



# Opportunities for Indigenous Australians in aid: what is needed?

By Tony Kiessler

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has set itself an ambitious agenda to increase the engagement of Indigenous Australians in the delivery of Australian aid. This is guided by DFAT's [Indigenous peoples strategy](#), which sets a broad agenda for engaging with both Australian and overseas indigenous peoples, stating that, "DFAT will encourage Indigenous Australians to apply for DFAT-funded opportunities to engage in and develop people-to-people links with the international community". [This article](#) published by Devex discusses the potential benefit of people-to-people engagement in the delivery of Australian aid through the translation of concepts into the local context.

Many of DFAT's procurements now require tenderers to propose an 'Indigenous participation plan' that sets targets for Indigenous supplier use (see [Supply](#)

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[Nation](#)) and workforce participation in line with the Australian government's broader [Indigenous procurement policy](#) (IPP). These DFAT procurement requirements are quite new, and Indigenous participation in international development programs is currently well below the Australian government's Indigenous engagement targets.

In opening opportunities for Indigenous Australians, DFAT also has a responsibility to ensure that Indigenous businesses and individuals are well placed to meet the demands of this new marketplace. DFAT should act as a steward, leading by example to build capacity and encourage their partners to create a sustainable marketplace for Indigenous businesses in international development. Overseas posts should be supported to understand how to facilitate the engagement of Indigenous consultants and long-term advisors on existing programs in Asia and the Pacific, and to develop entry-level roles that can provide the exposure and experience needed for a career in foreign policy and international development. Large facilities and sectoral programs certainly have the capacity to create opportunities for Indigenous participation if supported and incentivised by DFAT to do so. Without market development initiatives, sourcing Indigenous expertise will become increasingly challenging as DFAT expands the IPP to cover more projects and they compete for a limited pool of domestically-focused experts.

Indigenous expertise is broadly aligned with the [Closing the gap](#) priorities - social development, health, education, economic development, housing, justice, environmental management, gender and social inclusion - which mirror many of the [priority areas](#) for Australia's aid program. However, harnessing this expertise and supporting its translation to international development requires a broader commitment than just setting procurement targets. The international development sector is currently somewhat of a 'closed shop' to outsiders. Strong competition for limited entry-level positions, a bias toward existing international experience and strong interest from 'second-career' non-Indigenous professionals present significant barriers to any new faces in Australian aid-funded projects.

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Volunteering is a traditional pathway to a career in development, but again [Indigenous people are underrepresented](#). This [report](#) cites the capacity to fund assignment costs and sustain periods without employment, as well as the dominance of higher socioeconomic groups, as factors that exclude those from diverse backgrounds seeking volunteering opportunities. Opportunities for Indigenous people to build their international experience and demonstrate their skills will only be realised through paid and appropriately supported opportunities.

DFAT could leverage their relationship with the UN and other multilateral partners (and nearly \$220m commitment in 2018/19) in Asia and the Pacific to encourage the engagement of Indigenous Australian expertise where appropriate in both short- and long-term opportunities. Australia and the UN could also quite conceivably establish funded Indigenous internships or facilitate access to the UN Young Professional Programme to provide pathways into future employment with the UN worldwide.

International NGOs (INGOs) also have the potential to facilitate Indigenous participation, and their contribution should not be overlooked. At their 2018 conference, ACFID called on its membership to [recognise the value of Indigenous voices](#) - one way to do that is through genuine participation in projects. INGO's are already working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in their domestic work and through this have access to Indigenous expertise. Supporting and encouraging staff and program partners to take up opportunities on overseas projects could create alternative pathways to careers in international development and provide a clear means of translating domestic development expertise to the international context.

DFAT is also developing a pool of experts through its own Indigenous Employee Network (IEN), which is increasingly [active in foreign policy and aid](#) and is uniquely placed to further develop and improve DFAT's Indigenous engagement. DFAT also shouldn't be afraid to encourage their staff to expand their skills

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through placements and roles with their partners and on projects. In fact, a recent [report](#) suggested that supporting Indigenous staff to diversify their skills was an important factor in staff retention, along with mentoring, coaching and other support to successfully navigate new challenges.

Finally, we will only know if our efforts are successful if we require routine reporting and measure compliance across funded partners. At present, tenderers are not routinely required to report on their progress in implementing the Participation plans they nominated at tender, and DFAT itself has not provided any specific guidance to the sector on what reporting is required. DFAT's targets suggest that only data on the number of Indigenous people employed on projects is required. However, a complete picture of the barriers to engagement will only be provided by also measuring how many roles were [appropriately advertised](#) and the number of Indigenous people that applied for roles. This will require contracting companies, INGOs and other organisations that receive Australian aid funding to ask all applicants whether they identify as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent, and this is certainly not yet routine in aid.

The economic empowerment principle driving the Australian government's *Indigenous procurement policy* aligns very well with the principles of aid and international development more broadly. I hope that DFAT can step up as a steward and that the broader international development community in Australia can take the lead in implementing this innovative policy going forward.

The DFAT *Indigenous peoples strategy* runs until the end of this year and will be reviewed by DFAT in 2020.

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