Pacific colleagues review NZ development cooperation

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Aid history was made in late 2014, when New Zealand became the first Pacific donor peer reviewed under the auspices of the Forum Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination. The Forum Peer Review assessed New Zealand's ability to coordinate and deliver development cooperation to meet Pacific Island Forum Countries' needs and enhance mutual learning. The report [pdf] was released in December 2015. What does it say?

In terms of process, Forum Island country colleagues scrutinised New Zealand's development cooperation efforts over a week in Wellington, NZ, and two days in Tarawa, Kiribati. The Forum Peer Review was conducted simultaneously with the DAC NZ ODA Peer Review. NZ chose Kiribati as the case study country, although with a Forum Peer Review team member from Samoa, reflections from Samoa were also incorporated. Recommendations were made in 18 key areas and NZ is expected to devise a time-bound and costed implementation plan – yet to be completed. The Pacific Island Forum Secretariat's Annual Tracking Report to Pacific island leaders will track progress against implementation.

In its findings, the Review highlighted a number of positives regarding NZ's approach to development cooperation in Kiribati. Often commended, NZ's four-year forward planning was cited as providing predictability and reliability (p. 13). The NZ Aid Programme's situation as a group within MFAT was viewed positively, bringing new skills and perspectives, and with an emerging learning culture and ethos. The Review Team saw a sound operational and policy basis for the Aid Programme. In Kiribati, NZ was judged to be coordinating and harmonising well with other donors (p. 14), and willing to use the Government of Kiribati's public financial management systems despite some identified weaknesses (p. 15). NZ was also mutually participating with the i-Kiribati Government in processes for technical assistance recruitment and use (p. 17).

Further, NZ's consultations about what activities NZ would support in Kirbati were assessed to be based on meaningful discussions with the Government of Kiribati (p. 9). This was particularly so for negotiations over NZ's Kiribati country plan, the 'Joint Commitment for Development'. The Government of Kiribati took a pragmatic approach to NZ's priorities regarding what NZ can and can't assist Kiribati with. At the global level, NZ is a strong advocate for Small Island Developing States, something that has been commented on elsewhere (for example: here and here [pdf]), and is a long-term hallmark of NZ's approach to its place in the Pacific.

In terms of improvements, the general theme running through the 18 recommendations was for NZ to focus

more on using and expanding i-Kirbati capacity, rather than 'doing development' for Kiribati. NZ was encouraged to ensure and support country ownership and leadership, and engage in facilitative policy dialogue (pp. 3, 13, 19). In this vein, NZ could assist Kiribati to create and develop a national development cooperation policy (p. 14).

Similar to the 2015 NZ Aid DAC Peer Review [pdf] (summary here), the Forum Peer Review identified the need to focus on capacity building and institutional building in-country, a point that emphasises the absence within the NZ Aid Programme of an explicitly articulated theory of change in development interventions: *how* NZ' 'does' development and *how* this then leads to inclusive sustainable development (not *what* it does). This capacity development weakness was also noted in the 2010 DAC Peer Review. Given NZ's approach seems to be along the lines of: 'we have money and skills, we will give them to you and you will develop', further thinking in this area may boost the Aid Programme's development effectiveness. This is not to say individual staff within the Aid Programme are not experienced in capacity development and social change, but as an entity this is not obvious in the Aid Programme – see the latest Strategic Plan [pdf], for example.

A second theme running through several recommendations was the need for the NZ Aid Programme to engage more actively with other development actors. The Aid Programme was seen to be building a learning culture, and encouragement was given to take this broader. Opportunities exist to systematically share NZ's learning with other Pacific, Australian and NZ international development actors.

Relationships with NZ civil society were highlighted as an area for more work. The Review report succinctly summarises what has been a difficult time for MFAT and NZ NGOs, yet acknowledges the relationship has improved (pp. 11-12). It may be unfortunate wording, but the statement that "MFAT acknowledge[s] the challenges, and value, of ensuring alignment between CSO [civil society organisations] and MFAT objectives" (para 49, p. 12) is disquieting. CSOs do not always have the same objectives as government agencies, and in many cases they should not: CSOs, including NGOs, exist for different purposes to government. If the 'alignment' in question is about a broad goal -- such as inclusive, sustainable development -- then concern is unnecessary. But if 'alignment' refers to a requirement for NGOs to fall in line with government priorities, then concern is warranted.

This concern would add weight to some NGOs' perception, articulated in the report, that MFAT views NGOs predominantly as contractable service providers to the government (para 48, p. 11). If correct, this is a significant failing. No government has a monopoly on international development cooperation, and NZ NGOs are not merely NZ government fund-receiving entities. A broader view recognising NZ NGOs' independent international development work, over a long history, would open excellent opportunities for shared learning in NZ about development cooperation efforts. It would also enable the NZ Aid Programme to grow understanding about NGOs and civil society in general, boosting their ability to engage meaningfully with these entities in development cooperation, wherever they are.

Overall, the Peer Review report offers a unique and welcome insight into New Zealand's development cooperation efforts. It provides an important opportunity for the NZ Aid Programme to understand its strengths and areas for improvements. I look forward to the publication of the Implementation Plan and annual progress reports. In the meantime, can NZ can make history again: putting its hand up to be the first in the Pacific to undergo the SDG Voluntary National Review?

Jo Spratt is an ANU PhD candidate studying NZ aid policy. Before this, Jo was an NGO advocate, manager and capacity-developer working in the Pacific. Jo is interested in global health, NGOs, and the practice of development and aid's role in this. She is also a Registered Nurse.

There will also be a presentation on the review of the New Zealand aid programme by representatives of the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat and MFAT at the 2016 Australasian Aid Conference next week; find out more and register for the conference here.