

DEVELOPMENT
POLICY CENTRE

The public and the aid community:
comparing views about aid

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Methods	2
2.1 Surveying the public.....	2
2.2 Surveying the Australian aid community	2
3. Results.....	4
3.1 Volume.....	4
3.2 Purpose	5
3.3 Reason	6
3.4 Areas of aid spending	8
3.5 Effectiveness	9
3.6 Poor's lives improving	10
3.7 Indonesia	11
3.8 Corruption	12
4. Conclusion	13
References	15

1. Introduction

Until recently, very little systematic academic work had been undertaken looking at the views of Australians on aid and international development. The Development Policy Centre has sought to fill this gap (see: Burkot and Wood, 2015; Wood, 2015, 2016a); however, much remains to be learnt. As part of our ongoing learning efforts, in collaboration with the Campaign for Australian Aid, we placed eight questions in the 2016 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), a large, representative survey of Australian adults.

We asked the public their views about:

- whether they think Australia gives too much aid,
- why they think Australia should give aid,
- which sectors they think aid should be focused on, and
- whether they think aid is effective.

We also asked a series of questions on the public's broader development beliefs. We asked:

- whether they think the lives of poor people in developing countries are improving,
- whether they think a wealthy person in Indonesia earns more than a poor worker in Australia, and
- the extent to which they think corruption is the cause of poverty in developing countries.

In addition to taking this opportunity to survey the public at large, we also posed the same questions to a sample of people from the Australian aid and development community. While we have surveyed the Australian aid community in previous work (Howes and Pryke, 2013; Wood et al., 2016a, 2017), the questions we have asked have always been very specific, focusing on particular aspects of the government aid program. Instead of asking specific questions again, in this exercise we asked the aid community general questions about aid of the sort that are normally included in public opinion surveys.

This paper compares the responses of the public to the questions asked in the 2016 AuSSA and to those provided by our sample of respondents from Australia's aid community.

Our main findings are that members of the Australian public do not favour further reductions to the government aid budget. However, support for aid increases is also quite low. Most Australians want Australian aid devoted to ethical ends, rather than advancing Australia's interests. The Australian public displays a preference for focusing aid on traditional areas: disaster relief, education and health. Most Australians believe that aid is somewhat effective in helping poorer countries. Most members of the public thought that the claim that the lives of people living in developing countries had improved on average in the last 15 years was at least somewhat believable. They are also at least somewhat inclined to believe that reasonably wealthy Indonesians still earned less than Australians earning the minimum wage. When asked about the role of corruption in causing poverty in developing countries the most frequent response from the public was that it was part of the cause, but not the sole cause.

Compared to the public at large, members of the Australian aid community were much more likely to want to see the aid budget increased. Similarly, members of the aid community were even more likely than the public to want aid to be focused on helping developing countries. As compared to the public, members of the aid community were less enthusiastic about disaster relief and more supportive of spending aid across a range of areas. Interestingly, while the sampled members of the aid community were more likely than the public to think aid was effective, the differences between their views in this area were less than for some of the other questions. Aid community

members were more likely to think lives of people in poorer countries were improving, more likely to think wealthy Indonesians earned less than Australians on the minimum wage, and less likely to believe corruption is the primary cause of poverty in developing countries.

In rest of this paper we outline our methods and detail these findings before discussing their ramifications.

2. Methods

The data in this paper come from two surveys: one of the Australian public, the other of the Australian aid and development community. Each of these surveys is detailed in turn.

2.1 Surveying the public

Our data on Australian public opinion come from the 2016 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA). This is an annual survey run by the Australian Consortium for Social & Political Research Inc. (ACSPRI). The AuSSA is the Australian source of data for the International Social Survey Programme and is regarded as one of the most methodologically rigorous surveys available to Australian researchers. The AuSSA is a postal survey sent to 5000 Australians aged over 18 who are drawn randomly from the Australian electoral roll. The survey was conducted in four waves over the year (however, it was not longitudinal). The data reported on in this paper come from all four waves combined. People who were sent the survey were reminded three times about the survey after the initial copy was sent to them. Data were cleaned by AuSSA staff. The total final sample of valid responses was 1267. Responses were weighted to be demographically representative. In addition to the questions we asked about aid, many other questions were contained in the AuSSA, which in 2016 focused on opinions about government. As discussed in the conclusion, in the future we plan to conduct regression analysis drawing on variables from these questions.

2.2 Surveying the Australian aid community

Our data on the views of the Australian aid community come from a survey that we set up using the online platform SurveyMonkey. Because there is no known identifiable population of members of the Australian aid community we could not create a sample frame and sample randomly. The only approach available to us was to use a self-selected convenience sample of people who responded to our invitations to participate.

We invited people to participate via the Devpolicy Blog (in April 2017) and the Development Policy Centre's email updates. The survey was also advertised by the Australian Council for International Development (the umbrella body for Australia's aid NGOs) and the Research for Development Impact Network, and over the Development Policy Centre's social media channels (Twitter, Facebook). The survey was open for responses for six weeks, between 17 April and 29 May 2017.

Ultimately 351 members of Australia's aid community completed the survey. The sampling approach we used begs questions about how representative respondents were. Table 1 provides basic demographic information on the respondents to our survey. Table 2 details the types of respondents who answered the survey.

