

‘Memorandum of Understanding’ – our new podcast

by Gordon Peake and Julia Bergin

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Making New Year predictions is a mug's game – look at how 2020 turned out – but one forecast we make with utmost confidence is that more Memorandums of Understanding about international development will be signed in 2021.

Along with the launch of the corporate plan, the gender and social inclusion handbook, the training program or the handing over of kit, the MOU is a ubiquitous feature in both the iconography and the orthodoxy of international development. These performances of words bespeak the sense that aid is given in an ordered, rational and avowedly technocratic manner. It is also, in diplomatic parlance, an 'announceable', an activity that can be packaged up and proclaimed as an example of how some good is being done, vital in a funding environment where it is important to proclaim the good news and tarry not on anything else. Research produced in 2020 found that **96% of Australia's official words about the performance of its aid program were positive.**

There is by now a well-honed formula to such events. There will be a banner, a buffet lunch, a government minister or official from the country in question will eulogise 'donor partners' and it'll all be rounded off with a tweet from the funder about how this particular event has been even more epochal than the last. Not even COVID-19 has dimmed their prevalence: signing ceremonies and launches now take place via Zoom.

Anyone who researches, works in or has an interest in international development knows that reality is more complicated and complex than this. Like all forms of human endeavour, it is a potpourri of people, policies and politics laced through with the unanticipated and the unforeseen. It is also a darned sight more interesting, lively and contested than that described in the bloodless language of official records and reports, more than half of which, **according to the World Bank**, are read by not a single soul.

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In this podcast series, brought to you by the Development Policy Centre, we'll be peering behind the bureaucratic curtain and lancing through the buzzwords to tell the stories of the people, policy and politics of international development. Each fortnight, we'll be sharing personal stories of delivering and receiving development aid, showcasing research, discussing big political ideas and everything in between. Using both documentary-style narrative story-telling, interviews and expert analysis, our tone will be conversational and convivial while not being afraid to delve into difficult or contentious issues.

Gordon is the podcast's host. He has researched and worked in development since the early aughts and been responsible for a few signing ceremonies in his time, including one occasion where he facilitated an [MoU intended to implement a slew of previous MoUs](#). He's especially interested in the politics of development, working with unpredictability and what Yeats called the 'rag and bone shop of the human heart': the personal motivations, histories and relationships that make the world spool as it does. Podcast production is courtesy of Julia, a China journalist making her development debut. She is no stranger to international relations, penning articles and servicing sound waves for the likes of *The Guardian*, *The Japan Times*, and *The Little Red Podcast*.

With each of the ten episodes we have planned we'll be creating our own Memorandum of Understanding, not in the shindig sense of the term, but as a record of our improved comprehension or grasp of issues. In the pipeline are episodes about the politics of support for family planning, the roll out of the COVID-19 vaccines, how secular donors can work in countries where religious faith is strong, and climate change programs. We'll also be talking to the authors of books and reports that have made us think and focussing also on some of the work of the Development Policy Centre, starting with its research on seasonal workers and labour mobility. We're planning a later episode as a 'where are they now' search into three MOUs from yesteryear and asking what happened after these documents were inked. In each episode we're keen to include the voices of 'beneficiaries', those to whom the aid is ostensibly for.

In our first episode, to be launched on 1 February, we go to Dili, Timor-Leste, once the site of one of the world's largest and costliest development interventions. Between 1999 and 2012, the country was home to military peacekeepers, police from more than 50 nations, a legion of non-governmental organisations, an alphabet soup of programs, and enough characters to fill a shelf of Graham Greene novels. The episode centres on the stories of Agora Food Studio, a restaurant and food business set up by Alva Lim and Mark Notoras after they found they could achieve more in training Timorese chefs and restaurateurs than through all those reports they'd previously been scribing. We'll speak also to Agora staff and explore the

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importance of aid programs understanding food as an entry point into better understanding the country.

A final poignant note to end, which is to remember the work of the late **Dr James Scambary**, an anthropologist who died too young last year. James was fascinated by the utility of Memorandums of Understanding and curious about what happened to these documents in the months and years that followed. Gordon and James spoke about writing a book about the topic before he passed. The title of the podcast is, in many ways, inspired by him.

Our first episode airs February 1 and you can **find us** “wherever you get your podcasts”. Follow us on Twitter **@MOU_pod**.

Author/s:

Gordon Peake

Gordon Peake is a writer, podcaster and consultant, and a campus visitor at the Development Policy Centre. His first book was an award-winning memoir of life in Timor-Leste, his second was on the would-be nation of Bougainville.

Julia Bergin

Julia Bergin is the producer for the ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ podcast.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/memorandum-of-understanding-conversations-about-international-development-our-new-podcast-20200115-1/>