

**DEVELOPMENT**  
POLICY CENTRE

# **Review of Development Policy Centre work on aid and development**

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## 1. Introduction

In the second half of 2023 and early 2024, the Development Policy Centre conducted an internal review of the work that it undertakes on aid and development.

Specifically, the review focused on the Centre's:

- Aid Tracker;
- Devpolicy blog;
- Aid budget breakfast;
- discussion papers, reports and submissions; and
- its collaboration with other partners.

The review was designed to provide insights into the value of the Centre's work, as well as scope for improvement and expansion.

The review excluded the Centre's work on Papua New Guinea, the Pacific region, labour mobility and the Australasian Aid Conference as these are evaluated through different mechanisms.

Reflecting the input from key stakeholders, the review's central findings are very positive. Overall, stakeholders appreciated the work the Centre does and feel that it has an important place in the Australian aid community. At the same time, stakeholders also provided suggestions for improvements, changes and expansion. These suggestions range from relatively minor adjustments regarding how we communicate and the content we feature through our various platforms and events to more significant changes that would require further consideration and, in some cases, additional resources. For this reason, we conclude the report with a section on potential future directions that group these changes and improvements according to whether they could be implemented within existing resources or would require additional resourcing.

## 2. Methods

This review is not an in-depth external evaluation. Such an undertaking may be useful in the future but would require additional resources. To maximise learnings and insights within the time and resources available to the Centre, this internal review was designed to be undertaken in an efficient manner.

The review's central objective was to gather a diverse range of views from key stakeholders, as well as the aid community more generally, allowing the Development Policy Centre to obtain a snapshot of the utility of its work, and gain insights on potential changes, improvements and expansion.

Although the review drew on some existing data such as attendance rates and web-use statistics, the primary means of gathering data was online surveys. The surveys were run in September and October 2023.

The surveys gathered quantitative data to provide a snapshot of engagement with the Centre's work. The most substantive part of the surveys, however, involved questions designed to elicit in-depth responses. These qualitative questions were designed to provide a detailed sense of what was working, what could be improved, and if there was additional work the Centre should consider undertaking.

Survey invitations were sent first to key stakeholders. Typically, these were people who occupied important roles in the Australian development community, such as senior management in DFAT, university researchers and think tank personnel and senior leaders in INGOs. Subsequently, the survey was opened to the broader development community.

All told, the survey received 45 complete responses. Just over half came from targeted key stakeholders. Figure 1 shows a breakdown of all respondents by the organisation type. Figure 2 shows the roles of people who completed the survey. Figure 3 shows where respondents were based.

As Figure 1 shows, respondents come from a broad cross section of the aid sector, including good representation from DFAT (almost all of the respondents under the category 'government'), aid contractors (private sector) and INGOs.

**Figure 1 – Organisations respondents came from**

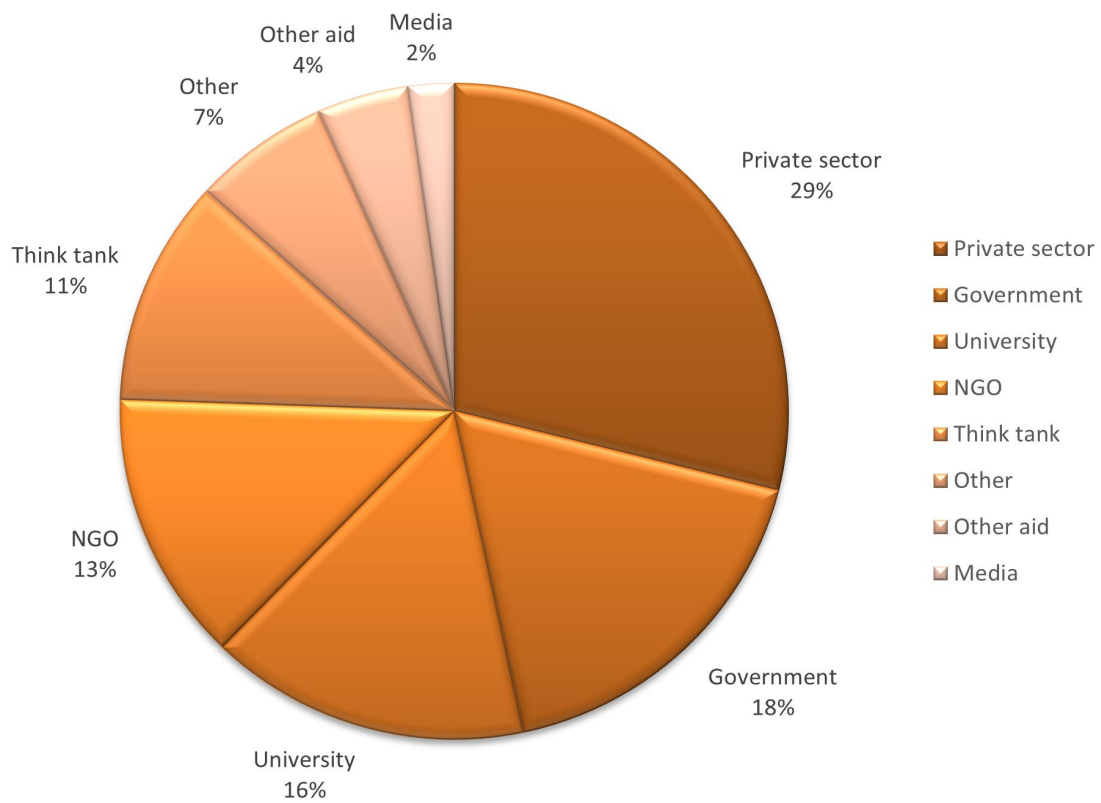


Figure 2 shows that, commensurate with our strategy of targeting key stakeholders, most respondents were in senior roles.

**Figure 2 – Respondent role**

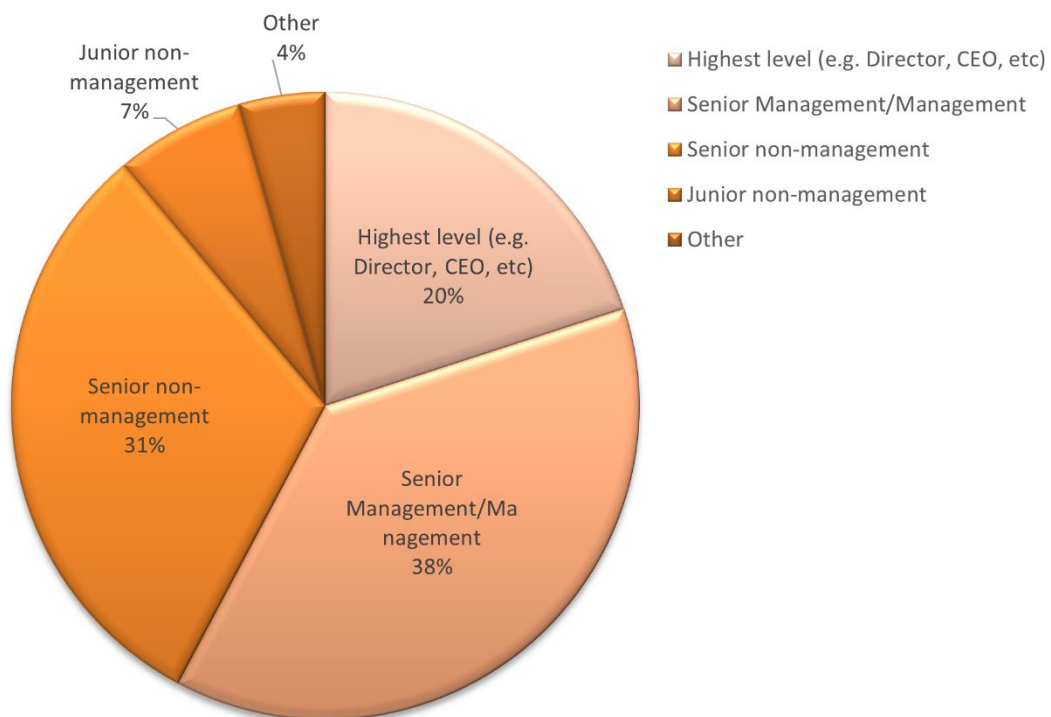
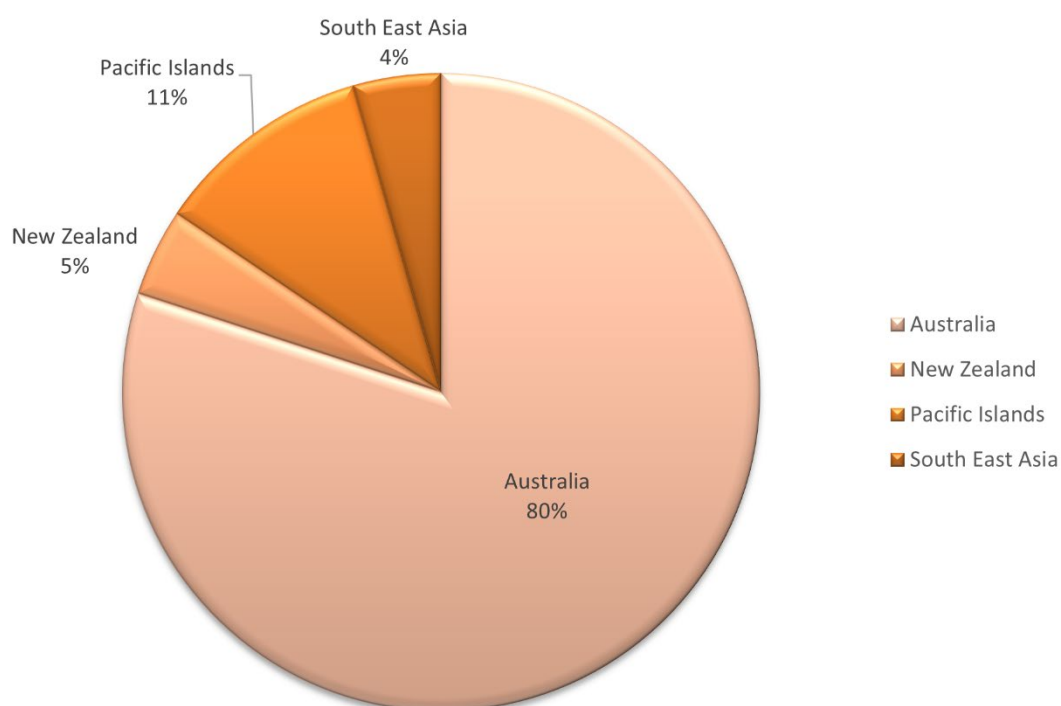


