



Nanaia Mahuta's New Zealand aid legacy

By Terence Wood
20 October 2023

Nanaia Mahuta, the first Māori woman to serve as New Zealand's foreign minister, will be leaving parliament in the next few weeks in the wake of Labour's election loss. In three years as foreign minister she proved to be a competent diplomat serving New Zealand's interests overseas. She had a nuanced take on the world and at times also took principled stands. Overall, I think it's fair to say she did a pretty good job.

My main interest in Mahuta hasn't been her overall performance though, but rather her impact on New Zealand aid. [As I wrote](#) when she assumed the role, she had no aid experience. Indeed, she'd shown no real interest in aid previously. When she became the politician in charge of New Zealand government aid I was unsure what, if any, impact she would have.

Now, three years later, her impact is clearer. It has been a tale of some achievements, some lessons and some uncertainty.

Thanks to a big climate finance increase, aid went up on her watch. I'm not sure how much credit she can take for that: the [increase was driven by](#) Green Party environment minister James Shaw. However, she can take credit for overseeing the development of a comprehensive climate finance strategy, with a strong emphasis on civil society.

Mahuta also didn't get as caught up as some politicians in the New Cold War. As a result, as best I can tell (annoyingly, no one ever invites me to high-level strategy meetings), the quality of New Zealand aid didn't fall as much as it might have in the midst of Western donors' rush to chase China out of the Pacific.

At the same time though, as the last OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) [peer review of New Zealand aid showed](#), there is still plenty of room for improvement in New Zealand aid practice. Many of the problems the DAC review identified have been known for years. But Mahuta never really pushed the foreign ministry to improve. Under different circumstances I think she might have: NGO staff who met her have told me she was

engaged and interested and keen to learn. And the mere fact she proactively engaged with NGO staff was a change from her recent predecessors.

She had a big problem though: time.

For much of her tenure as foreign minister, Mahuta was also Minister of Local Government. And, thanks to sensible, but politically fraught, water infrastructure reforms, being local government minister was an incredibly difficult job. As a result, Mahuta didn't have time to press for better aid practice.

There's a lesson here, relevant for Australia too – foreign ministries aren't aid agencies, and they struggle with effective aid delivery, but are often reluctant to admit this. Real change requires political attention.

Mahuta did have an impact on aid at a more conceptual level though. In [ministerial speeches](#) and internally she emphasised the importance of incorporating Māori concepts and values into foreign policy, including aid giving. And if you look at Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) documents, including [aid policy documents](#), you can see the increasing presence of Māori language and ideas.

The changes fit with Treaty of Waitangi commitments to partnership in governance. So in a domestic sense they are excellent. What's uncertain at this point though, is whether these conceptual changes will have a tangible, positive impact on New Zealand aid delivery. They might – some of the Māori ideas and ethics reflected in the changes sound conducive to greater aid effectiveness. But having the right ethos is only part of the tough job of giving aid well. It's in the tricky practicalities of aid where many ideals sink, swim, or disappear entirely. And at this point it's too soon to ascertain the practical impact of the conceptual changes Mahuta encouraged. Perhaps her legacy here will be truly positive, but it will take hard work from MFAT for it to occur. This lesson, of course, will be relevant for Australia's attempts to incorporate indigenous perspectives into its foreign policy too.

In New Zealand's case, sadly, we may never get to know what Mahuta's legacy in this area could have been. The incoming right-wing government could well be hostile to incorporating Māori concepts into foreign policy and her changes may not last long.

For now it seems fair to say that Mahuta probably brought some improvements to New Zealand aid. At the very least, she didn't make matters worse. That's a favourable outcome by the standards of New Zealand's recent foreign ministers.

Disclosure

This research was undertaken with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The views are those of the author only.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/mahuta-20231020/>

Date downloaded: 9 May 2024



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