



A parliamentary committee on aid? Issues and options

Ashlee Betteridge and Stephen Howes

SUMMARY

Parliamentary inquiries into the Australian aid program have been few and far between. An aid committee or subcommittee would improve parliamentary oversight of aid. This brief explores the different forms that a committee on aid could take and suggests what it should focus on.

KEY POINTS

- There have only been three parliamentary inquiries into aid since 2001. Given the expansion and importance of Australia's aid program, this is not enough.
- Several countries other than Australia have much more active and structured parliamentary oversight of their aid programs, including the UK, Canada and Germany.
- Greater parliamentary oversight could be achieved by a new committee or subcommittee; or by renaming an existing committee to indicate a greater focus on aid.
- Many aid reviews and evaluations are already produced, but their quality is uneven and their impact is often minimal. The focus of parliamentary oversight should be on existing reviews and evaluations of the aid program, with the aim of ensuring high quality outputs that are acted on.
- Recent changes to the way aid is organised and delivered (i.e. the abolition of AusAID) increase the importance of parliamentary oversight.
- There appeared to be strong bipartisan support in the last Parliament for a new committee or subcommittee on aid. This Parliament should ensure that support is translated into action.

The **Development Policy Centre** is part of the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University. We undertake analysis and promote discussion on **Australian aid, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific** and **global development policy**.

A parliamentary committee on aid?

Issues and options

INTRODUCTION

Inquiries into the effectiveness of the Australian aid program have been few and far between. Throughout the last decade, despite the massive growth in the aid program, parliamentary scrutiny of aid delivery and impact has largely remained limited to Senate Estimates hearings.

This policy brief examines the important role that parliamentary oversight can play in improving aid effectiveness. It provides an overview of previous inquiries into aid in Australia and international examples of parliamentary oversight. The brief explores the different forms that a committee or subcommittee on aid could take in the Australian context, and discusses what the mandate or focus of such a committee should be, as well as the benefits and the challenges.