Figure 3 shows respondent location. As might be expected given the Australian aid focus of the Development Policy Centre’s work, and the location of the targeted participants, the bulk of respondents were based in Australia. The Centre’s work does have a broader international reach, however. Future evaluations could potentially be designed to draw on a participant pool from a wider range of countries.

**Figure 3 – Respondent location**



Although the internal review has proven an effective tool for efficiently gathering feedback on the Centre’s work, it is not an in-depth evaluation. It has a number of limitations that should be noted up front.

First, there is the issue of who the survey could and did reach. A survey of this nature could not be undertaken in a manner designed to reach people who were not aware of the Development Policy Centre’s work: targeted stakeholders came from the Australian aid community. Most members of this community are aware of the Centre, and any members who were not would have been unlikely to respond to the survey. The open section of the survey could be filled out by anyone, including those unaware of the Centre. However, we could only advertise it through the Centre’s tools. As a result, people who were oblivious of the Centre’s work would be very unlikely to see survey invitations. This is a shortcoming. However, it is not major – the purpose of the review was learn from those who know what the Centre does. Nevertheless, in a full future evaluation it may be desirable to learn

more from people who might benefit from the Centre's work, but who are unaware of it. This would be particularly relevant in Pacific countries.

Second, there is the issue of selection bias. We could not compel people to complete the survey. As a result, there is the risk that people who took the time to fill out the survey were an atypical subset of the Australian development community. This was a risk, and in a future evaluation might be minimised by more extensive outreach to targeted participants to ensure survey-completion rates are as high as possible. However, the data that we received for this internal review contained a pleasingly diverse range of views about the Centre's work. There was a lot of positive feedback, but there were also complaints and suggestions for improvement. Responses were not so biased towards people with a particular view on the Centre as to prevent the review from establishing useful findings.

Third, surveys such as the one used in this review are an efficient means of gathering a range of views, but they can't obtain as much in-depth information as interviews can. As the report demonstrates, we still received useful feedback, but in a future evaluation, important stakeholders would ideally be selected for in person interviews.

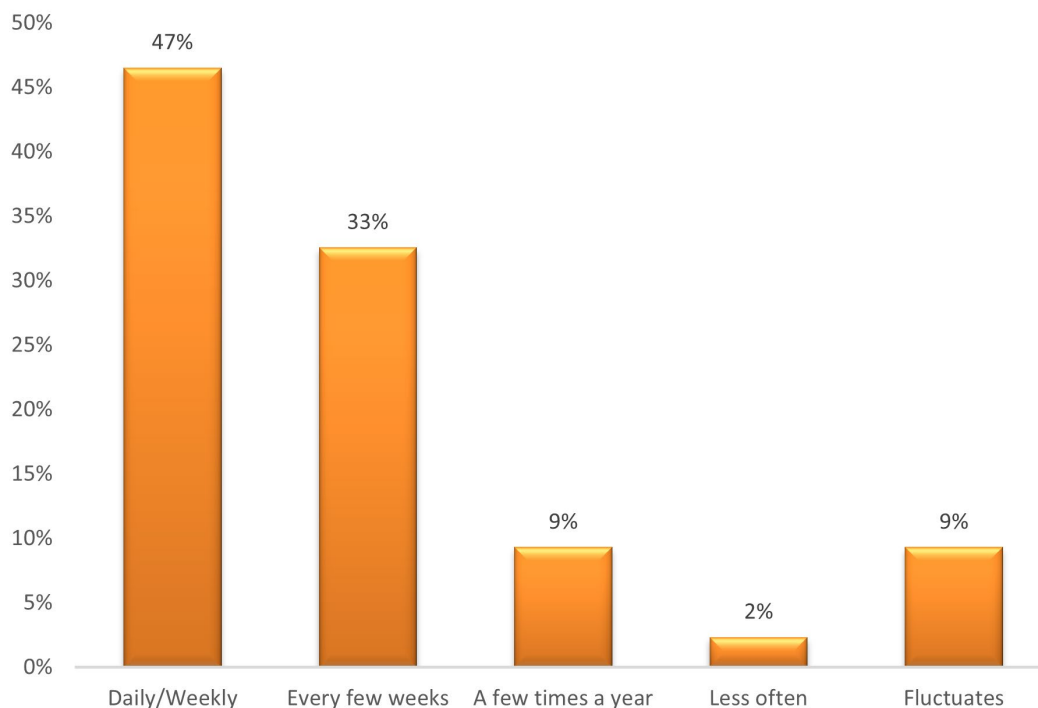
Finally, the Centre works in a wide range of areas above that the focus of this review and from time to time participants provided responses that reflected the Centre's other work, or which may have been affected by it. Such "contamination" was unavoidable. It was also impossible for us to isolate aid-related work in other aspects of the analysis such as publication statistics. Where the inability to separate different work programmes was a particular issue for analysis we have noted the problem in the text or in footnotes.

### 3 Findings

#### 3.1 Engagement and overall utility

Figure 4 shows how frequently respondents stated they engaged with the Centre’s work.

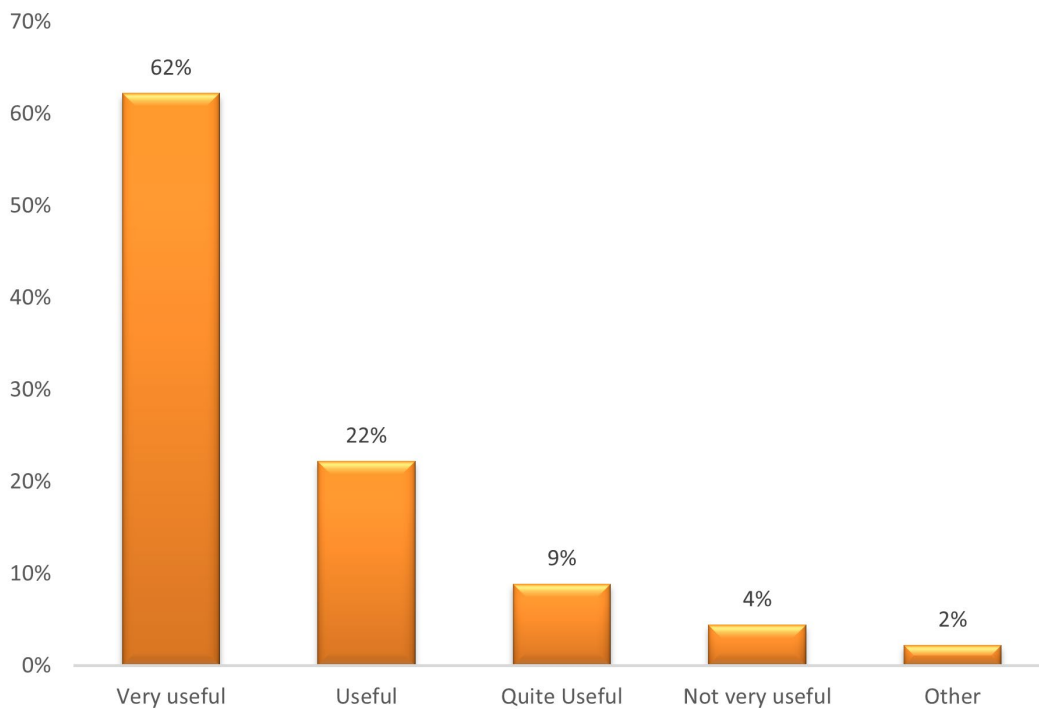
**Figure 4 – Frequency of engagement with Development Policy Centre work**



Nearly half of the respondents stated they engage with Development Policy Centre work on a daily or weekly basis. Most of the remaining respondents engage at least every few weeks. (Although it is not shown on the chart, engagement was slightly higher among the targeted key stakeholders.)

