

July blog digest: A Parliamentary Committee for aid | Too many health meetings in the Pacific | Blog summary



by Stephen Howes

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A Parliamentary Committee for aid

In his recent [post](#) on aid to fragile states (based on his equally recent [discussion paper](#)), John Evers, formerly senior Australian Treasury official with hands-on experience in aid delivery through his leadership role in the Enhanced Cooperation Program in PNG, calls for the establishment of a parliamentary committee on aid. This was something we politely suggested in the 2011 [Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness](#), where we noted the interest of several parliamentarians in the proposal.

John adds further specificity to this recommendation by calling for a sub-committee on aid to be established within the Joint Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT). More importantly, he also elaborates on the rationale:

There are many policy and administrative issues in Australia's growing aid program, including how effective it can be, in what ways, in fragile and conflict-affected countries. A JSCFADT sub-committee could improve on the attention given to the aid program in Senate Estimates, which tends to be dominated by the most topical issues. It could do justice to the forthcoming work of the Independent Evaluation Committee, and more broadly to AusAID's extensive reporting on its programs. It could also have a

salutary influence on other agencies involved in delivering Australia's aid, ... asking whether their contributions are sufficiently selective, well coordinated and guided by internal and external evaluations.

Interestingly, a Senate Committee enquiry has just in fact been **announced** into Australian aid to Afghanistan. Enquiries into Australian aid are few and far between (the last one was in 2006 on Australian aid to the Pacific), and our Parliament couldn't have picked a more difficult case to examine. Still, there is a lot to examine, and it's hard to think that an enquiry every six years is enough given the expansion and importance of our aid program.

Too many health meetings in the Pacific

We featured lots of posts on aid and health this month, from family planning ([here](#) and [here](#)) to the link between water and sanitation and HIV/AIDS ([here](#)) to data problems in measuring progress towards the health MDGs ([here](#)). Joel Negin's **post** on regional health meetings in the Pacific, "So many meetings, so little impact," might sound prosaic by comparison, but sometimes in aid it is the prosaic that makes the difference.

Joel and his colleagues have estimated the number of regional meetings which government health officers in the Pacific attend. The results (reported in this [research paper](#) [pdf]) are startling. They count 52 regular meetings and 14 one-off meetings in a 12 month period, including 13 on HIV and sexually-transmitted diseases. Why is this is a problem?

The high number of regional health meetings represents a substantial time and cost impact on senior health officials with some spending as much as 50% of their time out of the office. PICT [Pacific island countries and territories] officials lament being constantly invited to meetings, with some citing several invitations in the same week by the same agency. ...

[S]maller countries often have just one or two staff managing across sexual and reproductive health, HIV and communicable disease control. The smallest PICTs may have just a single public health officer. A representative quote from one PICT interviewee

stated that the meetings “eat into his ability to carry on core business.

It gets worse:

As an example, one health official had twelve trips scheduled for 2010 which included a remarkable five visits to the continental USA, each consuming up to two weeks of the individual’s time. Over the course of the first five months of 2010, another individual was out of the country for 41 days which equates to approximately 27% of the individual’s time. The duration of the meeting is often only one portion of the time out of the office for health officers given infrequent flight connections between scattered island states. One interviewee noted that for a three day meeting in Fiji, he is out of the office for ten days ...

How did this alarming situation emerge? Too many agencies and meetings is a global problem (in aid in general, and health aid in particular), but AusAID has to take some of the blame. Joel notes that: “Over the past few years, AusAID has directed substantial amounts of its Pacific health funding to regional mechanisms often managed by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community.”

Not only does this sort of regional approach lead to more regional meetings, but more generally, many of the Pacific officials interviewed regard the regional model more generally as “inefficient and ineffective.” Joel reports specific concerns about “the scale up of regional management systems at the expense of on-the-ground impact.”

Joel argues that regional approaches should not be used, as it has been, whenever the same issue affects a region of countries, but rather should be restricted to those issues that actually require a regional response, such as cross-border influenza transmission. He says that AusAID is starting to get the message, but that “much more needs to be done including merging or cancelling some of these regional mechanisms.”

I hope that Joel and his colleagues will repeat their 2010 survey soon. We all know

how difficult it is in general to measure aid results. But here we have a clear indicator, albeit of failure than success. All we need is a target. A Pacific health regional meeting a month, rather than more than one a week as at present?

Blog Summary

PNG featured strongly over the month: see these two posts ([here](#) and [here](#)) on the elections, [this one](#) on social media in PNG, [this one](#) on economic prospects, and [this one](#) on the PNG Sustainable Development Program. And check out our new notes: much shorter announcements and opinion pieces: [here](#) on the Australian Pacific Technical College and [here](#) on Westpac investments in Solomon Islands logging.

A full list of all our posts over the last month follows below.

Aid

[Australian aid in the Asian century: part one – the humanitarian case](#) by Stephen Howes.

My argument for this post is simple: Asia is still full of poor people, poor people matter, and aid in general is of assistance to poor people.

[Australian aid in the Asian century: part two – international public goods](#) by Stephen Howes.