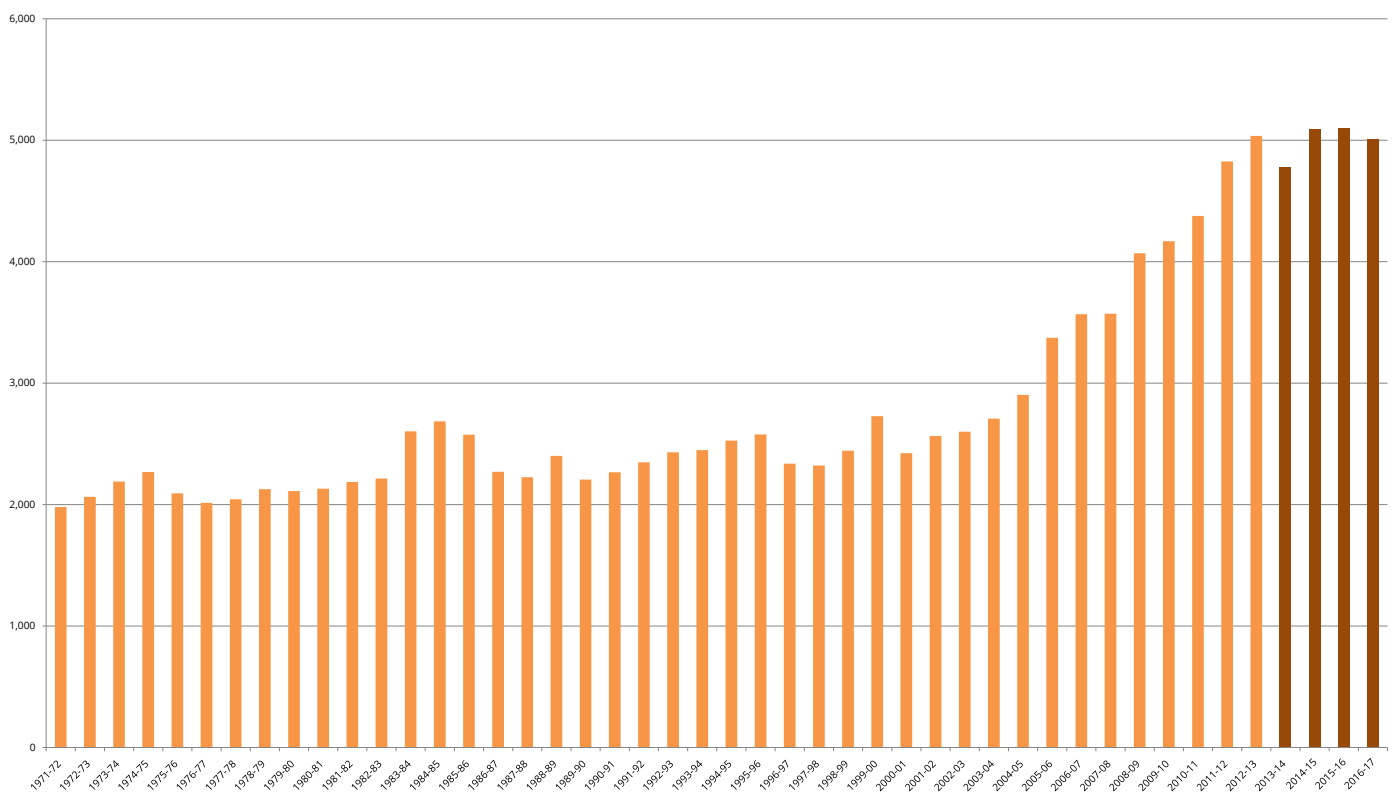
AUSTRALIA'S AID PROGRAM

The Australian aid budget has **undergone unprecedented growth** this century. In 2000-01, the aid program was some \$2.4 billion (2011-12 prices) in size. Today, even after inflation, it is double that at \$4.8 billion (2011-12 prices).

The aid program has not only increased in terms of dollar value over the last decade; it has also spread geographically. Aid to Africa and South Asia, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, has increased sharply during this period of growth.

The newly-elected Coalition government has announced that for the next three years aid will only be adjusted for inflation, so will not grow in real terms. It has also announced that the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) will be integrated into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Australian ODA (\$ million, 2011-12 prices)



Source: Budget documents

Regardless of whether there is future growth, and regardless of whether AusAID exists as a separate entity, the aid program is already much larger than it used to be and a more significant component of total government spending and activity. At the turn of the century, aid represented about 90 cents in every \$100 the Commonwealth spent. Today it is about \$1.30. The abolition of AusAID also strengthens the case for parliamentary oversight, as discussed later in this brief.

GROWING CALLS FOR PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT

The question of parliamentary oversight of the aid program was raised in the [2011 Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness](#). It found that parliamentarians were informed on issues of aid and development, but argued that engagement could be “further strengthened through a parliamentary committee or subcommittee focused on aid and development” (p.32).

Australia’s peak body for international non-government organisations (NGOs), the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), has also [called for](#) the formation of an aid subcommittee. An independent task force convened by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Foundation for Development Cooperation in 2011 to examine how the aid program could better support defence strategy [reiterated this call for a subcommittee](#) under the Joint Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT).

This recommendation was further supported by John Evers in a 2012 [blog post](#) and discussion paper for the Development Policy Centre on aid to fragile and conflict affected countries. Evers, a former Chief Adviser (International) to Treasury, suggested that establishing an aid and development subcommittee of JSCFADT would improve the attention given to the aid program in Senate Estimates, “which tends to be dominated by the most topical issues”.

Evers wrote that:

[A subcommittee] could do justice to the forthcoming work of the Independent Evaluation Committee¹, and more broadly to AusAID’s extensive reporting on its programs. It could also have a salutary influence on other agencies involved in delivering Australia’s aid... asking whether their contributions are sufficiently selective, well-coordinated and guided by internal and external evaluations.