Table 1 – Demographic information on respondents to aid community survey

Gender	Female	64.7%
	Male	35.0%
	Other	0.3%
Education	Academic	94.9%
	Non-academic	3.2%
	School or none	1.9%
Age (years)	Mean	43
	Range	20-78

Table 2 – Type of respondents to aid community survey

	Percentage
NGO	50.3%
Independent consultant	10.4%
Australian government	7.6%
Academia	6.0%
Aid contracting company	5.4%
Student	4.1%
Multilateral or regional organization	2.2%
Developing country government	0.3%
Other (includes retired)	13.6%

Comparing this information on the composition of our respondents with other data sources can provide some sense of how representative our sample was, at least in terms of observable traits. Unfortunately, we have no information on the typical education levels of people working in the aid community in Australia. However, given the education requirements for most jobs advertised in aid and development, the fact that most of our respondents hold an academic qualification (or are in the process of obtaining one) seems appropriate.

For respondent gender we do possess information from other sources. In the public phase of Australian Aid Stakeholder Survey (Wood et al., 2016a), the majority (53 per cent) of participants were women. The Stakeholder Survey was more intensively advertised and so is potentially more representative of the aid community as a whole in terms of respondents. Because of this, the gender composition difference between the two surveys – 53 per cent vs 65 per cent – is slightly concerning. However, ACFID's 2016 Annual Report states that 67 per cent of the employees of ACFID member NGOs are women (ACFID, 2016: p. 31). Given that, as Table 2 shows, the majority of our respondents were from NGOs, the similarity between the gender make up of our respondents and the gender composition of Australian NGOs found in ACFID data suggests that, once organisation type is taken into account we have a sample that is quite representative in terms of gender.

The average age of participants in the public phase of the 2015 Stakeholder Survey was 44 years; this is almost identical to the average age of participants in the opinion survey (43 years). To the extent that we can rely on comparisons with the 2015 Stakeholder Survey, our sample appears representative in terms of age.

When we compared the type of organisation that respondents to this survey worked in with the distribution of responses by organisation type to the public phase of the Stakeholder Survey, the biggest difference is in the percentage of respondents who worked for NGOs. 50 per cent of the respondents to our community opinion survey were NGO staff, compared to only 29 per cent of respondents to the public phase of the 2015 Stakeholder Survey. While we cannot be sure the stakeholder survey breakdown reflects the true organisational composition of the Australian aid community, it is probably more representative than the breakdown in this community opinion survey.

NGOs have almost certainly been over-sampled. However, analysis does not suggest this is likely to have biased results. When we compared responses to the questions below between NGO respondents and all other respondents from the aid community, aggregate responses were very similar for most of the questions (differences of less than five percentage points in almost all instances). In the few instances where differences were more marked they were still not stark; there were no examples of questions where most NGO respondents gave one answer and the majority of other respondents gave the opposite.

Our sample of members of the Australian aid community is a convenience sample, and this is less than ideal. However, no alternative approaches were available to us. Moreover, although caution should be taken in inferring too much from it, there is no obvious source of bias in the sample.

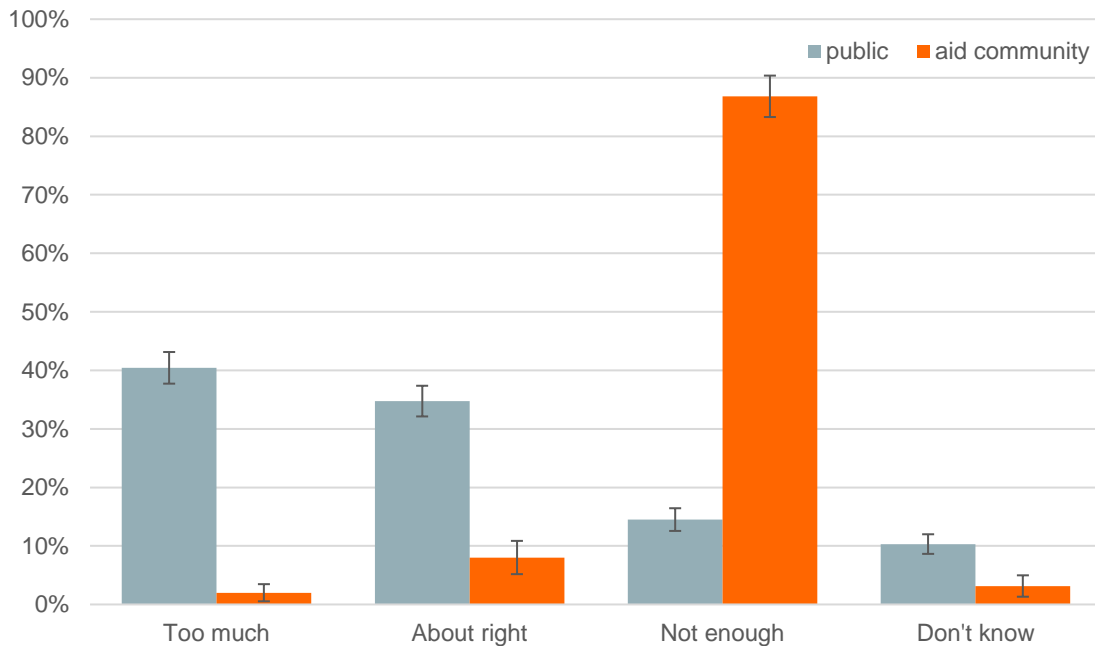
3. Results

3.1 Volume

The question of whether Australia's aid contribution is appropriate in quantitative terms is one of the most commonly posed public opinion questions related to aid. There is a significant body of evidence based on prior public opinion research showing that the plurality of public respondents tend to be in favour of reducing Australia's aid budget, either in isolation or as compared to other areas of the Australian federal budget (Burkot, 2017; Burkot and Wood, 2015). The 2016 AuSSA public survey findings are more or less in line with prior trends, with 40.4 per cent of respondents believing that too much aid is given, 34.8 per cent expressing the view that Australia's contribution is about right, and 14.5 per cent stating not enough aid is given. Although the largest proportion of respondents indicated they feel that too much aid is given, the results can be interpreted as suggesting that Australians' enthusiasm for aid cuts has diminished, given that the combined responses of 'right amount' and 'not enough' (49.3 per cent) exceed those who feel that too much aid is given. This finding is in line with from survey data starting from late 2015 (Wood, 2017).