Figure 5 shows the breakdown of survey participants’ responses when asked how useful they find the Centre’s work on aid and development in general.

**Figure 5 – the overall utility of the Development Policy Centre’s work on aid and Development**



84 per cent of respondents stated they found the work “useful” or “very useful”. If the data are limited to just the responses from targeted stakeholders in key development roles, 95 per cent of respondents replied that the Centre’s work was useful or very useful. Given that the targeted respondents were selected based on their central roles in the Australian aid sector, this is a very positive finding.

Unsurprisingly, given the preponderance of positive responses to the question on how useful respondents thought the Centre’s work was overall, most of the qualitative comments on the Centre’s performance were also positive.

Many of these comments pertained to specific products the Centre provides and these comments are included under the relevant sections later in this report, but there were also general comments. The following comments provide a sense of the overall tone of the general comments we received:

*“I appreciate the variety of insights and range of research presented through the blog and other avenues, and the coordinating role the Centre plays in bringing together those with a particular focus on Australian Aid.”*

*“Nobody else is doing it that well...If it isn’t happening externally at places like Devpolicy, I think at the moment it’s safe to say it isn’t really happening, so keeping up that kind of work, like the work on performance evaluation and transparency etc, is super important.”*



*“Very helpful to see trends in the work I do, which is for a managing contractor working specifically in PNG but impacts on learnings for similar programs in Pacific.”*

*“[The Centre’s work] is informative and analytical. Informative because it helps the audience [understand] Australia’s development priorities. [And] analytical in using aid information to help guide Australia’s development priorities to Pacific Island development needs.”*

*“I like the research of DevPol for its quality and depth.”*

*“The Centre’s work is, in many cases, indispensable.”*

*“Intelligent analysis of issues. Very useful stats and other research work.”*

*“Good analysis, timely papers, expert staff.”*

*“I just want to note my deep appreciation for the work the Centre does. Many thanks indeed.”*

*“Thanks for the work you do!”*

### 3.2 Criticisms, and suggestions for expansion and improvement

At various points in the survey, we asked respondents what the Centre could be doing better. Some respondents also took other opportunities to make criticisms during the survey. Some of these comments pertained to specific activities – such as the Aid Tracker or blog – and are covered in the relevant sections below.

Other critical comments focused on individual papers or presentations (one respondent, for example, expressed stated that a presentation on Tonga given several years ago was “otiose”). Given the Centre’s commitment to providing a diverse range of views, comments of these nature are useful to hear, but do not point to actual areas where systematic improvement is needed.

Some other critical comments were focused on Australian government aid itself, rather than the Development Policy Centre’s work. For obvious reasons, these were outside of the scope of this review.

However, a range of broad, useful criticisms and suggestions for improvements, or additional areas of work, were provided. These are covered in this section.

Some of the suggestions for expansion pointed to topics that the Centre already covers or has planned for 2024.

For example, one respondent suggested that, the Centre should provide, *“More comparative data on how Australia’s approach compares and contrasts to other donors and best practice.”* (Much of this information is available on the Aid Tracker.<sup>1</sup>)

Another respondent stated that, *“If I were you I would be gearing up for the (apparently) imminent increase in consultation and transparency around the Australian aid program.”* (The Centre already monitors Australian aid transparency, and is currently providing in depth feedback to DFAT on DFAT’s own aid transparency work.<sup>2</sup>)

A third respondent stated that, *“[I] would love to see more gender analysis.”* (In the period after the survey was conducted, the Centre published a major report on Australian aid and gender equality. Devpolicy blog posts also often cover gender-related issues.<sup>3</sup>)

Another respondent recommended that: *“Someone needs to take Pacific climate [finance] more seriously than the government currently does and focus on the [climate] adaptation investments...that [Australia is] making.”* (The Centre has already conducted some analysis on climate finance and is planning to produce a report on Australian climate finance during 2024/25.<sup>4</sup>)

While all of these areas are covered to an extent, the comments are helpful pointers to aspects of the Centre’s work that could be publicised more and in instances expanded. In particular, the last two comments – on gender and climate finance – could well serve as useful pointers to future Centre workplans. They are important, and the new Australian government International Development Policy places a strong emphasis on expansion in these areas.<sup>5</sup>

Some other respondents made suggestions that are already incorporated to some degree in existing activities, but which could possibly be expanded. In particular, one respondent stated that: *“I am not sure if you already do this but providing links to key international reports and events simple to alert readers to their availability. You would need to be selective and that’s ok.”* This is already done to some extent in the monthly Aid News blog posts, but there may

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<sup>1</sup> <https://devpolicy.org/aidtracker/comparisons/>

<sup>2</sup> See, <https://devpolicy.org/publications/the-2022-australian-aid-transparency-audit-2022/>

<sup>3</sup> The report can be accessed from: <https://devpolicy.org/publications/australian-gender-equality-aid-2023/>. Relevant blogs are at: <https://devpolicy.org/tag/gender/>

<sup>4</sup> For an example of existing work on Australian climate aid see: <https://devpolicy.org/awkward-arithmetic-of-australias-climate-finance-promise-20211202/>

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/development/australias-international-development-policy>

well be potential to increase the comprehensiveness of this aspect of the Aid News, including more focus on publicising key pieces of academic research, and this should be investigated.<sup>6</sup>

Other suggestions for expansion and improvement spoke to clear areas where there is potential for the Centre to expand its activities if resource constraints permit. One respondent suggested that the Centre, “[could] have a regular podcast...(I know resources are constrained, but I’m just dreaming).” The Centre has attempted to run podcasts the past, and would like to do more work involving podcasts in the future. As the commenter notes, however, podcasting is resource intensive.

Another respondent suggested that the Centre should make, “a specific effort towards informing the general public, in addition to practitioners.” This is a useful suggestion: public engagement on aid is clearly important. The Centre works hard on public outreach: in 2023 (a representative year) Centre staff with an aid focus were interviewed by media organisations 17 times. It would be possible to go beyond this and develop specific public education campaigns. These would require considerable extra resources and time though. Perhaps, if resources were to become available, campaigns of this sort could be considered. However, even then it might be better to leave this task to organisations such as Results, ACFID and Micah with the Development Policy Centre providing advice where needed (as it has done in the past).

Several respondents suggested the Centre should engage more with technical aspects of aid delivery. For example:

*“[The Centre should engage in] more technically based material on aid design, implementation, and evaluation. In other words, how and why aid works.”*

*“There are huge [Australian aid] investments in MEL [Monitoring Evaluation and Learning], but a big picture seems to be lacking on MEL – [I recommend] diving into this.”*

*“[The Centre should engage in] Micro analysis of aid projects, warts and all.”*

However, these suggestions are understandable: aid effectiveness is a crucial aspect of aid giving. The Centre already works in these areas to an extent: it released two publications based on DFAT performance monitoring data in 2023 and a third one is planned for 2024.<sup>7</sup> We have also publicised and supported public debate on more rigorous approaches to aid evaluations, including RCTs. The Centre also previously hosted an ongoing seminar series with DFAT’s Office of Development

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<sup>6</sup> The Aid News blog posts can be found at: <https://devpolicy.org/tag/monthly-aid-news/>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://devpolicy.org/publications/australian-gender-equality-aid-2023/> and <https://devpolicy.org/publications/recent-trends-in-australian-aid-performance-assessments-2023/>

Effectiveness [ODE] on aid evaluations. However, DFAT ceased to engage in this area when the ODE was dis-established.

Nevertheless, the Centre should continue to pursue opportunities in this area. Work of this nature can be the source of important policy-relevant insights. However, engagement will need to be balanced against resource constraints. If it is to be done well, for example, the micro-analysis of aid projects is very costly (and also requires some degree of buy-in from aid partners).