The recent inquiry into [The administration, management and objective of Australia’s overseas development programs in Afghanistan in the context of the ‘Transition Decade’](#), conducted by the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, contained a similar recommendation in its May 2013 report:

The committee recommends that the Parliament consider establishing a parliamentary standing committee or dedicated subcommittee of an existing standing committee charged with examining and reporting on Australia’s ODA. Among other benefits, this committee could be the catalyst needed to improve the standard of reporting on Australia’s ODA, especially Australia’s whole-of-government effort in delivering overseas aid. It may also be a means of raising public awareness of the work being done with Australia’s ODA.

During [AusAID’s Senate Estimates appearance in June 2013](#), Senator David Fawcett said that the JSCFADT had raised the issue of a subcommittee on aid multiple times with the Foreign Minister’s office, stating that there was bipartisan support. Foreign Minister Bob Carr replied that he supported the idea of an aid subcommittee, but flagged cost as an issue and a potential conflict if AusAID were to provide funding for the operation of a subcommittee. Committee costs are addressed later in this brief.

¹ The Independent Evaluation Committee oversees the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE), which is responsible for undertaking evaluations of the aid program.

PREVIOUS INQUIRIES INTO THE AUSTRALIAN AID PROGRAM

Inquiries into the Australian aid program have been limited. Aid has sometimes been factored into larger reviews of strategic relations between countries (such as the 2002 JSCFADT inquiry into Australia's relationship with Indonesia or the 2010 JSCFADT inquiry into Australia's relationship with the countries of Africa) or those on broader issues that encompass development (such as the 2007 Senate inquiry into Australia's involvement in peacekeeping). Submissions to the 2013 inquiry into [Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste](#) (under JSCFADT) covered aid and other forms of development engagement (the committee has not yet produced its report).

Aid issues are also occasionally discussed as part of legislation inquiries in the Senate—the [African Development Bank Bill 2013 \[provisions\]](#) inquiry was a recent example of this, as was the inquiry into the [International Fund for Agricultural Development Amendment Bill 2012](#). As these cases show, the subject matter tends to be very specific, and the scope of the inquiry limited. Though they are no doubt important and valuable, we do not count them as aid inquiries for the purpose of this brief.

[Senate Estimates](#) are conducted twice a year by eight Senate legislation committees, with officers from the aid program appearing before the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade committee. The Senate Estimates process is designed to examine proposed expenditure. Public servants appearing at Estimates are limited to answering questions of fact, and the process provides little opportunity for the discussion or analysis of policy. As Eyers highlighted, questions tend to be dominated by issues of the day, such as those raised in media coverage.

Outside of the legislation inquiries process in the Senate, there have been just three parliamentary committee inquiries into aid since 2001:

- A 2001 JSCFADT inquiry specifically examined the link [between aid and human rights](#).
- In 2006 the JSCFADT human rights subcommittee conducted an inquiry into [Australian aid to the Pacific](#).
- The 2012 inquiry into [The administration, management and objective of Australia's overseas development programs in Afghanistan in the context of the 'Transition Decade'](#) was conducted by the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (FADT) and produced an extensive report this year. The government has not yet responded.

COMMITTEE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION IN THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT

There are multiple types of committees in the Australian parliamentary system in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as joint committees involving representatives from both the upper and lower houses.

Most committees cover large portfolio areas, sometimes encompassing multiple government departments and agencies. However, there is some duplication of topic areas—for example, there is a Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, as well as a subcommittee on human rights under the JSCFADT, though they each have different responsibilities.

[Committees](#) conduct inquiries and hearings, gathering evidence (including from external experts) and making recommendations based on the information collected. They also have wide (but rarely used) powers to compel witnesses to appear or to call for documents (in the Senate, such powers are only available to a committee if the Senate delegates them). Committees also facilitate direct contact between members of the public, MPs and senators and encourage some degree of specialisation in the representatives serving on committees.



Australian aid to Afghanistan was the subject of the most recent parliamentary inquiry into aid.

