

We're all in this together: IDC Australia on the Australian aid stakeholder survey

by Mel Dunn

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The following is an edited version of the speech Mel Dunn delivered at the [launch](#) of the results of the [Australian aid stakeholder survey](#).

This is a great initiative. One of the most glaring comments in the report is within the first three lines – that there has never been such an effort to seek the views of stakeholders like us here this evening. Lost opportunity usefully corrected here.

I do not intend to speak for long and I plan to present from two angles through the eyes of the IDC:

1. What I think the survey has illuminated
2. In light of the survey findings, what possibilities exist?

First, it might be helpful to orient this presentation by briefly outlining where the IDC comes from and hence why we may see things the way we do.

The IDC was formed in the late 1990s and at that time its prime focus of engagement was with the Australian aid program around the contracting aspects of engaging with the managing contractor community. The data varies, but it would be reasonably accurate to comment that historically members of the IDC have managed the implementation of upwards of 20% of the Australian aid budget.

Our membership is not homogenous. Some members are significant global operations. Some employ in excess of 50,000 persons, globally. Some members are niche SMEs and some are individuals. Some are part of academia. What our members have in common is that we are private sector implementing partners and we are some of the most highly scrutinised development stakeholders...

...And this is good and proper.

At the same time, we are a highly experienced group of development professionals

with much to contribute beyond any contractual arrangement we are engaged through...and it is possible that this has not been harnessed as well as it may have been...

...And this is not good.

It is this brief context that helps explain why some of the survey findings are illuminating in the eyes of the IDC, and why we see tremendous opportunity to continue to move forward as part of this rich stakeholder group that we are just one part of.

What jumps out for me most powerfully is something that I probably always believed, yet we often see commentary that shadows doubt – the survey tells us that we are all in this together. We are all in this for the right reasons and these reasons are remarkably the same. As the report concludes, “there is more that unites than divides”.

Less surprising is that we all have vested interests – I guess the positive out of that is that we are also united by being human!

There is one statistic early in the report that I think is worthy of a passing mention and that is the high response rate generally, and specifically by the members of the IDC with a response rate of 84%. This is not a surprising statistic for me, except maybe that I might have thought it would have been 100%. It is not surprising because it is clear to me that our members are interested in the shape and performance of the Australian aid program and they want to actively and purposefully contribute.

Now, before I proceed, I would just like to parade the elephant a little... quoting the report:

“the least popular choice was for more aid to contractors among NGOs”

Hmmm, so what is that telling us? You don't really know what we do? Maybe there are misconceptions about the value of what we do? We do not do a good enough job telling others about the good we do?

I really don't know, but I suspect it is all of the above. And, I am sure that some of this is as much about perception for which the IDC and our members must take responsibility for not doing a good enough job and sharing its message. And this presents opportunity that I will talk to later.

Importantly, the survey focused on aid effectiveness challenges and the data provides a timely reminder of the work still to be done.

Two of the challenges focused on in the survey are particularly informed by this survey: enhancing the performance feedback loop; and the high knowledge burden.

In his definition of the feedback loop, Professor Howes reminds us that this requires “a willingness to take risks”, to make timely decisions and have realistic expectations. The data tells us that there remains so much more to do here. And the report informs us that it is the IDC members who are highly pessimistic.

Of the three attributes just mentioned – realism of expectations, appropriate attitude to risk, and quick decision making – the IDC members rated each as a “fail”. In reality, so did all respondents, except the NGOs offering a bare pass for expectations, but the IDC members are certainly critical.

So, why might this be the case?

Is it that the data tells us that more than 90% of contractor respondents confirm that all or the majority of activity funding comes from the Australian aid program? Or, is it that 85% of contractor funding is earmarked, hence creating a level of reduced flexibility impacting both decision making and risk management practice?

Maybe, but that is structural. Could it also be behavioural?

Contractor responses are again much more critical of micromanagement than other respondents. And one can naturally expect that this also impacts on decision making and attitude to risk.

Maybe it is both structural and behavioural.

Other respondents rate the use of partnership as a pass, even if barely, whereas the contractors suggest this attribute is below par. Could a different approach to engaging with contractors, in a more effective partnership approach where appropriate, create different structural and behavioural practice?

We certainly think this is a conversation worth continuing.

The second aid effectiveness challenge I would like to talk to, the knowledge burden, benefits most from the survey – both its data and its timeliness as the survey results suggest this challenge is rated poorly across the board.

In his definition, Professor Howes comments that managing this burden requires a reduction in staff turnover and, I quote, “working through effective partnerships (without micromanagement) with specialized capabilities”.

At the time of the survey, turnover was considered a significant weakness by

respondents. In the light of changes since the recent election, and with utmost respect to any who are impacted, one can only imagine that any organisational change that creates additional turnover is not addressing the challenge as defined by Professor Howes. There has been much discussion on this point, including here through the Development Policy Centre so I will leave this line of commentary to only offer that I hope that this data is considered in the development of the next manifestation of the Australian aid program.

But out of all of this there are some tremendous possibilities if we choose to view them that way. The data is the data and we should not necessarily be overly judgemental. Instead we should celebrate that we have this rich information and make use of what we are learning.

So, drawing on what has been especially illuminating for us, I now want to explore where possibilities exist and I will focus on what I think is the overarching glue – partnership.

In what I will term the modern era of the IDC, since 2010 our focus has purposefully been on ensuring we are doing all we can to contribute to better development. There have been some positive steps towards deeper engagement with the then AusAID that is continuing, but there is more to be done.

Addressing the challenge of the knowledge burden and the assumed risk of IP loss from workforce changes – industry is still here; industry has experience; industry is not just a collection of project and contract managers – we are development professionals with learning and experience to better inform practice.

Might better harnessing this address concerns about risk? Might more cerebral dialogue recognise shared values and erode a perceived practice of micromanagement? Might a partnership approach mitigate some issues associated with staff turnover by recognising we too are holders of IP of value to the aid program?

The role of the private sector is fundamental to work towards true sustainability of development efforts. And it is becoming increasingly true that with changes in aid delivery, globally, and reducing donor budgets, that the private sector has a far greater role to play.

The IDC is in a unique position by representing ‘traditional’ development implementing partners as well as being the private sector; many members are significant global operations and large employers in their own right. We speak the language of industry, and we seek to bring our dual experiences to achieve better development outcomes for all.

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So, Stephen, I agree with your assessment, that this survey does in fact highlight that we should celebrate that the Australian aid program is a good program – but it can be improved. The time is right for us all to work differently together and the survey challenges us all to step up.

The IDC will continue to be a positive and active voice for better development. We support the report's closing remarks that as a broader community we need to make our voice heard and get on the policy agenda...

...at times it will be best that our complete and collective voice is harnessed to create the necessary intellectual volume. It might be time to further our past conversations about what more could ACFID and the IDC do together to further ours and our respective members' obvious commitment to more effective development.

Finally, back to the opportunity I left hanging – if nothing else comes out of this survey, I hope we all have a greater sense that we are in this together; that we have a reasonably united view of what we do and what is important; and that none of us are the solution for everything – but together we might generate better solutions.

Thank you.

*Mel Dunn is Chair of **International Development Contractors (IDC) Australia**, which brings together private sector companies who are experienced, innovative and effective in delivering international aid to the world's poorest countries*

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Mel Dunn is the Chief Strategy Officer at DT Global. He is responsible for ensuring that DT Global's initiatives and efforts lead to delivering better development outcomes that prioritise value creation for our people, partners, clients and stakeholders.

Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/were-all-in-this-together-idc-australia-on-the-australian-aid-stakeholder-survey-20140106/>