By contrast, surveyed members of the aid community overwhelmingly think Australia does not give enough aid, with nearly 87 per cent of respondents selecting this answer choice. Only 2 per cent believe that Australia gives too much aid, and 8 per cent believe that the current aid volume is appropriate. These findings are unsurprising given members of the aid community's values, as well as their personal and professional interests in seeing a larger Australian aid budget.

Figure 1 – Australian aid volume

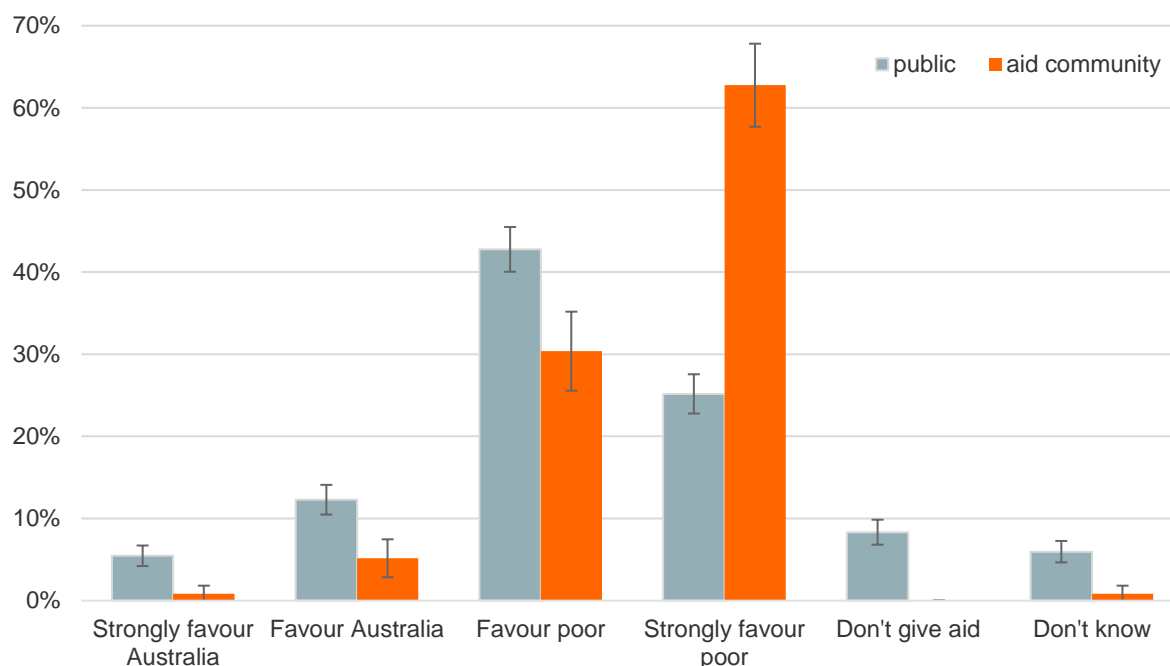


Question wording: Every year the Australian government gives aid money to poorer countries. Currently just under \$1 out of every \$100 of federal government spending is given as aid. Which one of the following options best reflects your opinion about aid spending? Answer wording: The Australian government gives too much aid; The Australian government gives about the right amount of aid; The Australian government does not give enough aid; I don't know.

Error bars on all figures in this report indicate 95% confidence intervals.

3.2 Purpose

The ethos of Australian aid giving – and in particular whether Australian aid should be geared towards bringing some form of benefit to Australia or not – has been an ongoing issue (Burkot and Wood, 2017; Swanton et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2017). To capture the views of the public and the aid community on this issue we asked two questions. The first of these focused on whether the primary beneficiary of Australian aid should be Australia or poorer countries. The results for both the public and the aid community can be seen below. Nearly 70 per cent of the Australian public favours or strongly favours focusing Australian aid on helping people in developing countries. This ought to provide a clear steer to politicians as they decide what the purpose of Australian aid should be. While public support for focusing Australian aid on helping developing countries was very strong, unsurprisingly the aid community's support for this was stronger still. Over 90 per cent of respondents from the aid community favour or strongly favour focusing Australian aid on helping people in developing countries.

Figure 2 – Australian aid purpose

Question wording: Do you think Australian government aid to poor countries should be given primarily for the purpose of helping people in poor countries, or do you think Australian aid should be given primarily to help advance Australia's commercial and strategic interests? Answer wording: Strongly favour helping people in poor countries; Favour helping people in poor countries; Favour Australia's commercial and strategic interests; Strongly favour Australia's commercial and strategic interests; I don't think the Australian government should give aid; I don't know.

