DEVELOPMENT
POLICY CENTRE

Creating a healthy domestic political economy for aid and development policy – Summary Report

Workshop held at Crawford School of Public Policy, 11 April 2016

Camilla Burkot, Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson, David Hudson, Jo Spratt, and Terence Wood

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Development Policy Centre

Crawford School of Public Policy

ANU College of Asia and the Pacific

The Australian National University

devpolicy.crawford.anu.edu.au

devpolicy.org

+61 2 6125 7922

devpolicy@anu.edu.au

Contents

Introduction 1
Session on public opinion and engagement 2
Session on public campaigning 4
Session on direct political advocacy 7
Wrap-up session: where does this leave us, where are we going? 10

Introduction

One way to describe the Australian aid and development community in early 2016 was that it was in a state of realignment to its political and funding environment. This process of realignment was precipitated primarily by substantial cuts to the Australian ODA budget, first announced in December 2014 and enacted in the May 2015 budget, which in turn was preceded by the reintegration of the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in September 2013. These two events had a profound impact on the quantity and nature of Australian aid.

Despite the magnitude of these changes, civil society and the interested public appeared to take little organised action to counter these changes until it was too late. In part this was simply because the changes were quick and largely unanticipated. Moreover, the environment to which Australian NGOs had become accustomed (between about 2005 and 2013 there was an unprecedented scale-up in Australian ODA) provided few incentives for them to devote significant time and resources to developing and reinforcing public and political engagement on aid and development policy. NGOs were also faced with a collective action problem: many rely to some extent on government funding for their work, which adds to the challenges of opposing government-mandated changes. NGOs also compete with one another for government funds, yet all NGOs require a political environment that is broadly supportive of ODA.

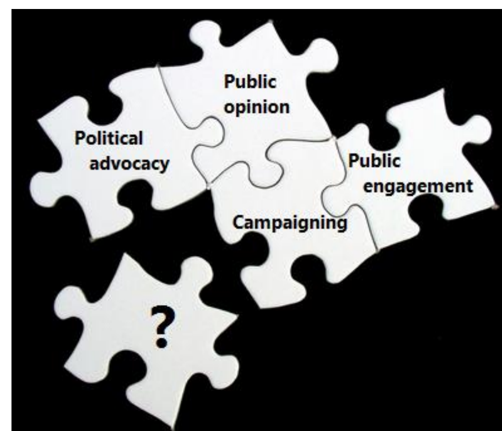
Regardless of the reasons why the Australian aid and development community may have been slow to react, the reality is that Australian aid underwent substantial change from 2013. Those who work in and support the sector have come to terms with this state of affairs, and have begun the process of (re)building broad support for high quality aid and development policy.

In support of this process, the Development Policy Centre convened a workshop on 11 April 2016 at Crawford School of Public Policy, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The workshop was held just ahead of the release of the 2016 Federal Budget, when further cuts were slated. These cuts were to bring Australian aid to its lowest ever level as a percentage of GNI.

Given the factors outlined above, **the primary goal of the workshop was a simple one: to provide a venue for people working in the areas of public and political engagement on aid and development policy in Australia to informally discuss their current efforts, challenges and opportunities**. As part of this, the workshop aimed to connect academics conducting relevant research with representatives from NGOs and campaigning groups, in order to bring academic insights (particularly in the areas of public opinion and engagement) to the attention of campaigners, and to identify pertinent areas for further research. In the long term, it is hoped that the workshop will contribute to the

development of a robust network of practitioners and academics who understand what drives public engagement and policy creation, and can successfully advocate for high quality ODA policy in Australia.

About 25 representatives of NGOs, campaigning groups and academics attended the workshop, which was held under the Chatham House Rule. Both the participants themselves and their organisations represented diverse constituencies, reflecting the breadth of the Australian aid and development community. The workshop was a dedicated opportunity for individuals and groups who might not otherwise interact to discuss their work and identify areas of mutual interest.



