technology, academia, multilateral-agencies, religious organisations, civil society, gender groups, disability, and safe schools initiatives. The building of coalitions and support of UN agencies and bodies should be a priority.

And finally, I believe in respect to my earlier comment, that this be accompanied by a national educational scheme to shift the understanding of aid away from purely charity, and away from 'cure', to focus on resilience and investment. I understand how difficult this would be, however, aid needs to be prioritised and rethought of as a means of empowering *us*, as well as those we serve.

Yours Sincerely,

Alyssa