3.3 Reason

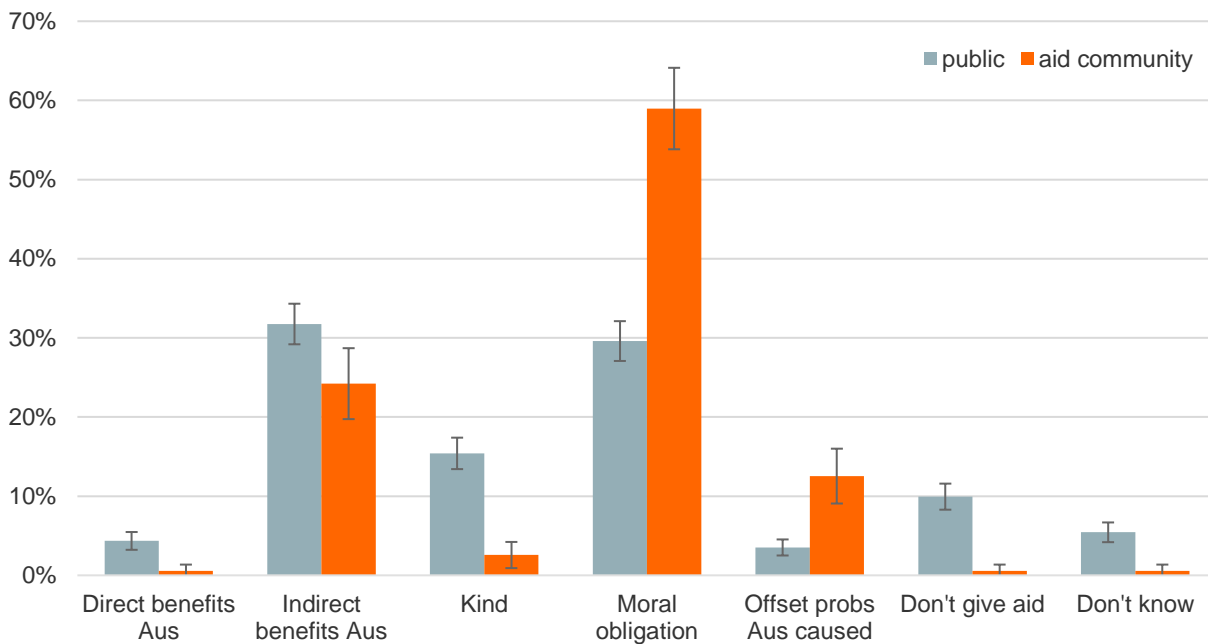
In addition to asking respondents about the purpose of Australian aid, we asked a subtly different question – one to do with the key reason why Australia should be giving aid. Once again, in this question respondents could express a preference for Australian aid being given to benefit Australia. However, this time they could distinguish between direct benefits (benefits for Australian firms and the like) and indirect benefits (such as preventing the spread of disease). For those who still weren't inclined to seek benefits for Australia there were a range of options, including to be kind, to fulfil a moral obligation and to offset wrongs Australia has committed.

Amongst the Australian public bringing indirect benefits to Australia was the most common response followed closely by respondents who viewed giving aid as a moral obligation. The next most common response was kindness. Notably, while indirect benefits to Australia was the most common single response, taken together the kindness and moral obligation responses (similar responses, both which have nothing to do with benefits to Australia) were more common still, being the responses given by 45 per cent of respondents. Neither direct benefits to Australia or offsetting problems Australia has caused were common responses amongst the public.

The aid community's responses were different in interesting ways. A very large majority thought Australia had a moral obligation to give aid. Interestingly, the second most frequent response from members of the aid community was not kindness, but rather indirect benefits to Australia. The difference between the proportion of the public who gave this response and the proportion of the aid community was only just over 5 percentage points. While most of the aid community see aid as

a moral obligation, a non-trivial minority believe the main reason for giving aid should be enlightened national interest.

Figure 3 – the reason for giving aid



Question wording: Thinking now about why the Australian government should give aid to poorer countries, which one of the following comes closest to describing the main reason you think Australia should give aid. Answer wording: I don't think the government should give aid; The Australian government should give aid to bring direct benefits to Australia (more trade, more money for Australian firms etc.); The Australian government should give aid to bring indirect benefits to Australia (a world safer from terrorism, stopping the spread of diseases etc.); The Australian government should give aid to be kind. I don't think Australia is obliged to send aid, but I think it is a kind thing to do; The Australian government should give aid because Australia has a moral obligation to help poor people in other countries; The Australian government should give aid to offset problems Australia has played a role in causing; I don't know.

3.4 Areas of aid spending

In addition to why Australia should give aid, we also asked respondents to indicate what they thought the three most important areas (or sectors) of aid spending are. Respondents were presented with a list of 11 common areas of aid spending, listed below in alphabetical order (as they were presented to respondents), and asked to indicate which they thought are the first, second, and third most important uses of overseas aid.¹

1. *Agriculture – growing food and crops*
2. *Debt relief – reducing debts owed by poor countries*
3. *Disaster relief – helping in emergencies and urgent humanitarian crises*
4. *Economic growth – creating jobs and supporting the economy*
5. *Education – helping people to attend school and receive an education*
6. *Energy – providing electricity and other energy services*
7. *Family planning – providing access to contraception and other family services*
8. *Governance – improving government accountability, transparency and legal rights*
9. *Health – treating diseases such as HIV and malaria and providing vaccinations*
10. *Infrastructure – providing roads, access to clean water, sanitation and telecommunications*
11. *Women’s empowerment – supporting gender equality and women’s rights*

The survey findings showed considerable variation across both public and aid community respondents in terms of their preferred areas of aid spending, though health and education spending stood out as some of the most popular areas. Table 3 summarises the top preferences (with the proportion of respondents who selected that area) across both samples.