TYPES OF COMMITTEES

At the highest level, there are three types of committee: select, statutory and standing. Select committees are appointed as the need arises for a specific purpose, and have a limited life. Statutory committees are those established by an Act of Parliament. Standing committees are of most relevance to this brief. Standing committees are appointed at the beginning of each Parliament, for the life of the Parliament. They can be House, Senate or Joint committees.

In the Senate, each standing committee is made up of a pair of committees: a references committee and a legislation committee. Senate references committees inquire into general matters referred to them by the chamber, based on terms of reference, which can vary considerably in scope. Senate legislation committees inquire into and report on government budget proposals (i.e. estimates and appropriations), bills or draft bills and annual reports or other government administration documents that are referred to them.

Bills are routinely referred to Senate legislation committees, which handle the bulk of committee

activity in the Senate. For example, in the 42nd Parliament, 356 matters were referred to Senate legislation committees, while only 40 matters were referred to Senate references committees.

References committee inquiries tend to be wider and issues-based, instead of looking at the details of a single piece of legislation. Hence they attract a higher volume of submissions on average and require a larger time commitment from senators.

In the House of Representatives, there are two types of standing committees—investigative and domestic. Domestic committees deal with matters relating to the internal operations of the lower house. Investigative committees examine matters of public policy or government administration.

Joint standing committees are established by a resolution agreed to by both houses, and their membership comprises both MPs and senators. Reports from their inquiries are presented to both houses of Parliament.

In the 43rd Parliament, there were 15 House of Representatives standing committees, eight pairs of Senate reference and legislation committees and seven joint standing committees.

HOW COMMITTEES ARE CHOSEN

The size of lower house and joint committees varies. Membership of lower house committees is [proportional](#) to the representation of the government, opposition and minor parties in the parliament. This means they are typically chaired by a government member, with an opposition member as deputy. The political parties nominate committee members.

In the Senate, legislation committees consist of three government members, two opposition members and one member from a minority party or an independent senator. References committees have three opposition members, two government members and one independent or minority party member. Government senators chair the legislation committees with opposition, minority party or independent senators as deputy chairs. Opposition or minority party senators chair the references committees with government senators elected as deputy chairs. Senators who are interested in the work of a particular committee, but who are not members of it, can attend as participating members, though they cannot vote on matters before the committee. [Subcommittees in the Senate](#) consist of three or more members from the main committee.

The composition of a joint committee is determined by its resolution of appointment, agreed upon by both houses. The [JSCFADT resolution of appointment](#) provides for a membership comprising 13 government MPs, nine opposition MPs, five government senators, five opposition senators and two independent or minority senators. A government member is chair.

COMMITTEES CURRENTLY DEALING WITH AID OR DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Inquiries currently covering aid and development issues typically fall under one of two committees: the JSCFADT and the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. The JSCFADT has a subcommittee on human rights, which ran the 2001 inquiry into aid and human rights and the 2006 inquiry into Pacific aid (from a human rights and security perspective). The Senate committee was responsible for the recent report on aid to Afghanistan.

COMMITTEE COSTS

The costs of carrying out an inquiry vary depending on the number of submissions received, the length of hearings or consultations, the need for any committee travel to support the investigation process and any commissioning of additional expert advice.

Breakdowns of expenditure per individual inquiry or committee are not included in public reports. However, according to the [Annual Report 2011-2012](#) of the Department of the Senate's Committee Office, a typical secretariat for a committee in 2011-12 cost around \$490,000 for staffing with an additional \$60,000 in administrative expenses. Senator and MP salaries are not included in committee expenses. Flights and accommodation costs for senators attending hearings are paid for by the Department of Finance and Deregulation, while Hansard and broadcasting services for committees are provided by the Department of Parliamentary Services.

It is possible DFAT might second, at its own cost, a staff member or members to the secretariat for a particular inquiry or series of inquiries. It is also possible DFAT would occasionally fund the provision of expert advice to the committee, if requested. However, in general the costs to DFAT associated with inquiries would be minimal or nil. In addition, the provision of support to the secretariat, if requested, could not be considered to constitute a conflict of interest (as was suggested by Senator Carr, see p. 3 of this brief), since it is the members of the committee, not the secretariat, who conduct inquiries and make findings. Costs, from whatever source, might be reportable as Official Development Assistance (ODA), but they would be tiny relative to the total aid budget, and would be a worthwhile investment in aid effectiveness.

