

Aid and asylum seekers: an unhappy marriage

by Robin Davies
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In an opinion piece in the November edition of *Rights Agenda*, the monthly bulletin of the [Human Rights Law Centre](#), I return to a topic explored earlier this year in a [series of posts](#) on the Development Policy Blog: the use of aid in connection with asylum-seeker costs.

Since late 2012, Australia's overseas aid program has, in one way or another, allocated almost \$1 billion toward the costs of Australia's asylum seeker management regime. That's to say nothing of general aid funding promised to [help clinch regional resettlement deals](#) with Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

The Coalition, when in opposition, [stridently opposed](#) the use of overseas aid to meet asylum seeker costs within Australia—calling it 'outrageous' and 'inappropriate'. In office, will they cease this practice? More importantly, what might be the government's policy on using aid to meet costs associated with 'community detention' where it is practised offshore?

Getting answers to these questions, particularly the latter, is not merely important from an aid policy perspective. Certainly, using aid to offset asylum seeker costs is regarded by many people as an abuse—but that's not the worst of it. The very availability of overseas aid for this purpose creates incentives to handle asylum seekers in ways that reduce their welfare, security and visibility, and erode their human rights. For more on this, see the [full opinion piece](#).

The government has quite a few aid policy and management questions on its plate at present. While those above might not be uppermost right now, they do bear watching. Any use of aid to pay for something labelled as community detention offshore would be highly questionable. And if a government were to move people into murky arrangements outside institutional detention for no other reason than to be able to charge the aid program for their costs—as Labor appeared to be [contemplating](#)—this could have serious consequences both for the people concerned and for the government's international standing.

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