Alongside the suggestions for change, when we specifically asked respondents what could be changed or expanded, a number suggested that changes were not needed. For example,

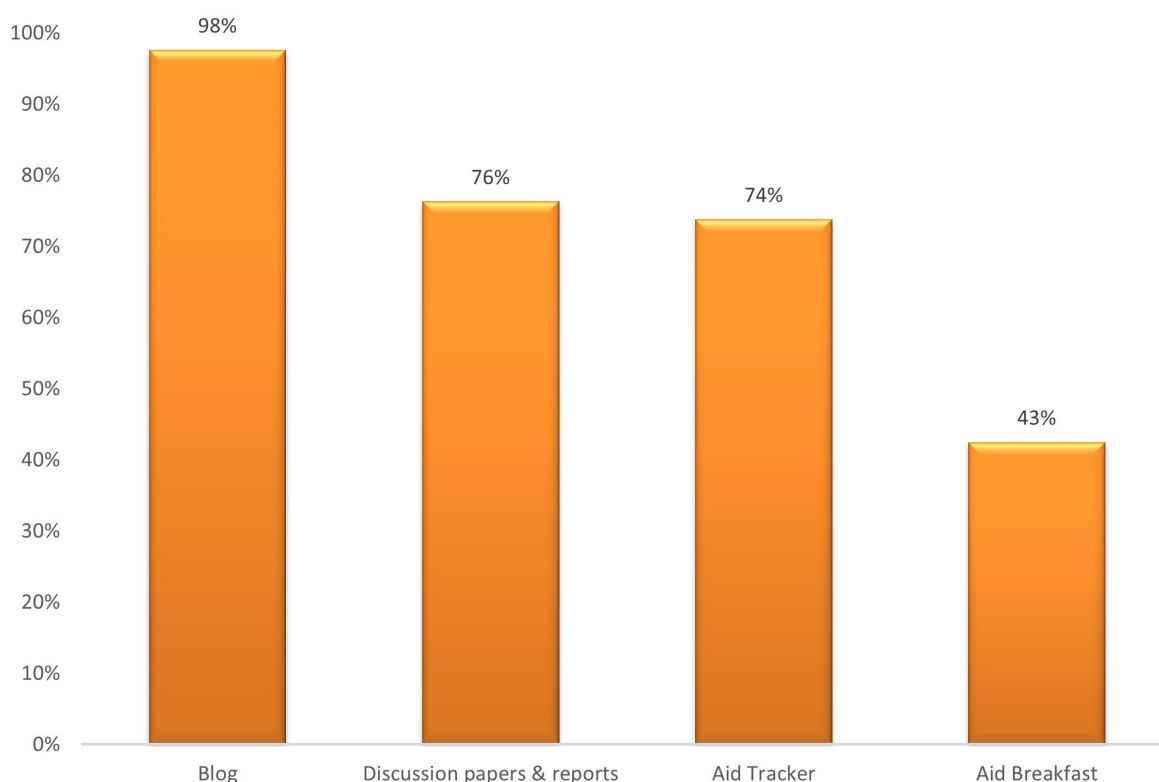
*“Keep doing it. No major changes needed.”*

*“I think you've got it about right.”*

### 3.3 Results by activity

Figure 6 shows the share of respondents who stated they used each of the main Development Policy Centre activities that were covered in this review.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 6 – Engagement with individual aspects of the Centre’s work**



<sup>8</sup> One or two respondents skipped some questions on individual product use; missing data of this sort is excluded from all calculations.

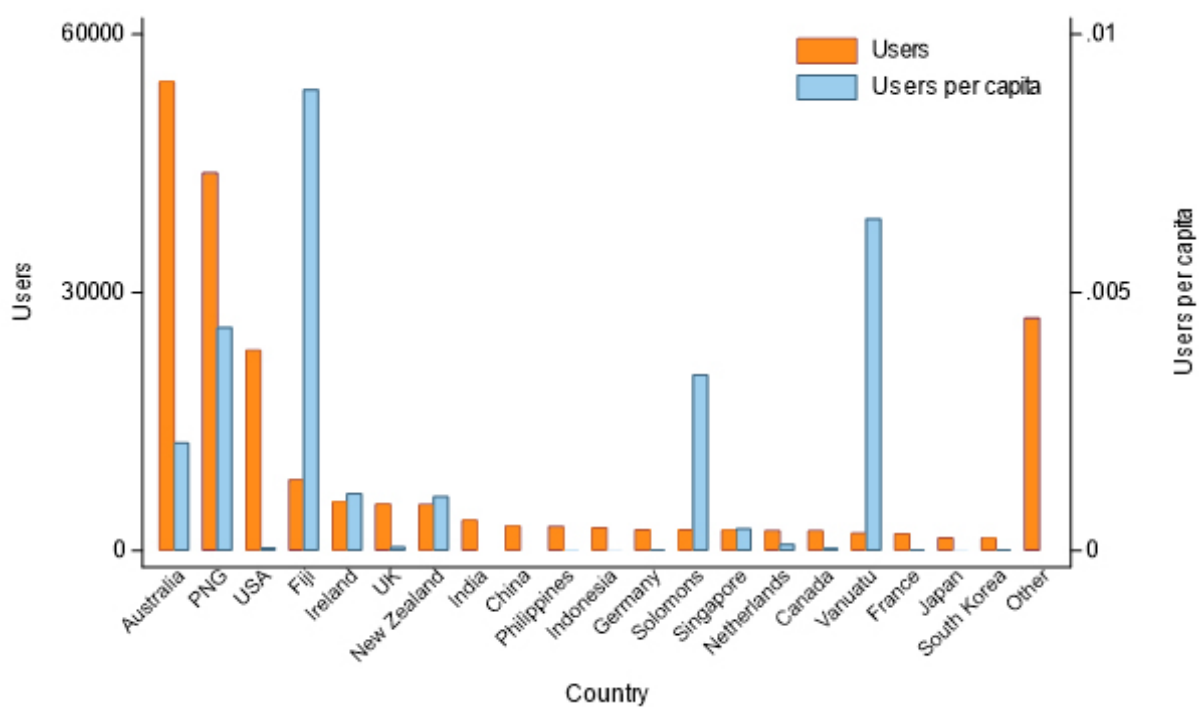
As might be expected given that it is the Centre’s centrepiece of external engagement, use of the blog is nearly universal. Use of discussion papers and reports, and the Aid Tracker is also very high. Attendance at the Aid Budget Breakfast is lower, although as we will discuss, it is still a popular event.

In addition to broader overview questions, and asking respondents what Centre work they made use of, the survey also asked specific questions about the specific activities that the Centre undertakes on aid and development (excluding the Aid Conference). Responses to these questions are detailed below for each activity. Where useful, information from additional sources is also included.

### 3.3.1 The Devpolicy blog

Figure 7 shows blog readership numbers (over the period July to December 2023) broken down by country. Because Pacific countries typically have small populations, readership per capita figures are also show.

**Figure 7 – Devpolicy blog readership**

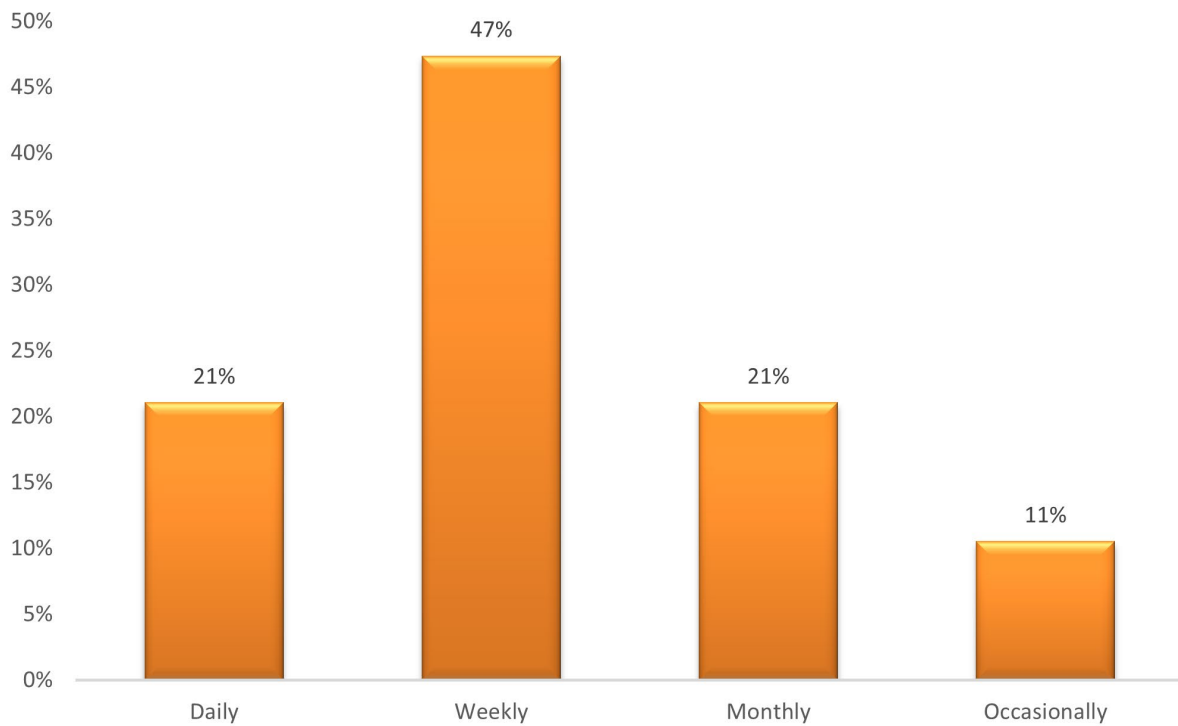


As might be expected, Australia is the source of the majority of blog viewers. However, on a per capita basis readership from Pacific countries is also encouragingly high.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the Centre conducts DFAT funded work on PNG as well as DFAT funded work in the Pacific meaning that not all readership in these areas can be attributed to Foundation funding. Nevertheless, the stats to provide a sense of the blog’s reach.