International examples of oversight committees

United Kingdom

In the UK, the [International Development Committee \(IDC\)](#), appointed by the House of Commons, examines the expenditure, administration and policy of the UK aid agency, the Department for International Development (DFID).

The committee consists of 11 backbench parliamentarians and sets its own agenda for inquiries. It was created in 1997 in response to the creation of DFID.

The committee [invites](#) written submissions and engages experts from civil society, academia, and overseas development partners to give oral evidence on the subject of an inquiry. The IDC also scrutinises DFID's annual report and makes recommendations on aid spending. Between 2010 and 2012, the committee published [16 reports](#), and in 2012-13 [11 reports](#) were published (see box).

The [Subcommittee on the Independent Commission on Aid Impact \(ICAI\)](#) works alongside the main committee. It examines the work of the independent commission established by the UK government to evaluate DFID's effectiveness. It analyses ICAI reports and DFID's response to them. It is comprised of five appointed members from the larger committee.

Prior to the IDC, committee scrutiny of development assistance in the UK tended to be reactive or triggered by problems and only took place infrequently "rather than the ongoing process of dialogue between the IDC and DFID that exists now" (Burrell et al 2009, p.16).

The IDC has been a strong voice for aid effectiveness, not only within the UK aid program, but internationally. For example, in a 2011 review of UK contributions to the World Bank, the committee [called for](#) reform and increased accountability at the multilateral lender. Findings from committee inquiries have generated significant media coverage and public debate on the UK aid program, its effectiveness and DFID's relationships with multilateral and bilateral partners.



Topics of UK IDC reports 2012-13

- DFID's contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- Scrutiny of arms exports
- Tax in developing countries: increasing resources for development
- DFID's program in Zambia
- The development situation in Malawi
- Afghanistan: development progress and prospects after 2014
- UK aid to Rwanda
- Post-2015 development goals
- DFID's Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011
- UK aid to Pakistan
- The future of UK Development Cooperation (written evidence)
- Global food security (written evidence)



Aid experts addressing a US Senate subcommittee

United States

Under the US system, committees have the power to prevent bills from proceeding and can make substantive amendments and propose legislation, consequently handling a large part of Congress' work. Every bill is **referred to a committee or subcommittee** for study and recommendations before being considered in Congress.

The **US House Committee on Foreign Affairs** is responsible for oversight and legislation on foreign assistance in the lower house and can conduct public hearings and interrogate witnesses. The committee also sets priority areas for oversight every two years. The **US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations** holds annual hearings on the USAID budget. The **Subcommittee on International Development and Foreign Assistance, Economic Affairs, International Environmental Protection, and Peace Corps** has oversight responsibility for US development policy and foreign assistance programs. It also has responsibility on monetary policy, including US participation in the World Bank. Legislative and other matters may be referred to the subcommittee by senators for consideration or vote.

European Union

The European Parliament has a **permanent standing committee on development**, which scrutinises the objectives of the European Commission's development spending (EuropeAid) and the development policy of the European Parliament. The committee compiles reports on policy areas up for debate in the Parliament and makes recommendations. The committee also helps set the budget and is responsible for political dialogue with developing countries and engagement in interparliamentary fora.

It also has the power to commission research studies or reports to inform its decision-making and recommendations.

Canada

Canada has a **House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**, which added international development to its title in 2006 and dropped international trade (a standalone **International Trade Committee** was subsequently formed). Under the main committee, there is also a subcommittee on **International Human Rights**.

The committee studies and reports on matters referred to it by the House of Commons, and scrutinises the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (the Canadian Agency for International Development was folded into the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade in early 2013) as well as autonomous aid agencies such as the International Development Research Centre. In the most recent session of Parliament, the committee undertook studies and reports on topics such as the corporate practices of companies in developing countries, Canada's development assistance to Ethiopia, the role of the private sector in international development and the plight of North Korean refugees in China.

