

The old Australia-UK aid partnership is new again

By Robin Davies
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As announced last week by Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop, Australia and the UK have recently entered into a [new framework agreement](#) which will govern their cooperation on international development policy and programming. The agreement, which received an [approving nod](#) from Greg Sheridan of *The Australian*, was signed in London by the secretaries of the UK Department for International Development and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

This new agreement replaces an [existing one](#), signed in May 2008. The latter was chock-a-block with shared priorities but never saw much action. While the content of the new agreement has not been made public, Julie Bishop's press release indicates it is more selective, homing in on four priority areas: '[i] economic growth and development, including leveraging the private sector and aid for trade; [ii] gender equality and women's empowerment; [iii] humanitarian response; and [iv] coordination on key global development policy agendas, including the post-2015 development framework and G20'.

What has been left out relative to the 2008 agreement? Collaboration on five topic areas: basic service delivery, state fragility, multilateral effectiveness, climate change and aid management, including through staff exchanges. And 'delegated cooperation'—the passing of funds from one donor to another, in cases where a donor is willing to invest in but not manage programs.

While the omission of climate change cooperation is no surprise, it shouldn't be assumed to reflect likemindedness: the UK side is of a [very different mind](#) on the use of aid for action on climate change. The omission of multilateral effectiveness is more puzzling. Unless 'multilateral effectiveness' is simply considered an oxymoron, one would have expected the UK and Australia to pursue cooperation or, better, convergence between their [very similar](#) multilateral assessment processes.

As for service delivery, the UK side must have had a moment of pause when it recalled that Australia and the UK were both party to the four-way [Alliance for Reproductive, Maternal and Newborn Health](#), announced with great [fanfare](#) during the UN General Assembly in 2010. However, the alliance delivered little and hasn't produced a progress report since its second one in 2012. Like many a joint political gesture, it exists mainly in web caches.

With priority areas agreed, a few ‘announceables’ were needed to seal the parchment. The two donors have duly identified some fairly inexpensive ones that won’t create a lot of work. Indeed it appears they won’t involve any actual cooperation. Both sides are simply contributing funds to the same few multilateral pots for activities relating to private sector development, infrastructure and violence against women in Afghanistan. Not exactly ‘joint aid projects’ as described by Sheridan.

Partnership agreements of this kind represent low-hanging fruit for ministers looking for ‘concrete’ outcomes from bilateral talks, such as the [Australia-UK Ministerial Meeting](#) (AUKMIN) which occasioned the above agreement. The reality is that such agreements tend to be quite empty or else create fiddly work that is of little benefit either to the cooperating parties or to the developing countries which are the sites of clunky cooperation efforts. They are joint political gestures of a piece with the Alliance for Reproductive, Maternal and Newborn Health: hurriedly made and as quickly forgotten.

Donors would do better to stop fabricating ‘joint projects’, engage with one another when it makes sense to do so, and divide labour more cleanly than they do—including through the delegation of funds.

About the author/s

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