In the review survey we asked all respondents who used the blog (98 per cent of respondents) how often they used the blog. Figure 8 summarises responses to this question.

**Figure 8 – Frequency of blog usage**



72 per cent of surveyed blog users stated they either used the blog daily or weekly. A slightly lower share of targeted participants (68 per cent) used the blog this often. Most of the people surveyed draw on the Devpolicy blog a lot.

Reflecting this, when asked in what ways the blog was useful, many respondents provided positive appraisals:

*“The blog...is really useful to hear different ideas/research in the sector. I wouldn't really be keeping up with it otherwise. There's nowhere else that really has this much, with this volume, with an Australian flavour, and of this quality.”*

*“The daily email articles [the blog posts] are excellent. They constantly keep me up to date with news and information on development issues, discussions, and points of interest in our region.”*

*“The blog is extremely useful. These days, I tend to use it more as a resource for research, in terms of tracking down the subject of debate at a particular time, or using key articles to find relevant links to news reporting and publications.”*

*"[The blog is] useful to see what's happening out there, hear from both academics, researchers and ordinary people about evidence based work, some program perspectives and beneficiaries as well. The mix of writers is great!"*

*"Excellent coverage of debates in the development sector. I particularly enjoy the authors from the region."*

*"I read the blog articles that are relevant to my area of work, to inform my analysis and writing for blogs, articles and presentations at workshops, seminars, lectures and conferences."*

*"It's kept me up to date with the latest in research on the region."*

*"[The blog is useful for] sharing new research and introducing me to emerging researchers of interest. [It is also useful for] Exposing me to issues/topics I wouldn't normally know about (beyond my direct specialisation and thus reading list). [And it keeps] me up to date with the latest policy initiatives, or issues with policy initiatives, of DFAT/Australian aid."*

*"It has made me understand development issues in the Pacific and Asia in a nuanced way."*

*"The content is diverse and covers topics outside of my content area."*

*"[The blog] provides a different perspective at times and helps development practitioners to think more broadly and realistically about the issues."*

*"I like the Devpolicy blog for its depth."*

Some survey respondents also stated that they enjoyed the ability to publish in the blog: *"Great as a platform to publish our analysis." "[I use blog] to keep abreast of development debates in Australia, and to publish blogs from time to time".*

When asked for suggestions for improvement many respondents stated the blog was ok as is. However, there were also a range of suggestions for improvement. Some these captured changes that are already occurring. For example,

*"One challenge is the changing social media landscape [the commenter lamented what they perceived to be the deterioration of Twitter/X]...Focusing more on LinkedIn could be a good move."*

Blog engagement stemming from Twitter/X posts has fallen and we have already increased the usage of LinkedIn as a means of promoting blog posts. This has proven to be a positive change in terms of eliciting interest in the blog. Despite these changes having occurred to some extent, there is a case for investigating the potential for further diversifying our social media presence.

Some other comments were technical. Some of these were useful and warrant consideration by blog management with a view to their feasibility and utility. For example:

*"I think they are missing a link from the email to the actual article on your website - that would be handy."*

A small subset of suggestions pertained to individual blog posts that respondents did not like, as well as topics the respondents wanted covered. (For example, *"Better analysis of the BRI and the AIIB."*) Blog posts will never please all readers, so the occasional complaint about individual blogs can be disregarded. Suggestions for additional areas of coverage are useful, but the blog is constrained by the submissions that it receives. Possibly with more resources, submissions on specific topics could be commissioned.

One respondent complained about a perceived drift, *"into fringe and woke issues."* In our view this comment is not justified based on the blog's content. It was also not a common complaint. Requests for increased diversity among blog authors were more common:

*"Support more young people to participate in the blog, we want to hear from them too!"*

*"More perspectives from outside the region if possible; I know it may be hard getting people to write it though."*

*"More unconventional views."*

*"Have more authors from developing countries."*

*"More diverse views, more practitioner perspectives."*

*"Good range of topics covered. But want to see more challenging views. The outliers."*

*"Thats a big one! How about encouraging more feedback from grassroots rather than the usual faces and names from government, consultant lists, expatriates who think they know how to do development on the ground and can write better than locals so they get to 'speak' on behalf of locals as the 'expert'."*



At the same time, one respondent contended that increased diversity was causing them to, “*wonder a little bit about quality.*” This focus on balancing increased diversity whilst maintaining quality in pursuit of evidence-based development policy is a more useful framing than engaging with highly politicised identity debates or promoting “outliers” for the sake of it.

Table 1 is based on published blog posts from 2023. It shows the share of blog authors in 2023 who were women. It also shows the share of blog authors in 2023 who were from developing countries.

**Table 1 – Development Policy Centre blog authors by gender and location in 2023**

Share of blog authors female	Share of authors from developing countries
39%	25%

Note: In 2023 372 individuals authored or co-authored blog posts.

As the table shows, slightly under 40 per cent of authors in 2023 were women. Only, a quarter came from developing countries. There is a good case for continuing to increase author diversity on the blog. However, the concern raised about the perceived fall in quality associated with the increase in diversity points to a challenge that also needs to be recognised. Not all potential authors – be they academics, policymakers, aid workers, or people from developing countries – are able to write clear, succinct, analytical blog posts. Increasing diversity significantly will bring increased demands on the small number of Development Policy Centre staff involved in managing the blog. Because of this, any increase will need to be weighed up against the additional resources required to facilitate it.

One final suggestion came from a respondent who thought articles were one-sided at times and who wondered, “*if you should actively encourage the publishing of responses?*” The Centre already publishes responses, although ideally it would publish more.<sup>10</sup> The main impediment to this is a reticence on behalf of official aid actors to respond to critical blogs. Nevertheless, the Centre should continue to proactively provide the right of reply and do its best to foster debate on the development issues the blog covers.

Another respondent suggested the Centre should ensure blog material (and potentially other Centre outputs) is accessible to people in aid-recipient countries such as,

*“health workers, teachers, policemen, informal market vendors, unemployed youth, school dropout etc. Information is powerful but it’s not broken down for them to understand how decisions affect them.”*

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: <https://devpolicy.org/not-astounding-overview-new-zealands-aid-budget-works-20160727/>. The blog also has a comments facility in which posts are often the subject of considerable debate. For an example of blog comments debate see: <https://devpolicy.org/doubling-down-on-governance-20231005/>.

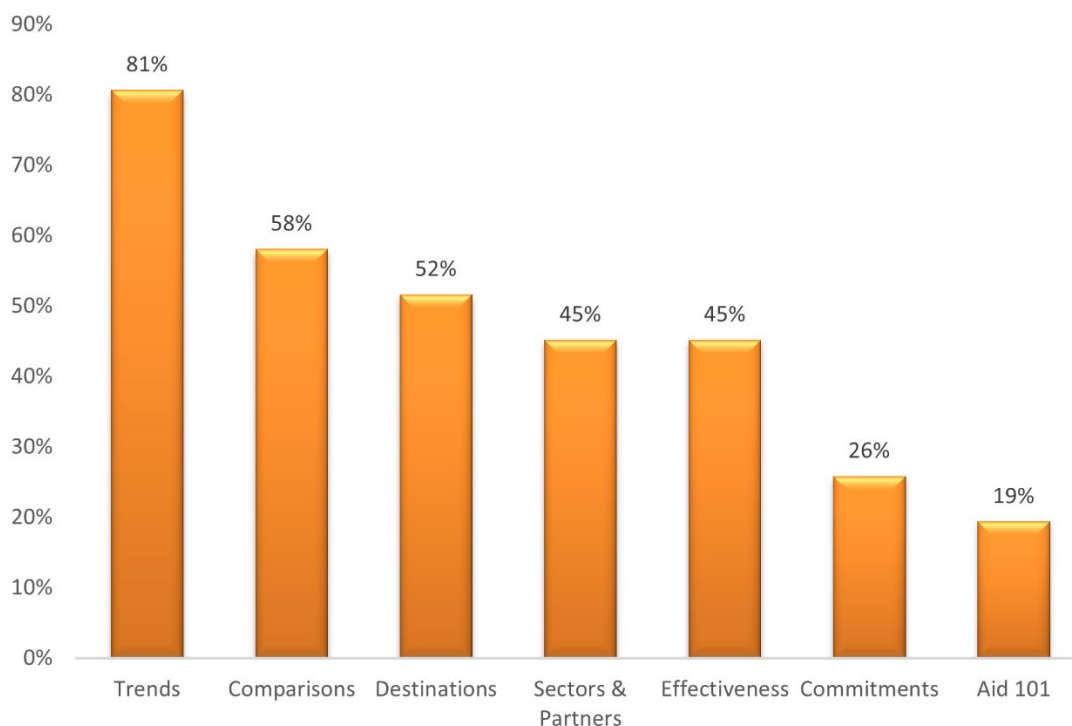
This is a very interesting suggestion. The Centre already employs someone (with resources that do not come from the Foundation) who works to place blog posts in newspapers in the Pacific (newspapers are still a highly consumed source of information in the region). Going further than this could be desirable in the future, although the magnitude of the task, and the resources required, should not be understated given the complexity of much academic and policy material.