Germany

The Bundestag has a **Committee on Economic Cooperation and Development**. It focuses on global social justice issues and is **responsible for** preparing parliamentary negotiations and decisions and following them up, including through public inquiries and hearings.

The Bundestag also has a **Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid**, which looks closely at human rights issues in developing countries. Development policy topics are also dealt with by the Foreign Affairs committee and the Budget Committee. **Study committees** comprised of Bundestag members and external experts examine areas relevant to development policy to inform decision-making. Additionally, committees of inquiry can be **established** to investigate specific issues or topics.

OPTIONS FOR CREATING A DEDICATED COMMITTEE OR SUBCOMMITTEE

There are three distinct options for establishing a committee or subcommittee focused on ODA in Australia.

1. A standalone committee on aid and development could be established, either as a House, Senate or Joint committee. This could be challenging to achieve because in recent parliaments there has been a tendency to limit the number of committees to moderate the workload of MPs and senators.
2. As recommended by Eyers, an aid subcommittee could be established under the JSCFADT. Given that most of the inquiries in the past that have examined aid have fallen under this committee, it seems like a logical choice. This would also enable subcommittee members to be drawn from both the upper and lower houses, engaging a broader spectrum of representatives. Alternatively, a subcommittee could be formed under the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (FADT) references committee.
3. If there is little momentum to create a dedicated committee or subcommittee, the mandate of an existing committee could be expanded to more explicitly include aid and development in its terms of reference and title. For example, the title of the JSCFADT could be changed to add 'international development', such as in the Canadian example (p. 8), and the committee terms of reference could more clearly define its mandate and role in scrutiny of aid. The recent merger of AusAID with DFAT could make this an attractive example to follow, though there is a strong case for giving aid its own committee or subcommittee to ensure that it receives adequate attention. A final option in this renaming category, and the least ambitious, would be to turn the subcommittee on human rights under JSCFADT into a subcommittee on human rights and aid.

All three options would represent a big step forward. Choosing where to place any new committee or subcommittee would also be an important decision. If a subcommittee were formed under JSCFADT, it would likely be a government majority committee. If it were formed under the Senate's FADT references committee, then it would have an opposition or minority party chair and majority. This could influence factors such as the likelihood for recommendations of an inquiry to be taken up by the government or the level of criticism of current government policy in the committee reports.

AREAS OF FOCUS FOR ANY NEW COMMITTEE OR SUBCOMMITTEE

Investigating aid is not an easy task, and there are already mechanisms to hold Australian aid to account. One pressing problem though is that no one takes much notice of the evaluative output already being produced. The ODE, which has responsibility for evaluating the Australian aid program, produces regular thematic, country and synthesis evaluations. The Australian National Audit Office conducts an audit of some aspect of the aid program every one or two years, and the aid program itself produces an Annual Review of Aid Effectiveness.

Rather than launching new inquiries, what we really need is a body that will read the ones that are produced, and comment on them. Without this mechanism on the demand side, there is no guarantee that the supply of evaluative documents will have any impact at all, or even that they will be read. With parliamentarians looking at aid reviews and evaluations, there's much greater likelihood that this material will be written to a higher quality, be taken more seriously and responded to more promptly and fully.

This is in line with what the UK International Development Committee does. As noted above, although the UK also launches its own inquiries, it also reviews DFID Annual Reports, and has its own subcommittee which monitors and reviews the work of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, the UK's (more independent) version of our own ODE.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The benefits of a committee or subcommittee on aid include: improving the effectiveness of Australian aid; scrutinising whole-of-government approaches; increasing parliamentary and community engagement; and strengthening Australia's voice in international aid and development debates.

Improving the effectiveness of Australian aid

A dedicated committee or subcommittee in Australia could create a space for the investigation, consideration and discussion of aid and development policy based on questions of effectiveness and efficiency.

