Making clear bets for change: Australia's International Development Policy

Photo Credit: DFAT

by Lisa Denney

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Launched in 2023, the Australian Government's International Development Policy has been pointed to as signalling a number of shifts in the Australian aid program – perhaps most notably towards more locally-led development. It also signals an under-acknowledged reorientation of Australia's strategies for achieving development.

While remaining firmly committed to state-building as a way to support the capacity of states to deliver, the policy also points to a shift towards enabling civil society and supporting local leaders and coalitions to drive change in their own countries. These strategies should be understood as "bets" on how development happens – they propose different ideas about where change is likely to come from. Recognising them as different strategies for change would prompt DFAT staff and those implementing its programs to think about how change happens and how these different approaches might be brought to bear in a given context and programming area. So, where is state-building, versus civil society, versus local leaders and coalitions, likely to drive development? And in what combination?

At the recent Development Intelligence Lab event celebrating the one-year anniversary of the policy, these three different strategies for development were flagged, with some suggestion that they all play a role and are mutually supportive. While intuitively appealing, this is not always the case.

There are, of course, interrelationships and overlaps between different strategies for change and sometimes they push in the same direction. For example, building the public financial management capacity of the state while supporting civil society advocacy on accountability can go hand in hand with more responsive public spending. But it is not the case that all strategies always contribute equally to change. A case in point is where state-building efforts to train and equip police

services undermines the rule of law by strengthening a predatory service that impinges on the rights and safety of the citizens they are meant to protect. In such cases, change pursued through state-building is in tension with change pursued through support to civil society. Not all change strategies are complementary or cumulative.

Thinking more explicitly about different approaches to change as strategies or bets is useful in uncovering the implicit biases we operate with to understand how change occurs. It is widely recognised that developmental change has historically been driven by a range of factors – rather that a single "root cause".

For instance, critical junctures are defining moments of change that disrupt the status quo, such as natural disasters, election results, or conflicts. The 2022 coup in Myanmar serves as a prime example of such a juncture. In contrast, social movements represent the gradual efforts of groups exercising agency to challenge and dismantle structures over time, much like the civil rights movement. Technology can also play a transformative role, with advances like the contraceptive pill leading to shifts in family structures, workforce participation, and household power dynamics.

Leadership can be pivotal in driving change, whether at a national level, like President Paul Kagame's controversial transformation of post-genocide Rwanda, or at a community level, where religious leaders can galvanise communities to end harmful traditional practices. Lastly, coalitions of actors with shared interests can propel change, as seen in the Coalitions for Change program in the Philippines, where issue-based groups work together to reform governance policies. This list is not exhaustive – but points to some of the commonly recognised drivers of change. We all operate with preferred mental models about how change happens – some of us are naturally drawn to social movements as drivers of change; some by the power of technology. But the point is that we need to be alert to the many possible ways in which change might happen in different contexts and think strategically about how development assistance can contribute. This means recognising our own preferred mental models and thinking more openly about approaches to development as strategies for driving change.

Critical to conceiving of these as different bets for how development is achieved is developing a framework for capturing learning about what works, for who, where, and why. This goes well beyond the program-level monitoring, evaluation and learning that attracts considerable investment, to embedding a curiosity for learning about how change happens within DFAT and its program implementation. What is needed is a higher-level framework that can capture which strategies are effective in which contexts (both in countries and programming areas), identifies who benefits

from these strategies, and uses research to understand the outcomes. Such an approach would require thinking through the strategies for change that are embedded within investments, as well as across country and thematic portfolios. This would go a long way to making future policy commitments and program planning more evidence-based in its selection of strategies for change – so that these are done intentionally rather than by default.

If development is fundamentally about understanding and navigating how change happens, then getting clearer on the strategies we are testing and what we're learning about them is crucial. We can distil a number of these strategies from Australia's International Development Policy and would do well to treat them more explicitly as distinct approaches for driving change.

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