### 3.3.2 The Aid Tracker

As shown above, nearly three quarters of survey respondents stated that they had made use of the Aid Tracker. Notably, 79 per cent of the key stakeholders that were specifically targeted for the review stated that they made use of the Aid Tracker, which suggests it plays a particularly important role for major aid actors as they track Australian aid.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of respondents (who stated that they used the Aid Tracker) that stated they used individual Aid Tracker pages.

**Figure 9 – Survey participant reported usage of different Aid Tracker pages**

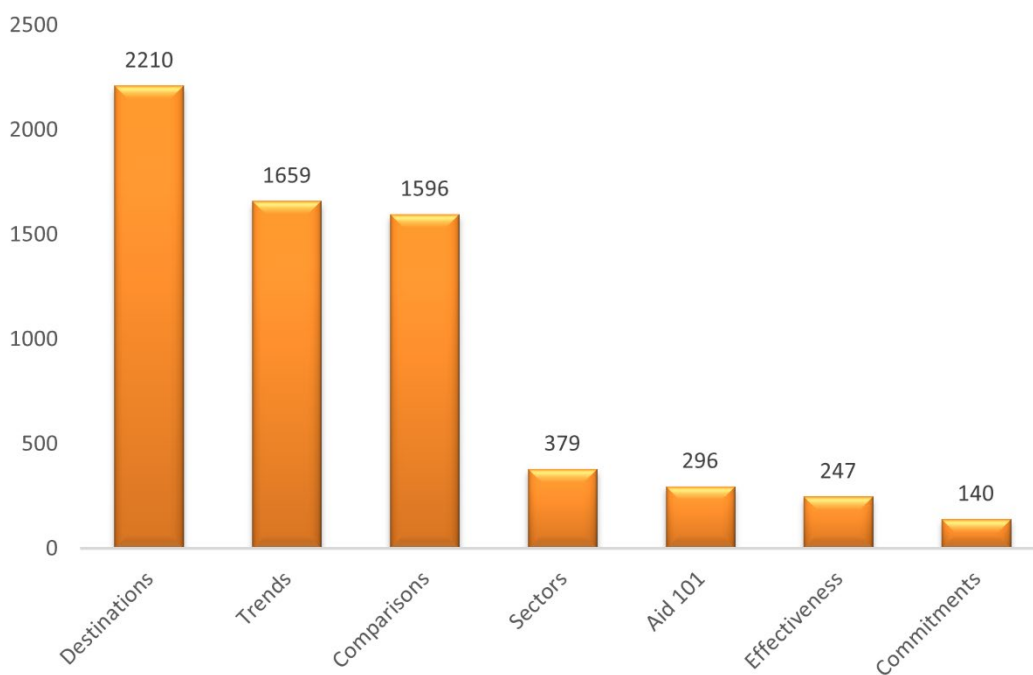


On the basis of survey results, the pages with overarching data on Australian aid – Trends and Comparisons – are the most used. Pages containing breakdowns on Australian aid – Destinations and Sectors & Partners – are also reasonably well used. The qualitative page which describes available information on the effectiveness of Australian aid also appears to be quite useful. The Commitments and Aid 101 pages are the least well used. In the case of information accessible from the

Commitments section this may well be because the information is quite specialised (information on Gavi commitments, for example). In the case of Aid 101, this may well be because most of the surveyed Aid Tracker users already know the basics about Australian Aid.

Figure 10 shows usage stats from the Aid Tracker as a comparator. These come from Google Analytics 4 and only cover the period June to December 2023 (this was the only period for which data available).

**Figure 10 – Aid Tracker page view statistics from Google Analytics June-December, 2023**



Overall patterns between the survey data and site use statistics are similar. Compared to survey findings, the Destinations page performed better (possibly because there were more international visitors than survey participants). Trends and comparisons both had relatively high levels of traffic as in the survey. Sectors performed worse than in the survey data, a discrepancy which is harder to explain. Broadly commensurate with the survey findings, Aid 101, Effectiveness and Commitments received the least traffic.

When asked whether the Aid Tracker was useful to them, and if so why, respondents provided helpful insights. While the number of comments provided was quite small and can not necessarily be viewed as representative of the average Aid Tracker user, they do show it being used for an encouragingly wide range of reasons. These include: as a tool that INGOs use, including for advocacy, as a tool used by consultants in report writing; as a tool used by DFAT staff for a range of reasons; as a teaching aid; and even as a tool that is being used in aid recipient countries.

Some of these are highlighted below.

*"[The Aid Tracker] provides very useful factual information to help my organisation develop advocacy materials."*

*"[It provides] quick references so you don't have to dive into the DFAT documents [and] quick comparisons between countries."*

*"To understand the amount of Aid that Australia releases and to whom it goes. Also it shows how Australia compares to other donor countries in the OECD. It gives context to Australia's aid budget and educates on aid in general. I would share with anyone who asked about Australia's aid and development involvements."*

*"Great to use as my "source of truth" when writing talking points, briefings, policy or policy analysis."*

*"I refer journalists or analysts to it regularly – it's a prominent aggregation of key material that is actually able to be understood."*

*"I use the Australian Aid Tracker in my teaching, running through the data with students."*

*"To analyse spend by partner category and apply the learnings from that to our business development activities."*

*"In helping Pacific islanders understand aid flows to their countries."*

There were also suggestions for improvements. Some of these had understandable motivations, but would be very hard to apply to a data portal (and in instances are already covered in the Devpolicy Blog). For example,

*"[The Aid Tracker could be more useful] by being more explicitly critical."*

*"More informed assessment of projects would be useful; Insights into current thinking. & Some assessment of the impact of the privatisation/corporatisation of aid delivery."*

*"Maybe showing or elaborating on potentials if Australia increased its generosity? (showing the opportunity cost of not increasing aid)."*

Other suggestions have already been incorporated in recent upgrades to the Aid Tracker, such as the request to provide: *"more info on Australian aid by country rather than just region."*

Other suggestions seemed very useful, and they should be analysed carefully as potential future changes, although they would be dependent on available resources. These included publicising the Aid Tracker through an annual event (although this does happen to an extent at the Budget Breakfast), and providing a how-to video explaining what it could be used for. A suggestion which warrants particular attention is to: *“publicise [the Aid Tracker] much better in the Pacific.”* Possibly this could be done by placing newspaper articles as already occurs with the blog.

At least one additional suggestion – *“[I] would love to see the inclusion of OECD DAC gender data!”* – could be incorporated with existing OECD data. (The same could be done with climate aid.) Potential constraints are staff time, and space on the Aid Tracker. Nevertheless, this change should be considered and possibly could be implemented if some existing sections of the Aid Tracker were simplified or removed.

Another suggestion was that: *“if you could disaggregate by sector/country to a greater/more refined degree that would be great.”* This would be possible with available data, but would require a lot of additional staff resources, and may run the risk of overcomplicating the website. However, it could be considered as a future change if it is not covered by DFAT’s future aid portal (current discussions with DFAT seem to suggest their portal will contain detail of this nature).

### 3.3.3 Discussion papers, reports and policy submissions

Since 2017, the Development Policy Centre has published 122 discussion papers (DPs), reports, policy submissions, policy briefs and books (hereafter referred to as “publications”). The DPs perform an important role in providing: an open-access outlet for research papers on topics we consider worthwhile that might not be suitable for journals; exposure to pre-print, open access working versions of research for both academic and non-academic audiences prior to their publication in peer-reviewed journals; and facilitating greater feedback to improve the quality of research and publications, including our own. As shown in Figure 6, 76 per cent of survey respondents stated that they made use of Development Policy Centre publications. Among key actors in the development sector who were individually targeted for the survey, 79 per cent stated they made use of these publications.

We do not have data for downloads of reports and policy submissions. However, in total, the 54 Development Policy Centre discussion papers published from 2017 onwards have been downloaded approximately 13,000 times.<sup>11</sup> The majority of comments on the publications were very positive:

*"I feel they are more authoritative and certainly more independent than some of the sector's pieces. In particular, you do not need to beat around the bush so much in standing up to Australian government policy."*

*"Impressive policy-focused research. I've particularly enjoyed the strong focus on Pacific labour mobility to make sure that Australia and New Zealand policy has the evidence it needs to improve and extend these programs."*

*"Intelligent, thought-provoking pieces that inform our broader research and understanding."*

*"They have been useful to broaden my knowledge and understanding on different topics, and hear different views on a range of issues."*

*"Evidence based information, political information plus hearing grass roots perspectives keeps me well informed from all fronts."*

A number of respondents said the papers, reports and submissions helped them with their own research. One journalist stated that they used them for, *"news story ideas [and] prompts"*. One NGO respondent stated that they used the papers to, *"deep dive topics that are aligned to our business focus...to help position our NGO."* One manager from a private sector contractor stated that the papers provided, *"useful intelligence, ideas, insights."* One academic stated that the publications were, *"useful both as an avenue to publish and as a source of research."* Another academic said that many of the publications helped inform their own research on aid.