The workshop was organised around three main sessions: public opinion and engagement; public campaigning; and direct political advocacy. A fourth session provided an opportunity for reflection and identification of outstanding questions and challenges.

Session on public opinion and engagement

Following an ice-breaker exercise, Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson and David Hudson from University College London led the first session of the day. The session focused on two questions: 1) What do 'we' (academics and practitioners) know about why people engage with development issues, and 2) how (in what ways) does the public matter for aid and development policy?

To prompt discussion on the first question, Jennifer and David presented evidence from the Aid Attitudes Tracker (AAT) survey of public opinion and engagement with global poverty in Britain, France, Germany and the USA. The AAT findings show that what matters for increasing individual's engagement with global poverty (e.g., reading/sharing an article on the subject, donating, signing a petition, buying/boycotting, volunteering, etc.) are: a) social norms, b) an individual's sense of a moral obligation to help people in poor countries, c) political interest, and d) a sense of personal efficacy. **Social norms, or the extent to which individuals, family and friends think fighting global poverty is a useful way to spend time, emerge as the strongest driver of engagement across the AAT analyses.** The AAT also shows that a sense of personal efficacy – or the belief in the ability to make a difference in fighting global poverty – increases engagement. Negative attitudes towards immigration and racial resentment drive down engagement.

From research studying people's current levels of engagement, the discussion shifted to **what can be done to move known levers to increase the public's engagement with**

development issues? This is a hard but important question, and one both academic researchers and the sector must turn to. Social norms, for example, are difficult to shift – so how can we, as a sector, engage with people's values, change attitudes, and consequently, change behaviour? How should campaigns and messaging target personal efficacy, and what are the most effective messages, both short- and long-term? A general view from the workshop attendees was that these questions would benefit from further academic and practitioner collaborative investigation.

The second question guiding the session on public opinion and engagement explored the link between public opinion and development/aid spending. In the UK there has been a long-standing assumption that building public support was necessary for maintaining and/or increasing aid volumes. According to the UK's House of Commons International Committee (IDC 2009), for example, 'public support is essential to an effective development policy'. But is it? Evidence from the UK suggests otherwise: support for aid spending has been on the decline while cross-party support for spending 0.7% of GNI on overseas aid resulted in legislation to do just that in 2015. Evidence from the Australian case reveals both a decline in public support for ODA and cuts in aid spending. Clearly, **the relationship between public opinion and aid is not as straightforward as has often been assumed.** What is missing is a theory of change that broadens the assumed linear relationship between public opinion – which is usually taken as a proxy for political pressure – and political action on development/aid.

Figure 1: Commonly assumed theory of change

Source: PowerPoint slide by Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson and David Hudson

For this reason, time during this session was dedicated to small groups to discuss and draft more complex theories of change. Though no definitive new theory of change resulted from this short exercise (one was not expected), the ensuing discussion highlighted the common belief that the factors underpinning public and political engagement are far more complex than often assumed and articulated. Though it is recognised that a number of actors and institutions are involved – encompassing the media, economy, significant events (famine, disasters, etc.) and private actions (e.g., donations) – the precise nature of the connections between them are neither linear nor clear.

In addition to the diverse field of actors involved, existing research indicates that the *saliency* of aid/development also needs to be considered in any theory of change. Evidence from the AAT shows that global poverty simply isn't a salient issue for most people – compared to immigration, the economy, or Syria/ISIS, for example – but that doesn't mean the public don't hold strong views about it. Thus, developing a better understanding about how we can work with a public on an issue which involves both low salience and strong views could also help in thinking about how and when public opinion matters for aid advocates.

Session on public campaigning

The second session of the workshop turned from public opinion and unpacking the broader 'ecosystem' of Australian aid policy influences to the work of public campaigning. A panel of four representatives from campaigning organisations each presented 'snapshots' of their current campaigning strategies and what they are learning from them.

The subsequent plenary discussion, and indeed conversations that arose throughout the workshop, revealed the many strengths of Australian aid campaigning. At the same time, they highlighted inherent challenges involved in this type of work, as well as future opportunities to grow, and the importance of systematic learning while doing.