Table 3 – most preferred aid spending areas (% of respondents)

	Public	Aid community
1st preference	Disaster relief (38.91%)	Education (21.91%)
2nd preference	Health (26.38%)	Health (21.36%)
3rd preference	Education (19.35%)	Women’s empowerment (17.13%)

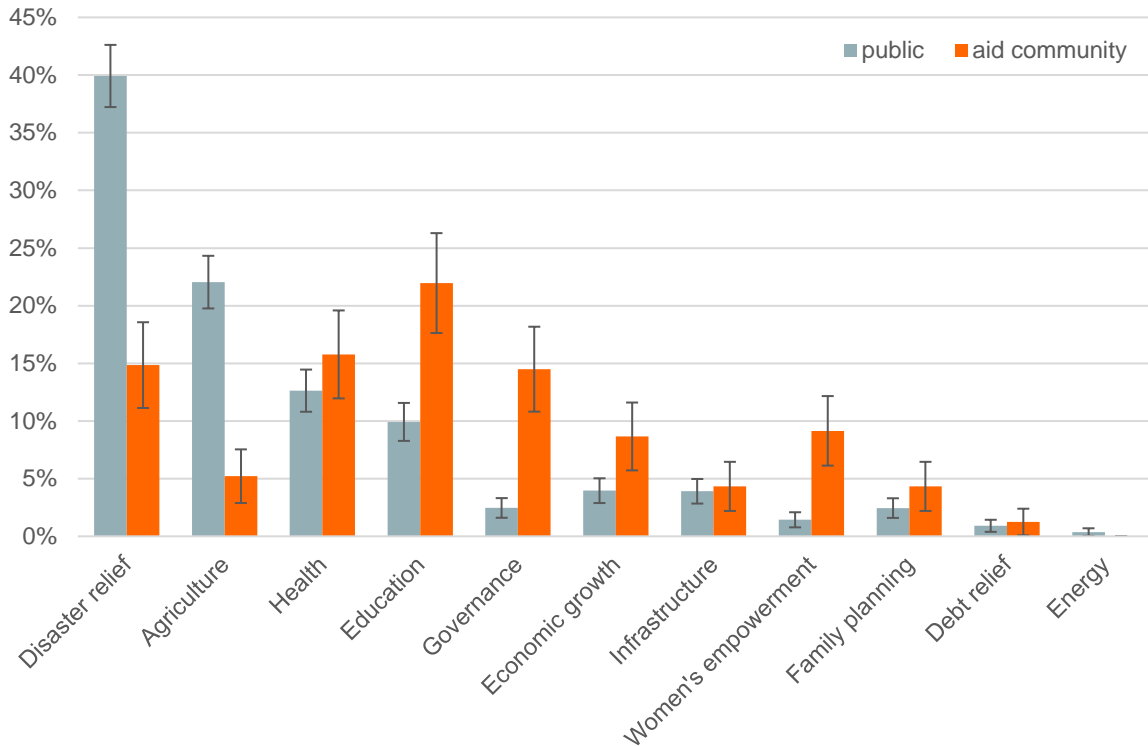
Figure 4 compares the weighted averages of the aid spending areas preferred by the Australian public and the aid community. While the aid community appears to prefer a diverse mix of aid spending areas, the public evidently has an affinity for more traditional aid spending areas – foremost disaster relief, and to a lesser extent agriculture, health and education. This likely reflects a traditional public perception of what constitutes ‘aid’, with a strong focus on humanitarian assistance.² While the public and the aid community are similarly supportive of health, there are striking differences in education, governance, economic development and women’s empowerment.

¹ Note that respondents were limited to the areas as listed in the question; that is, there was no option to write in an alternative area of aid spending.

² It is possible that the popularity of agriculture among the public sample merely reflects its location as the first response category available to survey participants. Generally, there was little evidence of a bias towards the first response categories in other questions. It is possible, however, that this more complex question did lead to some respondents simply selecting the first available answer.

Notably, there is little support for governance and women’s empowerment amongst the public. This is concerning given the importance of these sectors.

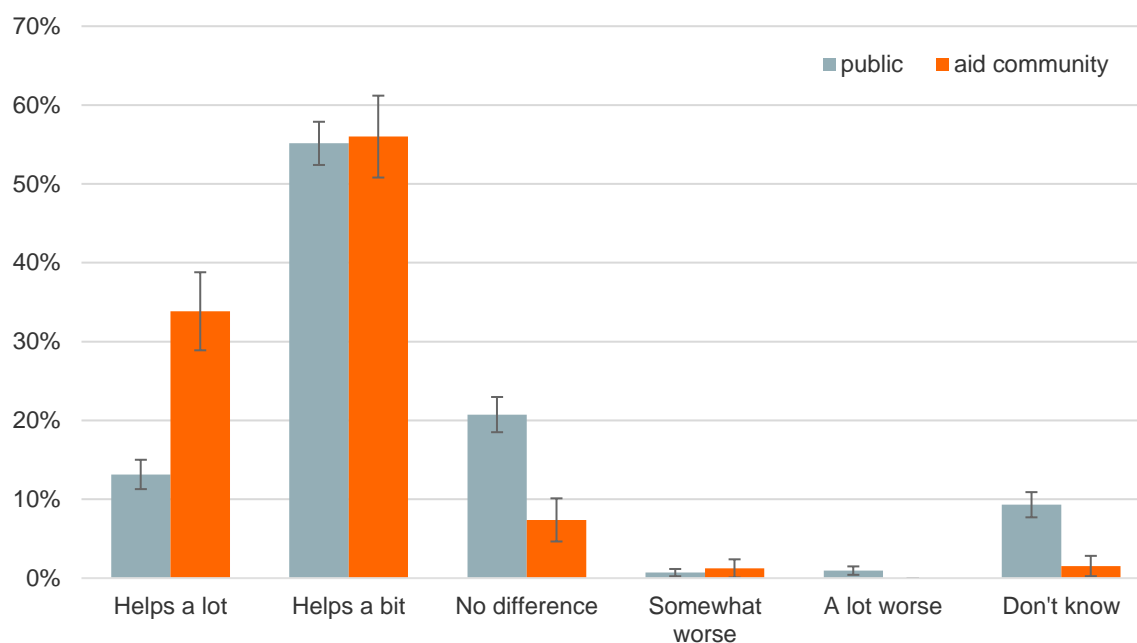
Figure 4 – Weighted averages of aid spending preferences



Question wording: Thinking again about government spending on aid in poor countries, please indicate what you think are the first, second, and third most important areas for government spending on overseas aid in poor countries.