When asked about suggestions for improvement, one respondent suggested having, *"more researchers from developing countries as lead authors."* This is important, but because the Centre does not have resources to commission and pay for studies it is limited to drawing on the submissions it receives. Also, as Table 2 shows, a significant share of the authors of Development

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<sup>11</sup> This figure is approximate as we do not have download figures for two papers published in 2020/2021. The exact figure excluding these papers is 12,833. Not all of these discussion papers have focused on aid. Some have been on Papua New Guinea, or development issues in the Pacific. The Centre has been publishing discussion papers since 2011. However, we limited downloads to those papers produced since from 2017 onwards so as to provide a picture of the Centre's recent performance and to reduce the time devoted to the sampling process.

Policy Centre discussion papers since March 2017 have been from developing countries.<sup>12</sup> Many Development Policy Centre discussion papers have multiple authors. Reflecting this, not all of the developing country authors have been lead authors of papers. But it is not clear that this is a problem. Co-authorship is common in academia, and in the case of Development Policy Centre papers it has also served as an excellent tool for working alongside developing country authors as they develop their research skills.

**Table 2 – Development Policy Centre discussion paper authors by gender and location**

Share of authors who have been female	Share of authors from developing countries
33%	40%

Table notes: A total of 51 papers were included in the sample. A total of 58 individual authors were listed as author or co-author of one or more of these papers.

While the findings of Table 2 point to comparatively strong performance in publishing authors from developing countries, they also demonstrate another potential issue: under-representation of female authors in discussion papers (when we extended the analysis to cover reports, policy briefs and submissions, women remained under-represented the same degree). This is a concern, and the Centre needs to encourage more female authors where feasible. However, once again it needs to be emphasised that the Centre does not have funding to commission papers. As a result, it is constrained by who submits papers in the first place. Still, where possible within resource constraints, all effort should be made to promote diversity.

Two respondents emphasised the importance of tailoring findings to accommodate the challenges of aid practice. This request should be accommodated where it can be done factually and clearly, although it needs to be noted that many of the publications are focus on aid policy, or other aspects of development, rather than aid practice *per se*.

Another respondent stated that, “*some authors offer a sophisticated discussion, others do not. More of the first and less of the second will always be welcomed.*” All discussion papers and most reports are peer-reviewed, which helps ensure they are of reasonable quality. Nevertheless, the Centre should continue to maintain the highest standards of quality control, while at the same time recognising that this needs to be balanced against soliciting a broad range of views, and cognisant of the fact that not all papers will be to everyone’s taste.

One respondent suggested that, “*summary blogs are always helpful*”. At present the Centre provides these for almost all publications. However, the comment is a useful reminder of the importance of

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<sup>12</sup> March 2017 was the cut-off date because it provided a sample of slightly over 50 papers. We avoided sampling papers from prior to that date to prevent the sampling and coding process from becoming overly time consuming. Also, more recent years give a better sense of current practice.

short engaging summaries (usually blogs) of larger academic publications. Another respondent suggested that the, “audience for each paper [should be] identified prior [to its publication] and reports shared with these audience once produced.” This is already done on an *ad hoc* basis. However, as much as possible within resource constraints it should be done proactively in the future.

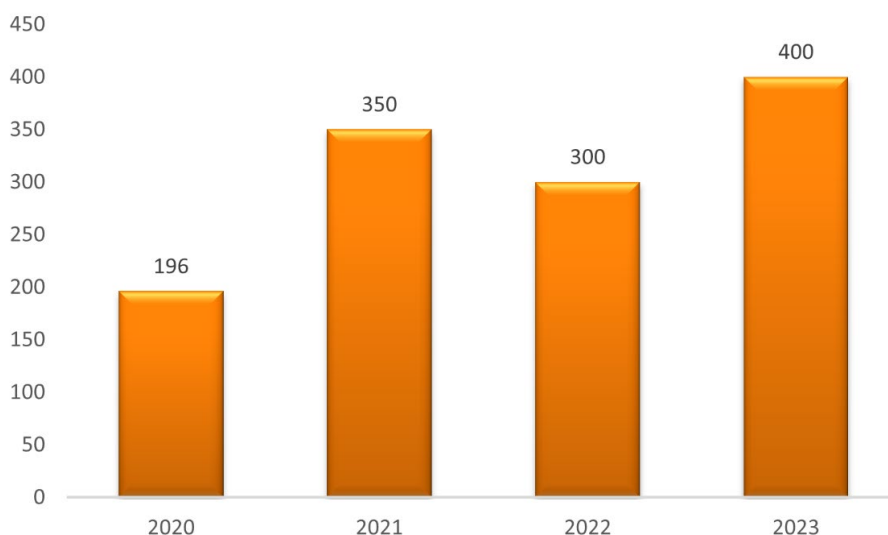
Some respondents suggested specific topics, such as: “more on the SDGs and what other donors are doing to support [them].” This type of feedback is valuable. For a small entity such as the Development Policy Centre the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would be too large a topic to engage with. But specific key areas of the SDGs could usefully be engaged with. Gender and Climate Change are engaged with elsewhere in this review. But, given the Centre and its contacts have some available expertise other specific research into SDG-relevant areas such as health should be considered if sufficient resources are available.

### 3.3.4 The Budget Breakfast

Only 43 per cent of survey respondents stated that they had attended (or watched) a Development Policy Centre Aid Budget Breakfast. However, 58 per cent of specifically targeted respondents had attended, which is significant for an event with a very specific focus and which only occurs once a year.

Figure 11 shows the number of people who have attended budget breakfasts in recent years and gives a sense of the importance of the event to the Australian aid community.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 11 – Budget Breakfast attendance**



<sup>13</sup> There is likely some margin of error in attendance numbers associated with people who register and don't attend and the like. Also, were attendance to be measured as overall views of the recorded events online it would be considerably higher.



Among those who attended, the budget breakfast was almost universally popular, with respondents stating they valued the rigour, underlying understanding of aid and independence of the event:

*“Excellent insights, taking us beyond the minimal documents that get provided by DFAT, looking at the trends over time and the bigger picture. Nobody else’s aid budget analysis stacks up on rigour and vision.”*

*“The budget breakfast gives me my yearly once-over concerning the state of play of the aid budget. I use it as a yardstick to make sure I’m broadly up to date with overall trends.”*

*“[The] quality of Stephen’s corporate knowledge. Hands down [the] best shortcut of the year.”*

*“Budget briefings are a highlight.”*

*“It’s a good complement to ACFID’s analysis in the way that it looks the broader budget and economic context, and also delves deeper on specific program areas drawing in other analysis from the centre.”*

*“[It is] interesting to hear Development Policy Centre expert analysis.”*

*“It helps to focus the mind quickly on understanding the aid budget.”*

In recent years, the Budget Breakfast has moved from an in-person to an online event (this started as a response to COVID-19). When asked what could be improved about the breakfast, several respondents suggested they missed the chance for networking and informal discussion that an in-person event presented.

One respondent, for example, stated that:

*“I wonder if you could move to a hybrid presentation – in person for those in Canberra and on-line for those who can’t get along to it? [An in person event] always provided a good opportunity for informal discussions with sector colleagues about the budget as well as the presentation itself.”*

These comments make sense and the feasibility and cost of moving to a hybrid format should be investigated in the future, alongside potential demand.

One other respondent suggested, the Centre should, *“inject a few different perspectives.”* Into the breakfast. This should also be investigated, although any changes would need to be considered in

mind of the time constraints associated with running an hour long event and the availability of informed speakers who could offer differing perspectives.

### 3.3.5 Collaboration

The final question on a specific aspect of the Development Policy Centre's aid and development work that respondents were asked was whether the respondent or someone from their organisation had collaborated with the Development Policy Centre in recent years. Collaboration was defined broadly as, "anything from our team explaining a subject to you, to working together on a report, to data analysis, to being on a campaign, to consulting with us on a review".

47 per cent of respondents stated that they (or someone from their organisation) had engaged in collaboration. 71 per cent of targeted respondents said that they (or someone from their organisation) had engaged in collaboration.

When asked what type of collaboration, the most common response was collaboration in running events or speaking together on panels and the like. Seeking the Centre's expertise and collaboration in writing blogs was another common response. Collaboration in parliamentary briefings and hosting events with politicians was also mentioned.