As noted in the Introduction to this report, the rapid turn for the worse in Australian aid post-2013 caught most of Australia's development community by surprise. Since then, aid actors of all sorts, but particularly public campaigners, have had to move reactively, reinvigorating and reconfiguring. Though this need to move quickly and responsively has resulted in challenges, one of the most encouraging aspects of the workshop was discussion that revealed the breadth, depth and sophistication of public campaigning efforts currently in place in Australia. Australia's aid campaigns do not want for intelligence or energy. **The various campaigning entities also clearly benefit from a healthy division of labour that allows for different campaigners to work in different ways and with different groups.** This has brought impressive reach amongst various segments of the public: for example, with church groups, young people, and students. Some NGOs are also reaching out to their own financial supporters, encouraging them to engage with aid issues beyond the donations they give.

Also impressive was the sophistication of thought going into the types of messaging most likely to be successful (narratives, rather than numbers, for example), as well as thinking about the most effective types of campaign strategies (targeting particular electorates, for example). Even though advocates conceded that campaign efforts are still unlikely to bring on board (or even reach) the bulk of the Australian public, these efforts nevertheless have the potential to engage a large enough share of the public for concerns to become an active, positive part of the political processes that govern aid's future.

However, as in all aid work, there are still plenty of challenges and opportunities for improvement in the realm of aid campaigning. One of the critical challenges identified during the workshop was something that has proven a perennial challenge for NGOs as they have attempted to work together on development issues: **the issue of collective action and cooperation**. Australia's NGO and aid campaigning communities are collections of groups that share a central belief that Australia should give more ODA, but which often differ in many other areas. For organisations that function largely as independent campaigners on specific issues, this is less of an issue. But for collective endeavours such as the Campaign for Australian Aid, agreement amongst constituents will be an ongoing challenge to manage. As the growth of the Campaign for Australian Aid has shown, successful cooperation is clearly possible. However, the **problems of collaboration could become increasingly difficult in situations where campaigning moves away from issues of aid quantity (following the aid cuts) and starts to tackle issues of aid quality.** The quality of Australian aid is undoubtedly important and an issue that campaigns need to address, but making it a campaign issue has the potential to bring division, particularly if debates about quality are allowed to become debates about preferred sectors or approaches to aid. Preferred sectors would be particularly fraught for obvious reasons, and attempts to argue the case for particular approaches could just as easily fracture NGO coalitions given the diversity of beliefs about what good aid is. If aid campaigns do move to aid quality they would be very wise to focus on unifying issues, such as preventing Australian government aid being given to help Australian interests, rather than to those in need overseas.

Another issue is funding. ACFID receives some funding for non-campaigning work from DFAT. ACFID is not a campaigning organisation but as a peak body organisation for NGOs it plays an important coordinating role for the sector more broadly. There are clear benefits from the government funding ACFID receives and from the partnership based approach to aid this represents. Plausibly, however, such funding could bring challenges if the sector were to find itself strongly at odds with the government at some future point. With regards to campaigning organisations themselves, at present philanthropic funding plays an important role in some (but not all) campaigners' work. While this funding is important and valued, **diversifying the funding sources of campaigning organisations would reduce the risks of relying too heavily on a small number of donors**. In a similar vein, the challenges of working with volunteers was raised during the day (alongside gratitude for the energy and skills they bring). Involving volunteers is clearly good, but volunteers also bring their own significant costs in terms of coordination and capacity. A diverse funding base for paid, professional staff would be the optimal state of affairs for Australian aid campaigning.

One potential way to realise a more diverse and more substantial funding base would be for Australia's NGOs to commit more of their own privately raised funding

to campaigning work. Figure 2 shows how much money would be made available if Australian aid NGOs (all the ACFID members plus the five largest non-ACFID members) were to commit small additional percentages of the revenue they raise from private donations to shared campaigning. To put possible NGO contributions in perspective, these percentages have been chosen to reflect, respectively: current Australian government ODA to GNI; the most recent peak in government aid to ODA; the 0.5 per cent figure that was previously a bipartisan target; and the 0.7 per cent international target.