3.5 Effectiveness

How much aid people think Australia should give, and what they think it should be spent on, may well be affected by people’s perceptions of how effectively that aid is spent. To assess the public and the aid community’s beliefs about how effectively Australian aid is spent, we asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they believe that aid helps (or harms) people living in developing countries. Figure 5 shows the distribution of responses. While members of the aid community are far more likely than members of the public to believe that aid makes a big difference in the lives of the poor, it is striking that the majority in both respondent categories take a moderate view, believing that aid improves the lives of people in developing countries a bit.

Figure 5 – Australian aid effectiveness

Question wording: Thinking about the aid that the governments of wealthier countries such as Australia give to poorer countries, and what this aid actually achieves, on average do you think that this aid... Answer wording: Helps people in poorer countries a lot; Helps people in poorer countries a little bit; Makes almost no difference to the lives of poor people in poorer countries; Makes the lives of poor people in poorer countries somewhat worse. Makes the lives of poor people in poorer countries a lot worse; I don't know.

While the headline findings between the public and aid community are similar, it is possible that the underlying reasons for why most members of the public and the aid community hold this view may differ. Members of the public may be influenced in their views by their perceptions of other brakes on development, such as the prevalence of corruption in developing countries (a topic we discuss in greater detail below). By contrast, the aid community's arguably tepid opinion of the effectiveness of Australian aid may be coloured by their more detailed understanding of how aid works in practice and various constraints (logistical, political, etc.) that may limit aid effectiveness. Alternatively, their perception of aid effectiveness might also be tempered by their greater appreciation of the relatively small volume of aid that flows to most individuals in developing countries, as compared to, e.g., income from remittances or migration.

3.6 Poor's lives improving

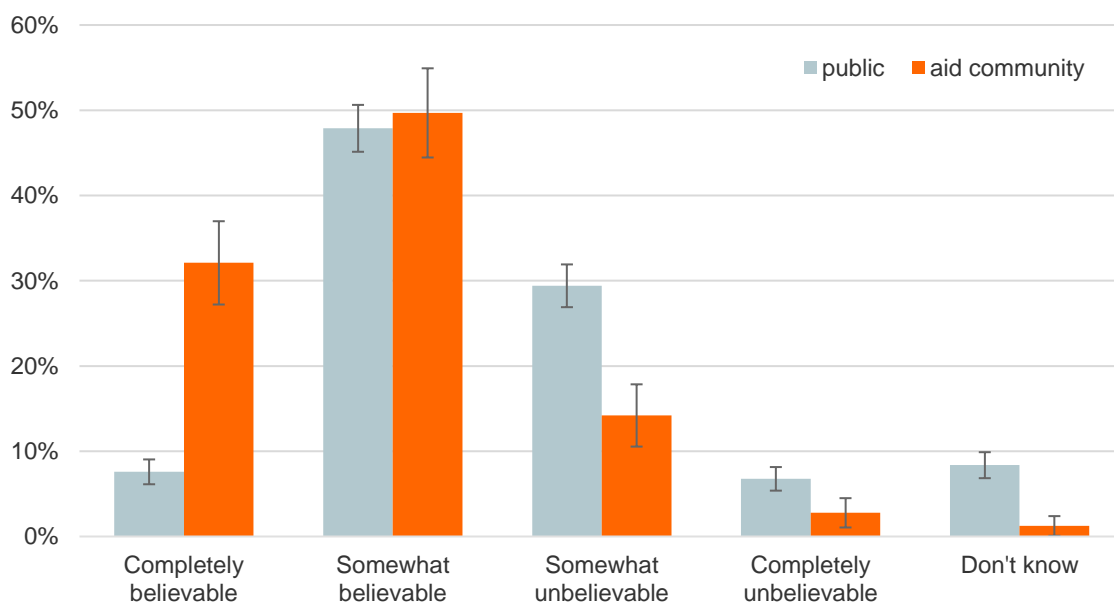
For most people in most developing countries, recent decades have brought real improvements in economic and human development (Kenny, 2011; Radelet, 2015). Yet, this is probably not obvious to readers of newspapers or people who watch TV news. Small incremental improvements for the majority of our planet's population do not readily lend themselves to headlines or articles. On the other hand, crisis and conflict does. This is understandable. Indeed, it is good that news broadcasters devote effort to covering international problems. However, a potential unintended consequence is that news consumers may have an unduly pessimistic take on broader development trends. To gather a sense of whether this was the case we asked respondents whether they thought the following claim was believable: "in the last 15 years the lives of poor people living in the typical poor country have improved significantly." Responses from the public

can be seen in Figure 6 below. The figure also shows responses from our aid community respondents.

Because the question is about belief there is no correct answer as such. However, a respondent well versed in the empirical literature on development trends ought to answer ‘completely believable’. The fact that fewer than 10 per cent of members of the public responded in this way suggests that something—quite possibly the nature of media coverage—gave them at least some cause to doubt the statement. Interestingly, only one-third of our aid community sample thought the statement was ‘completely believable’ themselves. It may be the case that the other two-thirds hold mistaken beliefs for the same reason as the public. Another possibility is that aid workers, by the nature of the work they do, work in parts of the world where progress is still very slow, and that this colours their perceptions of progress.

