

Using aid to shift power paradigms in the Pacific

by Anna Gibert

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“It’s the leadership, stupid.” This well-worn variation on Bill Clinton’s winning 1992 campaign mantra is what immediately came to mind when reading the [Development Intelligence Lab survey results](#) released recently, on the state of play of Australia’s approach to international development. In the lead-up to the release of DFAT’s new policy in May, the think tank undertook a “pulse check” – collating and analysing the insights of development experts from Australia and the wider Pacific region, with results disaggregated between the two groups. To the question “What is the single most important factor that will affect development in your country?”, the majority response from Pacific Islanders was resounding: “Governance and leadership”.

This response from the people who best understand how change does and doesn’t happen in their own countries sends a clear message to the Australian government, if it is serious about improving the effectiveness of its international development policies and programs. Without lucidity around the decisive factor of governance and leadership in sustainable development outcomes, the influence of Australia’s interventions will fail to penetrate beyond a superficial, band-aid level, disconnected from the real drivers of power and change.

The response also underscores the inadequacy of an approach that frames “aid” as that which Pacific “beneficiary” countries require to obtain shared goals of inclusive prosperity and regional security – reflected in further survey responses that qualify aspects of Australia’s aid program as “patronising” and “parochial”.

Patronising and infantilising are correct, given the disconnect that lies between the reality and knowledge expressed by Pacific Islander experts and the discredited assumptions on which so many development programs are based – that is, that the main reason for poor development outcomes, in health, education, infrastructure, gender equality, environmental protection and other areas, is a lack of money and technical expertise. If this were true, the hordes of technical advisers and billions of aid dollars poured into small Pacific Island states over the past three decades would have well and truly solved the problem. Pacific Islanders are clearly stating why this

is not the case – the reasons lie in the much murkier waters of power, who holds it, how it is exercised, and how it can be influenced.

And this is a message that is being echoed by other eminently credible sources with increasing volume. At the latest [Australasian AID Conference](#), keynote speaker Stefan Dercon, one of the world's premier development economists, presented the central thesis of his new book, *[Gambling on development: why some countries win and others lose](#)*. Drawing from over 20 years of leading development cooperation efforts on behalf of the British government, Dercon's message was the same: "It's the leadership, stupid" – or, as he more articulately puts it, it's the nature of political bargains made by leaders to bet on the compatibility of their own power and well-being with broad-based prosperity. If outside actors want to have any chance of influencing if and how these bets are made, the starting point is to engage with social change as a political, complex, messy, covert process – not one that is solved by predetermined projects with fly-in/fly-out consultants and their three-year plans to "deliver" systemic reform.

Which leads to the other majority response given by Pacific Islanders in the survey, to the question "What is the one thing you would change about Australia's approach to aid and development?": "Localisation and decolonisation". These experts are again stating the obvious: political, complex, messy processes of social change in foreign, sovereign countries are not successfully led by well-meaning "[white saviours](#)" and their branded projects.

This is not to say that the respondents were implying that there is no role for external actors in these processes. As [I and others have advocated elsewhere](#), there are stand-out examples of how Australia has supported local drivers of change to shift dominant power paradigms, and enabled developmental leadership and good governance to flourish. However, this only occurs when donors and their agents recognise their subordinate positionality, and are guided by the intrinsically motivated, politically savvy, and contextually legitimate local reformists. Clearly, there is work to be done here; Pacific respondents stressed that Australia has a long way to go to improve the quality of its relationships and cooperation – slightly awkwardly, an area that the Australian experts considered to be a core strength and comparative advantage.

To play this "[useful outsider](#)" role consistently well in such a complex maze of power, relationships and the overlay of current regional geopolitical dynamics, Australia must no longer be deluded into thinking that its development program can be a tool of influence and impact without the support of the full suite of its foreign policy toolkit. This has been compellingly argued in the [recent Options Paper](#) developed by the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy and Defence Dialogue,

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which emphasises the need for a joined-up, long-term, strategic approach to our engagement in the region. Critically, all the tools of statecraft must be mobilised to understand and navigate the complexity of Pacific political economies; without this, development efforts cannot amplify the work of local drivers of good governance, and risk **propping up antithetical power dynamics of the status quo**.

As highlighted by Pacific respondents in the Pulse Check survey, Australia's objectives in Pacific Island countries are at times perceived as incoherent, contradictory and self-serving. This would be in part addressed if all of Australia's agencies realised that the national interest – Australia's own prosperity and security – is intimately entwined with the prosperity and security of our neighbours; and there are no quick and easy, non-political, non-relational shortcuts to this end. And while there may be varying opinions on relative priorities, the full spread of experts surveyed clearly represents a contemporary, mature view of the purpose and function of development cooperation – one that is pivotal to grappling intelligently with geopolitical challenges, including countering the rise of authoritarian influence.

There is hope, however, that the voices of Pacific Islander thought leaders will be listened to in the crafting and implementation of Australia's new development policy. The first **area of focus signalled for the policy** is “effective, accountable states that can sustain their own development” – a logical governance starting point, on which all other poverty reduction and sustainable growth benefits are predicated. There are also indications that the “how” of influencing state capability is being seriously considered in politically astute ways. This includes DFAT progressing its localisation policy settings, similar to **shifts underway within other donors**. And of course the weight given by both Australia's Foreign Minister and Minister for International Development to the need to “**listen and learn**” about **Pacific priorities** is a significant and positive move.

The **Development Intelligence Lab report** provides sound recommendations for action based on the findings of this first-of-its-kind survey. High on this list is to “shrink the focus on what matters to improve impact”. Those who live and breathe the consequences of poor development outcomes have told us what matters in addressing the root causes. We need to heed their advice.

Author/s:

Anna Gibert

Anna Gibert is an independent consultant who provides strategic support to a number of locally led DFAT investments in the Pacific.

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