

A 'new' development policy? Or did Australia just miss its moment?



Photo Credit: *Reginald Ramos/DFAT*

by John Davidson and Soli Middleby

30 August 2023

A new development policy for Australia presented an opportunity to reinvigorate a program that has lost its way amid the ambivalence, and occasional outright hostility, shown towards aid by successive conservative governments. A time for ambition, a bold statement of intent supported by fresh ideas and commitments.

Unfortunately, **the policy** announced earlier this month does none of these things. Instead, we are presented with a collection of buzzwords, promises to develop strategies on virtually every aspect of the program, and very little that is actually new.

The objective remains consistent. **In 2014**, it was to promote prosperity, reduce poverty, and enhance stability with an Indo-Pacific focus. In 2023, the objective endures – a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific through sustainable development and lifting people out of poverty.

The aid program's position within government has not changed. While the 'all the tools of statecraft' rhetoric suggests to some **a repositioning of aid**, it essentially consolidates the 2013 decision to align our diplomatic, trade, and development efforts. Development remains firmly subordinate to both defence and diplomacy.

Geographic focus remains constant, centring on the Indo-Pacific, as adopted in 2014. While retaining flexibility for global commitments back then, we've also maintained capacity to engage beyond the Indo-Pacific today – albeit only where it affects the region.

Strategic priorities remain largely unchanged. The 2014 and 2023 policies vary in tone and emphasis mirroring Australia's political parties, yet both cater comprehensively. Encompassing everything from health to security, trade to social

protection, disasters to private sector growth, they differ only in structure: the 2014 policy grouped under eight investment priorities, while the 2023 policy adopts four overarching focus areas.

There is little substantive change in our approach to reform. In 2014, we were going to create 'a new aid paradigm' through our focus on value for money, effective partnerships, innovation hubs and country led reforms. In 2023, we will be using new country plans, updated indicators, genuine partnerships and localisation. While these might appear 'new' or 'different' they all represent broad generalisations about what we know makes a good aid program without any tangible evidence about how we plan to resource and deliver them.

Claiming something is new is an art in the aid industry which is full of promises that are broken and then made again. It is an industry that has grown adept at co-opting buzzwords and concepts while actually maintaining the status quo.

Most commitments already exist in some form, so what is actually new?

The ambition to embed the [perspectives of First Nations Australians into our development efforts](#) is new and commendable, but Australia's unresolved domestic position, clear in the debates over a constitutionally enshrined Voice, [could undermine it](#). We are at risk of projecting our muddled domestic debate internationally, which would not do justice to First Nations Australians and could undermine us with partners, [especially in the Pacific](#), where concerns regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are deeply felt.

New commitments to increase programming in gender and climate change are also commendable, but in the absence of any increase in real aid spending until at least 2036-37, they come at the expense of other programs. Countries in our region already view us with deep suspicion after it was revealed that the previous government's 'new' climate initiatives [didn't translate into additional spending](#).

That we have largely maintained the status quo is unsurprising. Unlike the UK's Minister for International Development who has [outlined a bold proposal for a bipartisan white paper on aid](#) that focuses on climate finance and the Sustainable Development Goals, DFAT's [terms of reference](#) lacked that ambition. Instead of giving big independent thinkers an opportunity to propose something new, we worked with those [well established in the Australian aid system](#).

The status quo will not make Australia a development partner of choice. This was the time, as [Professor Michael Wesley had suggested](#), to seriously consider

reversing the ‘machinery of government disaster’ that abolished AusAID in 2013 and re-establish a high functioning, separate aid agency. The establishment of a separate agency with ministerial support, staffed by development professionals, would introduce the contestability of ideas required to produce the world class policy and strategy to engage in a rapidly evolving geopolitical context.

An agency that both values and encourages debate across the whole of government with avenues for genuine participation in policy development and implementation that go beyond vague notions of ‘partnership’ would signal to our partners that we are serious in seeking to deepen our engagement and respect their input. It would allow our development agenda to be best advanced, as **some experts have argued**, in parallel to our geopolitical agenda, rather than subordinate to it.

In an international development landscape where the once **big thinking bilateral agencies** have been **gutted and mismanaged** into mediocrity, and a geostrategic context in which China is actively **seeking to reshape** the international aid architecture, Australia appears to have missed its moment.

Read [all Devpol blogs on the 2023 Australian international development policy](#).

Author/s:

John Davidson

John Davidson worked in the Pacific region for more than 30 years, most recently as head of the Australian government’s regional aid office based in Fiji. Since retiring, he has worked as a governance advisor to the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community.

Soli Middleby

Soli Middleby worked in international development for over 20 years, including 15 years with the Australian government’s aid program, and three years as CEO of the Australia Pacific Training Coalition. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/did-australia-just-miss-its-moment-20230830/>