When asked whether the collaboration was useful, respondents provided almost universally positive answers:

*Yes. I've interacted with the Centre in a variety of ways, including contributing blogs and research and regularly attending events over many years. This collaboration has always been extremely useful for me, both in a personal and professional sense.*

*It was useful in having a new dataset accessible to scholars, governments and researchers; a publication about data and its relevance to policy-making, and contributing new knowledge to understanding politics in a particular country.*

*Yes. [Development Policy Centre] speakers are always super informative and engaging.*

*Yes. [The collaboration] was useful in providing insightful views that can otherwise be difficult to obtain.*

*Yes, in terms of the value of the expertise shared by Development Policy staff and the depth of their knowledge.*

*Yes. The Development Policy team are highly informed, dispassionate and smart.*

*Very useful. I've learnt a lot, and become a better researcher and have also improved my writing.*

*I find staff open and interested in collaboration with other actors in the sector and more broadly.*

There were no clear recommendations for improvement regarding collaboration. However, potential for improvement this area is something that should be investigated further in any overarching external evaluation undertaken in the future. It is hard from an internal review such as this one to know when opportunities for collaboration may have been missed, or where potential new avenues for collaboration could be forged with outreach. Nevertheless the positive responses, and absence of critique, provided to this internal review are encouraging and suggest that the Centre is performing well as it seeks to collaborate with other aid and development actors.

## 4. Future Directions

Overall, the survey data, as well as the qualitative comments that were provided by participants in this review suggest that the Development Policy Centre's work on aid is meeting a need and is regarded as high quality. None of the data gathered by the review pointed to any clear need for a major change in course in what the Centre is doing.

However, the review does point to some opportunities for work in new areas, or new means of engaging. The Centre also has some plans for new work areas of its own. In this section we outline possible changes. Although many possible changes are covered above in the body of the review, in this section we have focused on the changes that we believe to be most important or to have the greatest potential. Some of the changes we discuss here can probably be accommodated with existing resources. Other changes would require additional resources to be feasible.

### 4.1 Existing resources

It is anticipated that the following changes could be implemented with existing resources.

**Further investigate minor technical and content improvements to the Devpolicy blog:** The Centre should investigate whether it is possible to link directly to Devpolicy blog posts from the daily blog emails that are provided to subscribers. As part of this, it should be investigated whether a reader can post a comment on a post by clicking on a link in the email version of that post. This could increase engagement.

The Centre should also increase the extent to which the Aid News blog series provides links to major, recently-released global development reports and consider the use of newsletters, as well as blogs, for this series, so as to increase reach.

The Centre will continue to explore diversifying its promotion of blog posts through existing and emerging social media channels that align with the blog audience.

**Ensure that the Aid Tracker is fully promoted via the Devpolicy blog and other avenues:** At present, the Aid Tracker is promoted during the Budget Breakfast and at times on the blog. In the future, this promotion should be intensified. The potential to promote the Aid Tracker via other approaches (such as in other well-read blogs with a Foreign Policy focus) should be investigated, potentially through the development of a new communications plan for the site.

**Add climate and gender expenditure data and charts to the Aid Tracker/investigate the potential for discontinuing other existing sections of the aid tracker:** The Centre in should add Australian climate and gender equality aid data to the Aid Tracker. This would fit with requests from survey participants. It would also be topical in light of the new targets contained in the Australian government's 2023 International Development Policy.<sup>14</sup> The addition could be based on OECD data and could inform ongoing research and analysis from the Centre and others on the implementation of these commitments.

At the same time, given some sections of the Aid Tracker appear to be relatively under-utilised, and given that the Aid Tracker runs the risk of being overloaded if it contains too much data, as well as the challenge of additional data-gathering time burdens, careful investigation should be undertaken to see if some existing sections of the Aid Tracker can be discontinued.

**Continue to strengthen the gender and climate focus of Centre research:** Given the interest displayed in these areas by review respondents and given the focus on these areas in the DFAT Development Strategy, the Centre should continue the focus of its research on gender equality aid and climate aid. In the first instance, this would continue through the Discussion Paper series (complimented where appropriate with blog posts and presentations). In future grants these topics could be considered as potential focal areas of Centre research.

**Evaluation seminar series:** the Centre is currently in discussions with DFAT's aid performance area as to the possibility of reconvening of the regular evaluation seminar series. If DFAT proves willing to engage, this series should be restarted.

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<sup>14</sup> The government's new policy commits Australia to: 80 per cent of all development investments will address gender equality effectively, and all new investments over \$3 million will include gender equality objectives; and from 2024-25, at least half of all new bilateral and regional investments that are valued at more than \$3 million will have a climate change objective, with a goal of this rising to 80 per cent in 2028–29. See: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/performance-delivery-framework.pdf>

**The Aid Budget Breakfast:** The Centre should investigate the feasibility and cost of moving the Aid Budget Breakfast to a hybrid format (in person and online), alongside potential demand and other practicalities.

## 4.2 Additional resources

The Centre already effectively subsidises much of its existing aid-related work through the time of its own academics (such as Professor Howes and Honorary Professor Davies) and professional staff. For these reasons, the scope for expanding the aid-focused work that it does without future funding increases is limited. As a result, some of the very worthwhile suggestions provided by review participants could only be accommodated with additional external resources. Some possibilities are listed below.

**Establish a podcast series:** The Centre is already investigating producing a podcast. If this can be done with existing resources, it should be. However, if additional resources are required to successfully produce an ongoing podcast, obtaining resources of this sort could be investigated in the future. Podcasts could draw and amplify content from, but also provide content for, the Devpolicy Blog.

**Dedicated funds for commissioning work from under-represented authors:** With additional resources, the Centre could establish a pool of funds to commission research and analysis on aid and global development from developing country authors, with a focus on perspectives from Asia and the Pacific. If author capacity is present, this could be facilitated through Discussion Papers and Reports. However, given the small size of the formal research community in the Pacific, in the first instance the work should probably be focused on the proactive commissioning of, and editorial assistance with, blog posts. Blog author diversity is as much of an issue with blog posts as it is with discussion papers. And blog posts are also easier for aid practitioners and community members to write.<sup>15</sup> When it comes to publishing more work by women, a specific fund and payment for authors may not be needed. Instead, proactive outreach could well be a sufficient starting point and should occur if sufficient staff resources are available. If resources are available, these options should be systematically investigated in future work on promoting author diversity.

**Proactively produce media articles on aid in the Pacific for the Pacific:** The Centre already has some connections with Pacific Newspapers. Newspapers are still a major source of information in much of the Pacific. With additional resources the Centre could use Aid Tracker data (as well as data from other resources such as the Pacific Aid Map) to produce newspaper articles for newspapers in Pacific

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<sup>15</sup> The Centre already works on encouraging blog posts from Papua New Guinea through its partnership with the University of PNG.

countries on the role of aid in those countries (how much aid is received, where it comes from and what it is being used for). This could serve as an effective form of outreach, publicise aid, and also possibly help citizens more proactively engage in the aid process.

**Commission additional in-depth research papers on key topics:** With additional resources the Centre could commission specialist researchers to undertake research in key areas of interest such as gender, climate finance and health. In some instances the Centre could undertake this work itself where it has existing expertise. However, the Centre could also potentially expand on the work it undertakes by engaging more with external researchers.

**Aid project case studies:** In line with the suggestion made by a review participant that the Centre should engage in analysis of individual aid projects, the Centre should consider the potential for conducting its own case studies in this area. The Centre has conducted project level case studies previously and they are resource intensive, require significant “insider” expertise and usually at least some level of cooperation from relevant donors.<sup>16</sup> But if the work could be undertaken, the Centre could use its project performance monitoring work to single out cases for study, or it could choose cases from key areas of interest (climate adaptation projects, for example). Little research of this nature is currently being undertaken, and there would seem to be considerable potential in expanding into this area.

## 5. Conclusion

In this internal review we have sought the views of stakeholders on the aid-focused work of the Development Policy Centre. This was done via an in-depth survey of stakeholders, including targeted stakeholders in key roles in the development community.

The review was conducted to get a general sense of the Centre’s utility to the aid community and with a view to identifying potential improvements.

Overall, feedback from participants was very positive. Participants typically viewed the Centre favourably and felt that it played an important role within the Australian aid community.

Participants also suggested improvements, including areas where the Centre might potentially expand. In this review, we have analysed these suggestions. In places we have explained why the

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<sup>16</sup> The Centre’s previous aid case studies on climate change mitigation in Indonesia and malaria control in Solomon Islands can be seen at the following links: <https://devpolicy.org/a-very-real-and-practical-contribution-lessons-from-the-kalimantan-forests-and-climate-partnership20120322/>; [https://devpolicy.org/publications/discussion\\_papers/DP64%20summary%20paper%20malaria%20Solomon%20Islands.pdf](https://devpolicy.org/publications/discussion_papers/DP64%20summary%20paper%20malaria%20Solomon%20Islands.pdf)

suggested improvements are not needed or not possible. However, we have also translated a number of the other suggestions into changes the Centre could make.

These are proposals for consideration and discussion within the Centre and with partners such as the Foundation. Not all of the proposed changes may be feasible. Some may require additional resources. Other potential changes may well emerge from the Centre's own broader plans and the experience of its staff. Nevertheless, this review and its findings will provide a starting point, based on many diverse viewpoints, as the Centre plans its future work.