Figure 2: Potential NGO contributions to campaigning (AUD)

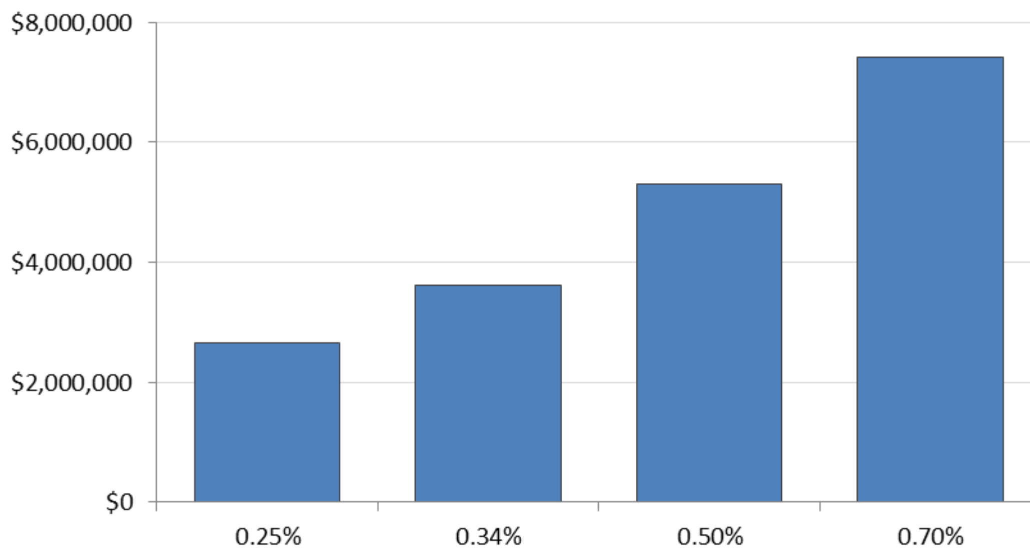


Figure notes: Data come from ACFID's 2014/15 annual report. A more conservative estimate produced figures ranging from $2.1M (0.25%) to $6.1M (0.7%)

As the figure shows, **if each Australian aid NGO was to contribute an additional 0.25% of their private revenue, this would result in $2.7 million being made available for collective campaign efforts.** By way of comparison, in the 2015/16 financial year, the Campaign for Australian Aid had a budget of under $1,000,000.

To be clear, NGOs already contribute some funding to campaigning costs (for example, the Campaign for Australian aid receives approximately $150,000 a year from NGOs), and the amounts given here would be in addition to existing contributions. The amounts here would also be in addition to the 0.17 per cent of private donations that ACFID members currently pay to ACFID.[1]

Clearly, providing additional funding to campaigning work would come at a cost to NGOs' own valuable core work, and the trade-offs associated with this should not be trivialised.

[1] The figure for ACFID contributions is averaged across the sector. Larger NGOs pay a larger share and smaller NGOs pay a smaller share.

But in 2014/15 Australian government aid was approximately four times private donations to aid NGOs. Given this, it is at least worth carefully considering the question of whether greater financial contributions from NGOs to the shared cause of Australian aid campaigning are possible.

The final issue that arose in relation to public campaigning was to do with **maximising campaign efficiency through systematic learning.** Campaigners are already learning and, as already discussed, it was obvious in the workshop that Australian public aid campaigning does not want for sophistication. But like all aid work, success (or optimal performance) in campaigning is not guaranteed. **Campaigners are taking some opportunities to learn (through message testing, for example) but there is scope for more.** One area where there seems clear potential for further learning is the impact of campaign messages to spur public action. Using the email technology already employed by most campaigners, it should be possible to experimentally test which messages are most effective in prompting supporters into action. The advantage of this approach over survey message testing (which has benefits in other areas) is that the testing is on the desired outcome or action, rather than something assumed to be associated with it (responses to survey questions). Another area where a commitment to ongoing systematic learning is recommended is in rigorous evaluations of specific strategies such as marginal seat targeting.