While a minority of both samples thought the statement ‘completely believable’, most respondents did think it somewhat believable. Strong scepticism was rare amongst members of the aid community, and only about one-third of the public did not believe the claim. Many respondents found cause to doubt the claim of improvement, but only a much smaller segment was disinclined to believe it.

Figure 6 – Believe that lives are improving



Question wording: If someone claimed that in the last 15 years the lives of poor people living in the typical poor country have improved significantly, would you think this claim was... Answer wording: Completely unbelievable; Somewhat unbelievable; Somewhat believable; Completely believable; I don't know.

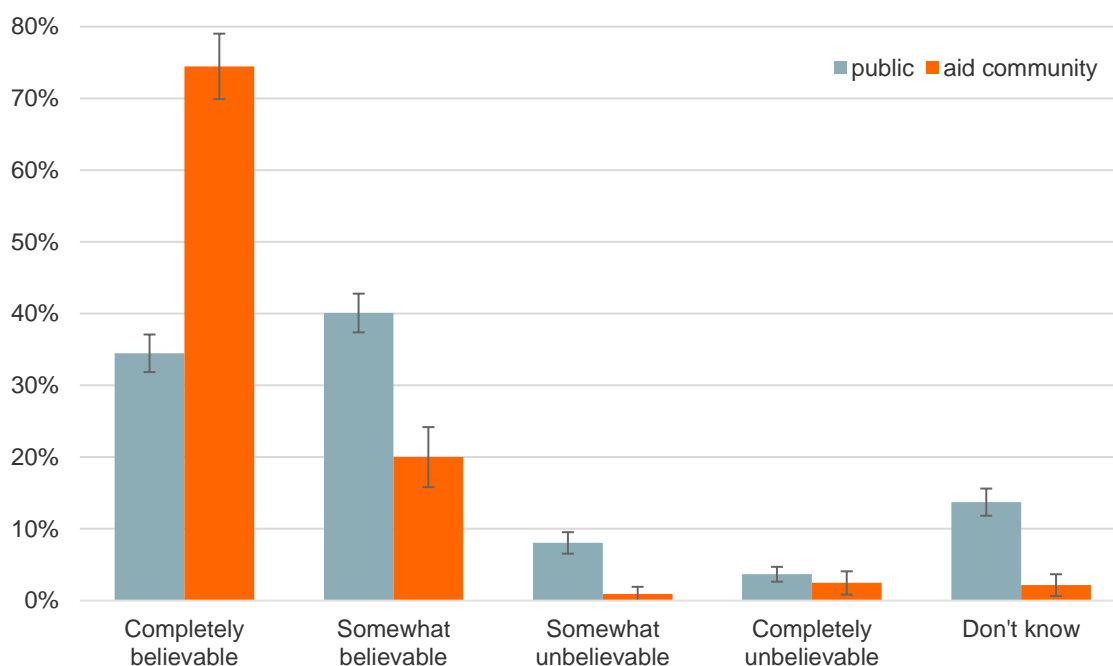
3.7 Indonesia

There is good evidence that people in developed countries do not understand the magnitude of income disparities between developed and developing countries (Nair, 2015). It is plausible that this failure to understand the difference in need might reduce support for aid. For this reason, we provided participants in the AuSSA with the following (empirically accurate) statement and asked them if they thought it believable or not: “an Australian earning the minimum wage earns more than over 80 per cent of Indonesians do, even taking into account the different costs of living in the two

countries.” We chose Indonesia as it is a neighbouring country, not a distant unknown entity. We chose the eightieth percentile of the Indonesian income distribution as the World Bank cautioned against using data from closer to the upper or lower bounds of the income distribution of the countries it had income or consumption data for. We chose the minimum wage for Australia as it provided a well understood bound. We chose exact amounts, rather than vaguer terms such as ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, so that there was an indisputably correct answer: ‘completely believable’, because the statement is true.

As shown in Figure 7, nearly three quarters of the surveyed members of the Australian aid community thought the statement was completely believable. Almost everyone else in the community thought it was at least believable. Given the wealth differences between the two countries any other outcome would have been very surprising. The public were less inclined to believe the statement; however, even amongst the public only just over 10 per cent of respondents found the claim somewhat or completely unbelievable. It seems that misconceptions of the relative wealth of nations are not so strong amongst Australians as to cause them to be strongly sceptical when presented with accurate information.

Figure 7 – Australia and Indonesia



Question wording: If someone claimed that an Australian earning the minimum wage earned more than over 80% of Indonesians do, even taking into account the different costs of living in the two countries, would you say this claim was... Answer wording: Completely believable; Somewhat believable; Somewhat unbelievable; Completely unbelievable; I don't know.