Even when countries such as Indonesia graduate, aid will still remain relevant in the Asian century as an international problem-solving tool, used to finance global and regional public goods.

[Keeping an eye on Australia's aid](#) by John Evers.

In a new [discussion paper](#) for the Development Policy Centre, I've

noted some distinctive features of this Australian aid to fragile and conflict-affected countries, in the context of international literature by aid providers and others about such aid.

If we can't really measure progress towards the MDGs, how do we measure the aid program results? by Alan Lopez and Jane Thomason.

... by and large, the international community cannot know if true progress is being made towards the MDGs because they don't have the data.

No cuts to current NZ aid levels but future looks grim by Joanna Spratt.

So, despite the three-year increase, overall New Zealand ODA is looking grim..

Development Policy

WASH and HIV/AIDS: what's the link? by Vanessa Varonese.

By integrating WASH and HIV we will .. achieve greater outcomes for the poorest and most vulnerable, and will thereby do our part to help turn the tide on the HIV epidemic.

Sachs' Sustainable Development Goals – vision of the future or more pie in the sky? by Joel Negin.

There will, of course, be critics and critiques. ... But there is an

opportunity for the SDGs to herald a new engagement by the emerging economies of the world that will be the global leaders of the next 15 years.

About time: putting family planning back on the development agenda by Julia Newton-Howes.

Contraceptive prevalence in Laos it is 29%; in Afghanistan 16%; in Timor-Leste it is 7%. For comparison, in Australia the figures is 71% and Norway is 82%.

After the siesta: whither the G20's development agenda? by Robin Davies.

Whether Australia will be able to find much common ground with its troika partners on development remains to be seen, but it certainly has a rare and imminent opportunity to refine the G20 catechism in this area and, leaders willing, do a few good works.

Tackling environmental pollution in Vietnam's craft villages by Sango Mahanty.

The study finds that current government policies treat craft villages in much the same way as larger scale industry, focusing on direct regulation, pollution fees for individual polluters and public education. However, such approaches are failing, given the economic significance of crafts for rural livelihoods and weak state capacity to monitor and regulate countless small-scale, dispersed and interdependent craft producers.

Pacific economies weathering global financial turmoil, but for how long? by Christopher Edmonds.

The just-released July edition of the Asian Development Bank's Pacific Economic Monitor projects economic growth of 6.0% in the Pacific region for 2012. ... [But] growth is now expected to decline to 4.2% in 2013.

So many meetings, so little impact by Joel Negin.

Given the capacity constraints and small size of many PICT [Pacific island countries and territories] ministries, the multitude of invitations to a growing number of meetings has become a source of concern.

Renewable energy targets in the Pacific: Why are unrealistic targets adopted? by Matthew Dornan.

Unfortunately, four of the six Pacific islands with a 100 per cent target have no low-cost renewable energy resources. ... They have been established because of the prospect that donors will fund such investments. It is time that donors responded only to sensible energy plans and targets, and not to those that are politically motivated.

The London family planning summit: a loss or an opportunity for the Pacific? by Sean Mackesy-Buckley.

For too long, political sensitivities, a lack of quality family planning

data, high transaction costs and the relative invisibility of the region has led to the severe neglect of Pacific family planning programmes.

Taking Pacific Islands economies forward: what can we learn from the past? by Tony Hughes.

A proposal is now taking shape with multi-donor backing, aimed at helping both PICs and donors to answer the question ‘What can we learn from our experience of economic management in the PICs?’

PNG

Papua New Guinea Sustainable Development Program – how is it performing? By Margaret Callan.

The absence of reporting on evaluations meant that it was not possible to judge the effectiveness of PNGSDP’s development investments. Hopefully the publication of this Review will be the first step in a more robust approach to program evaluation at PNGSDP.

PNG national elections: drums and drama of campaigning in the Highlands by Satish Chand.

The campaign was all about mobilising cash, coca cola (coke), and meat (pork): this was pork barreling, literally. The lone redistribution that I witnessed involved the amassing of K17,000 (AU\$8500) cash, 70 cartons of coke, 32 pigs, and 5 goats. These items alone that were redistributed that day amounted to a total of

K71,000.

[PNG national elections: polling in the National Capital District \(NCD\)](#) by Philip Mitna.

In the settlements, multiple voting was common. ... The ink from the Electoral Commission that was supposed to leave an indelible mark on the finger of the voter is no match for the lemon juice and bleach used by the offenders.

[Can social media transform Papua New Guinea? Reflections and questions](#) by Michelle Rooney.

In a country where names are often synonymous with ethnicity, family and sometimes political affiliation and in a context where corruption and violence are widespread, it is understandable that some may wish to conceal their real identities when engaging in the public sphere. It is also interesting to see that many people use their real identities and openly write about issues such as corruption and violence.

[Confronting the economic challenges facing PNG's new government](#) by Aaron Batten.

[M]aturing mining and oil operations will contribute to a 5 to 10% decline in real government revenue between now and 2014. ... In addition to addressing long standing issues of expenditure quality, the incoming PNG government will have to manage a growing need for fiscal austerity.

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