The challenges and possibilities for improvement in public campaigning are real but they should not be overstated — one clear takeaway from the workshop was the energy and intelligent thought being put into campaigning. The challenge now is to build upon the gains made to date and wherever possible take up opportunities to learn more.

Session on direct political advocacy

In the third session of the workshop, the focus shifted to a more specific type of advocacy work: working to influence politicians and their advisers. This session featured a moderated discussion with a panel of individuals with extensive experience in the halls of Parliament. Several guiding principles emerged, which provide some practical advice on how NGOs might best approach engagement with politicians. These principles were general and not intended as criticisms of current NGO work. Indeed, encouragingly, the question and answer session and plenary discussion indicated that a number of NGOs are already successfully implementing actions aligned with these principles in their direct political advocacy work.

The first principle is a fundamental one: the importance of **knowing your material and being able to situate it within broader contexts**. Politicians are accustomed to meeting with well-rehearsed lobbyists – that is, individuals whose primary role is to make their case to politicians and political advisers, and who therefore tend to know their facts and figures

back-to-front and inside-out. This requires preparation: not just having the relevant basic factual information to hand, but also drawing lessons from other sectors where appropriate, and anticipating and being prepared to counter obvious arguments. In order to make a convincing and memorable impression – particularly when trying to reach 'lukewarm' politicians – aid advocates must be able to present an equally knowledgeable and convincing demeanour as that presented by all the other full-time, professional lobbyists on Parliament Hill. As well as knowing what they are talking about, advocates must repeat their message both clearly and consistently until people are repeating it back to them.

Further to that, while much NGO political advocacy has traditionally hinged on emotional or moral arguments, the panellists in this session stressed that while such arguments can be powerful, they also have their limits – particularly when attempting to influence individuals who may be more accustomed to more hard-nosed 'facts and figures' arguments. The specific type of emotion evoked also makes a difference in terms of effectiveness; hope can be a hard sell, cautioned one panellist, while fear is often more powerful (although fear has framing problems associated with its use). The trick, therefore, is to **balance or blend the emotional and factual in a way that speaks to the particular politician's interests and beliefs**.

At the same time, while personal beliefs clearly matter when it comes to decisions about ODA, even with an issue such as ODA that is typically of comparatively low electoral salience (i.e., few people choose who they will vote for because of it) it would be unwise to entirely disregard how politicians may approach the issue strategically. Politicians (and others) are motivated by the strategic consideration of how a policy or initiative will impact on their popularity or through votes within their constituency. This is where saliency is made or broken. The numbers of potential voters are usually not large in marginal seats. A further tactic is to offer politicians access to a constituency that they wouldn't normally have access to, for example church groups or single issue organisations, which enable politicians to connect to a broader base than they otherwise would be able to.

This relates to the second principle: **identifying your audience.** A one-size-fits-all approach is not sufficient when working with politicians; rather, advocates need to take the time to get to know who they are approaching and what their priorities are. Realistically, one panellist cautioned, aid advocates are never going to be able to break through to 100% of people – therefore it's worth spending the time trying to identify and bring over 'lukewarm supporters' or 'the persuadable middle', rather than try endlessly to convince those politicians who will probably always be opposed to aid. While the need for identifying and targeting lukewarm supporters is perhaps more critical for successful political advocacy, it is also true when designing public advocacy campaigns. Once those lukewarm supporters are identified, then key facts and lessons can be tailored to appeal to those individuals' specific priorities. A further key lesson that was shared by several of the

panel was to identify rising stars early in their political careers. Getting them on board early through outreach or visits can pay large dividends later when (or if) they reach key decision-making positions.