In particular, giving existing evaluative reports greater scrutiny and profile would increase both their quality and their impact. Making them the centre of the envisaged committee's focus would also reduce the prospect of additional work and unmanageable mandates. The integration of AusAID within DFAT strengthens the case for greater parliamentary oversight as it would help offset the risk that, without a dedicated aid agency, aid effectiveness reforms will receive less attention. Aid will no longer be the subject of separate Senate Estimates inquiries.

Scrutinising whole of government approaches

As highlighted by Evers, there is the opportunity for an aid committee or subcommittee to assess the effectiveness of different departments in "whole-of- government" approaches to aid, either generally or in particular regions. If several departments are involved in aid delivery, a parliamentary committee is one of the few mechanisms available to take a holistic rather than a departmental view. This was one benefit of the recent Afghanistan aid review, which itself cited this as a potential benefit of a dedicated committee focused on ODA.

Increasing parliamentary engagement

The main finding of a 2009 assessment of the role of the legislature in UK and US aid effectiveness was that the "legislature and the executive must forge and sustain a sense of shared objectives for the spending of the aid budget, including shared principles and approaches on how development

is done more broadly" to allow an aid agency to have sufficient discretion to work effectively (Burall et al 2009).

Whether or not parliamentary deliberations result in consensus, a committee or subcommittee on aid would definitely increase parliamentary engagement with and understanding of the aid program. Through a dedicated committee or subcommittee, parliamentarians would have the opportunity to learn more about the aid program and increase their engagement with experts and stakeholders in the aid and development sector, as well as interested community members. This would better inform broader political discussion on aid and development.

Informing and encouraging community interest

Inquiries would also encourage submissions from the public and interested stakeholder groups, opening the door for increased opportunities for participation and feedback from the broader community on aid and development issues.

While media coverage generated by committee inquiries in Australia has tended to be limited (Monk 2009), the findings of an inquiry have the potential to generate media attention, particularly if helped by the communications efforts of the sector and other stakeholders or through proactive and engaged committee members.

In a study of the media coverage generated by inquiries between 2001-04, Senate references committees tended to generate the most coverage (Monk 2009). In the current media environment, however, there is also a risk that an inquiry opens the door for journalists to cherry-pick 'scandals' from a report to produce misleading or unbalanced coverage. This is another reason why meaningful engagement and follow-up would be critical to the success of any dedicated committee on aid or development.

Strengthening Australia's voice in international debates

Since Australia has become a more significant donor, it should also play a stronger, more vocal role in shaping and informing global development policy. The IDC in the UK has not only weighed in on how the UK aid program should be improved, but also on reforms to multilateral and regional organisations. The EU Development Committee has also contributed to these bigger debates.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Several challenges and questions could arise from any process of implementing an aid committee or subcommittee.

Too many committees, not enough time?

A challenge for those advocating for a committee or subcommittee on aid could be the current workload of MPs and senators. Committee work already forms a significant part of the workload for senators in particular. Senators currently spend **around three times** the amount of time in committee meetings and hearings than they do in the Senate chamber for sitting days.

In a **2010 speech** on the future of the senate, Greens Senator Christine Milne advocated for reducing the number of, and better prioritising, inquiries because stakeholders and industry groups were experiencing ‘inquiry fatigue’—they felt disillusioned that the large amount of work they had put into submissions had been met with very limited hearing time and a very limited government response.

While the volume of inquiries will ultimately be decided by Parliament, inquiry fatigue in relation to aid seems unlikely given the current dearth of aid and development inquiries. Focusing on existing evaluative reports and their follow-up would help conserve investigative resources.

Pressure on aid program resources

The information requirements of a subcommittee or committee on aid may increase pressure on the time of aid program staff. Again, if the committee largely focused on examining existing reports and publications from the aid program and ODE, this would go a long way to mitigating the potential human resource burden of a new committee.