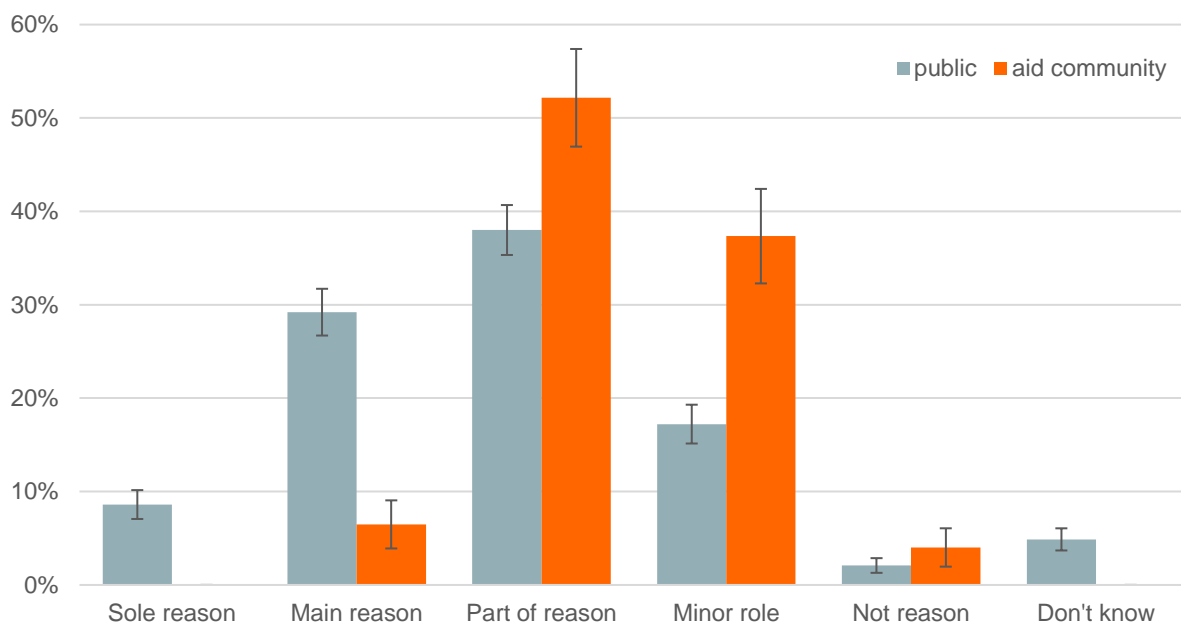
3.8 Corruption

Lastly, we asked a question examining the perceived relationship between corruption and poverty in developing countries. This is an important issue to understand as corruption is often highlighted by critics and proponents of a reduced aid budget, who argue that a high prevalence of corruption in developing countries means that an aid given is ineffective. Moreover, public opinion research conducted by the UK Department for International Development suggests that attitudes towards

corruption there have grown steadily more pessimistic – whereas in 2008 48 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement, “Corruption in governments in poor countries makes it pointless donating money to help reduce poverty”, by 2010 that figure had risen to 60 per cent and by 2014, 67 per cent (cited in: Hudson and vanHeerde-Hudson, 2015).

Fortunately, the results of the 2016 AuSSA survey suggest that the Australian public holds a more moderate view. The findings shown in Figure 8 suggest that while a not-insignificant proportion of public respondents (8.61 per cent) believe that corruption is the sole cause of poverty in developing countries, and members of the Australian public are more likely than aid community members to believe that corruption is the predominant cause of poverty, the plurality of the public (38 per cent) and the majority of aid community members (52.2 per cent) believe that corruption is only part of the reason why poor countries remain poor.

Figure 8 – Corruption and poverty



Question wording: Some people argue that the corrupt governments of poor countries cause these countries to be poor. Other people disagree and say there are other causes. Thinking about this issue, which of the following statements is closest to what you believe? Answer wording: Corruption is the sole reason why poor countries are poor; Corruption is the main reason why poor countries are poor, but other problems play some role; Corruption is part of the reason why poor countries are poor, but other problems play an equal role; Corruption plays some role in making poor countries poor, but other problems are the main reason why these countries are poor; Corruption is not the reason why poor countries are poor; I don't know.

4. Conclusion

When it comes to beliefs about aid and development, the Australian aid community and the Australian public are not polar opposites. There are common views and there are also differences which are only differences of degree. And yet, the two groups that we surveyed are not one and the same. The Australian aid community may be a subset of the Australian community but it is an atypical one in its beliefs.

The starkest contrast is to be found in views about the size of Australia’s aid budget. Over 85 per cent of surveyed members of the aid community think it should be increased. Less than 15 per

cent of Australian's share this belief. It is possible that the views of the average Australian can be changed. However, our own work in this area (Wood, 2016b) does not suggest this will be easy, or that it can be accomplished simply by reaching out to more Australians. Moreover, the fact that our survey did not reveal complete ignorance amongst the public regarding development issues (e.g., on the topic of income inequality) also suggests that more information may not necessarily be the cure for resistance to budget increases. Although the public are clearly part of the equation, it may be the case that public antipathy to aid increases means that most of the advocacy around this objective should be focused either on directly targeting politicians, or on other goals. Stating this is not the same as saying there is no need for development education in Australia. Undoubtedly, there is, but it is unlikely that information or education is likely to make the average Australian as supportive of increases in aid volume as the average member of the aid community currently is.

On the other hand, while the public's thinking about the purpose of aid, and the related question of the reason why aid should be given, still differs from the thinking of the aid community, here the differences are only of degree. As is the case with members of the aid community, enthusiasm for giving aid first and foremost to benefit Australia is low amongst the Australian community. This sentiment is something that could be tapped into by campaigners should they chose to confront problems of aid quality in the future.

One other way in which the public differs from the Australian aid community is in the diversity of views it holds. This is not surprising given how much larger the Australian public is as compared to the Australian aid community. However, it is a point worth emphasising as it means there will be many different subgroups of the population each who may be more or less amenable to different arguments, and to different objectives, when campaigning enters the sphere of public debate.

Given the AuSSA data include information on respondents' sociodemographic traits and political beliefs, as well as information on their beliefs about other topical issues, there is much scope to conduct more sophisticated analysis to identify the traits associated with particular levels of knowledge and views about aid. We have conducted similar work in the past (Wood, 2015; Wood et al., 2016b), and we plan to use the AuSSA data to undertake more of this work in the future.

For now though, our key takeaway point is that Australia's aid community is a unique part of the broader Australian community. While our data suggest some commonalities, and while they point to a public which is not completely ignorant of development issues, arguments cannot safely be assumed to be effective among the general public, just because they make sense to us.

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