This is related to a further lesson: the importance of understanding **what moves or motivates your audience**. This requires a deep and personal knowledge of key political stakeholders and developing a personal rapport through private meetings, not just public lobbying. Building up personal profiles is sensible. There is a good chance that any sources of support could be highly idiosyncratic in nature. It might be that a politician or policymaker grew up overseas, or that their children are committed supporters of a cause, or that they have some other personal link to a development issue (which is likely to be specific – for example, children's literacy, or conservation – rather than general). This is where involving parliamentarians and others in development projects through accompanied visits can help build these personal connections. Or it might equally be that politicians and policymakers are strongly influenced by other individuals, and so a more efficient and effective strategy is a second-order one of 'influencing the influencers'.

Lastly, the panellists stressed the importance of **working within the 'realm of the possible'** – that is, contextualising your interests and campaign 'asks' within the existing government policy framework. This means starting by understanding – not just challenging – the government's position and logic. When this is done effectively, it can help situate your interests in such a way that others (politicians or advisers) are able to champion them in the political sphere. The panellists on the panel with experience sitting in elected office noted that what politicians want from academics and advocates is not just overarching, aspirational goals, but specific objectives accompanied by policy options or packages that they can then take forward. It is essential to provide the person you are seeking to influence 'a way forward'; you have to give people something that they can do, such as a costed package or an initiative that is aligned with their existing position and rhetoric as well as the context that they are operating in.

The overarching lesson from this session on political advocacy is that – just as in public campaigning work – **there is no silver bullet for reaching politicians and policymakers**. However, preparing thoroughly, doing the groundwork, and acknowledging what is realistically feasible within existing policy frameworks will enable aid advocates engaging in this area to tailor their campaign messages to maximum effect.

Wrap-up session: where does this leave us, where are we going?

In the closing session of the workshop, attendees were asked to reflect in small groups on the day's discussion, insights and learnings to produce two comments in response to three questions: 1) What do we excel at; 2) What do we need to do more (or less) of; and 3) What do we want to know more about? Each of the comments generated in response to these three questions were then compiled and individually voted on; the 'winners' are highlighted in the box below (in descending order), and reflect the collective sense of where the sector is currently situated and priorities for an agenda moving forward.

What we excel at

1. Strong brands that speak to different segments of the public
2. Fundraising
3. General agreement on high-level issues, and agreement that we need to agree more broadly
4. Research/data/stories
5. Quality programming/good product(s)
6. High-levels of trust (with stakeholders)
7. Harmonious sector

What we need to do more (or less) of

1. Invest more in campaigning and advocacy (vis-à-vis fundraising)
2. Identify a SMART (Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound) goal for the sector
3. Understand how other sectors behave in comparison to us
4. Move away from quantity (of aid) arguments to more quality (of aid) arguments
5. Use (and improve) storytelling for campaigning and advocacy
6. Broaden reach and engagement among influencers outside the sector
7. Integrate a long-term strategy with short-term strategy
8. Develop a more sophisticated campaign strategy

What we want to know

1. What works: a regime of systematic testing for campaigning
2. How other sectors behave (act/do) in comparison to ours
3. How to resolve an incentive problem, i.e., fundraising versus advocacy
4. What is an effective theory of change for campaigning?
5. What is the balance of campaigning versus influencing?
6. How can research/evidence be made more accessible for wider sector use?
7. Should we engage foreign policy institutes, and how?

Beyond the individual suggestions outlined and ranked above, for us the sheer abundance of ideas reflected what we think was probably the most important encouraging takeaway from the workshop. Although the political environment for aid in Australia has been challenging in recent years, much strategizing has been taking place, and coordinated actions are being implemented based on this. As the Australian aid community prepares for the return of the Coalition government following the July 2 election, it is hoped that the discussions and lessons outlined in this report, and the relationships and debates fostered during the workshop itself, will contribute positively to the continued development of a robust advocacy and research community supporting Australian aid. Plenty has been achieved, but there is still more to do and learn in the coming months and years.