Sufficient expertise to inform inquiries

Committee secretariats are staffed by general parliamentary staff rather than specialists, and committee members also rotate frequently, without enough time to develop deep knowledge of a particular field. Without specialist, highly developed understanding of aid issues, would

inquiries or committee oversight really generate beneficial recommendations?

There are multiple sources of information for committee members throughout an inquiry process. They can access research resources and support through the Parliamentary Library or through their committee secretariat. They can call on experts to provide advice or to speak at hearings, and a large volume of information is received from interested stakeholders through submissions. If committee members built strong relationships with the sector, this could help grow knowledge, expertise and dialogue. And, once again, if the focus is on reviewing existing outputs, this will enable the parliamentarians and their staff to make maximum use of existing aid program expertise.

CONCLUSION

The massive growth of the Australian aid budget over the last decade warrants the attention of a dedicated parliamentary committee or subcommittee.

A parliamentary committee or subcommittee could provide a forum for information, debate, investigation and expert advice. It would ensure that aid effectiveness is given the priority it deserves and could raise the profile of aid among parliamentarians and the wider community.

There are three options for pursuing a parliamentary committee or subcommittee: creating a new committee; creating a new subcommittee; or renaming an existing committee or subcommittee to indicate a greater focus on aid. The consensus in the last Parliament appeared to be in favour of creating a new aid subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. This would be a good outcome, but there is no single best option. What is important is that one of these options be pursued so that parliamentary oversight of aid is expanded.

Rather than writing new reports, we suggest that the new or revamped committee or subcommittee focus on reviewing the evaluative outputs from the aid program and the ODE that currently have a limited audience, ODE’s individual evaluations and annual synthesis, as well as the aid program’s Annual Review of Aid Effectiveness.

Committee meetings could be regularly scheduled around the release of these reports. With parliamentarians looking at aid reviews and evaluations, there's a much greater likelihood that this material will be written to a higher quality, be taken more seriously, and responded to more promptly and fully.

The parliamentary committee system is imperfect, but greater parliamentary oversight of aid would be a step forward. Given that the aid sector has already expressed support for this idea and, more importantly, that there has recently been bipartisan support in Parliament itself, it appears to be a promising time, as well as an important time, to ensure greater parliamentary oversight of aid.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ashlee Betteridge is a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre.

Professor Stephen Howes is the Director of the Development Policy Centre.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of Crawford School of Public Policy or The Australian National University.

devpolicy.anu.edu.au

References

Burall, S, White, JM and Blick, A (2009) 'The impact of US and UK legislatures on aid delivery', The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Economic Policy Paper Series 09.

<http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/3547-us-uk-legislatures-aid-delivery>

Eyers, J (2012) 'Aid to fragile and conflict-affected countries: a review of the literature and Australia's approach,' Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper no. 21, Australian National University, Canberra.

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2103471

Grant, R (2009) 'Can we account for committee effectiveness? A survey of committee secretaries', Parliamentary Studies Paper 9, Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra.

http://www.parliamentarystudies.anu.edu.au/pdf/publications/PSP09_grant.pdf

Holland, I (2009) 'Senate committees and the legislative process', Parliamentary Studies Paper 7, Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra.

http://www.parliamentarystudies.anu.edu.au/pdf/publications/PSP07_Holland.pdf

Howes, S and Pryke, J (2012) 'Australian aid to Afghanistan: submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Reference Committee,' Development Policy Centre, Australian National University, Canberra.

<http://devpolicy.anu.edu.au/pdf/2012/australian-aid-to-afghanistan.pdf>

Interparliamentary Union (2009) 'Making aid work: towards better development results – practical guidance for parliamentarians on the role of parliaments in development effectiveness'

<http://www.aideffectiveness.org/images/stories/ParliamentsDevEffectivenessGuidanceNote-FirstEdition.pdf>

Monk, D (2009) 'In the eye of the beholder? A framework for testing the effectiveness of parliamentary committees', Parliamentary Studies Paper 10, Crawford School of Economics and Government, Australian National University, Canberra.

http://www.parliamentarystudies.anu.edu.au/pdf/publications/PSP10_Monk.pdf