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Rethinking Official Development Assistance

Australia has long had deep national interests in the provision of development assistance in the Asia-Pacific region, regional security concerns being not the least of them. If Australia is to "step-up" its aid in the Pacific and make a difference to the lives of the peoples of the Pacific, the focus must be on human security, not a tussle with China for influence.

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Abstract

For a wealthy and well-endowed country, Australia's Official Development Assistance has declined constantly in real terms for the past four decades, but most particularly in the last eight years, to a point where it could best be described as parsimonious. Australia has long had deep national interests in the provision of development assistance in the Asia-Pacific region, regional security concerns being not the least of them.

Yet it has taken the interest of China, and the extension of Chinese development assistance spending to a range of Pacific countries, to stimulate the Morrison government into a reappraisal of our interests in the Pacific. Never one to miss a marketing opportunity, the Prime Minister announced the "Pacific Step-up" as Australia's response to Chinese influence in the Pacific. And with the declaration that the Pacific is "our" neighbourhood and that the peoples of the Pacific are "our" family, Morrison has added sentimentality to realpolitik.

Yet money is what the peoples of the Pacific need, not spin and sentiment. They are not able to turn anything down, even if it comes in the form of soft loans rather than grants. Rather than spin and sentiment, the nations of the Pacific want increased and targeted development assistance aimed not at dealing with the competition between military powers but at the security and well-being of their citizens.

If Australia is to "step-up" its aid in the Pacific and make a difference to the lives of the peoples of the Pacific, the focus must be on human security in the Pacific, not some tussle with China for influence. Australia has formidable soft power tools at its disposal. These are what will make a difference to the people of the Pacific, and at the same time secure Australia's position as the country of choice in bringing deeper engagement between the economies of the Pacific.

Introduction

In 2019, according to the World Bank, Australia ranked 14th according to GDP ranking,[1] and 16th in GDP per capita terms.[2] If the funds management outliers (Monaco, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, Macao and the Isle of Man) are excluded, Australia ranked 9th in terms of GDP per capita after Switzerland, Ireland, Iceland, Singapore, the US, Qatar, Denmark and the Faroe Islands (which is more about fishing than funds management).

By any measure, Australia is a rich and well-endowed country.

In the mid-1970s, Australia spent more than 2 percent of the federal budget on overseas aid.[3] Yet the generosity that distinguished Australia as an aid donor in earlier decades has given way to parsimony as we transfer Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding allocations to refugee detention centre management and other overseas budget demands. Australia's overseas aid has fallen by almost one third since the Abbott government assumed office in 2013. In 2019-20 Australia's total aid expenditure was just over $4 billion, a fall of nearly $120 million on the previous year, and the sixth consecutive year in which aid funding had been cut in real terms.[4] As the table below shows, Australia's ODA as a percentage of GNI has fallen from 0.32 percent in 2014-15 to an estimated 0.21 percent of GNI in 2019-20. By the end of this decade, ODA's share of GDP is estimated to fall to 0.17 percent.[5] The ANU's Development Policy Centre estimates that aid spending has been cut by 27 percent since 2012-13.

[1] https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf

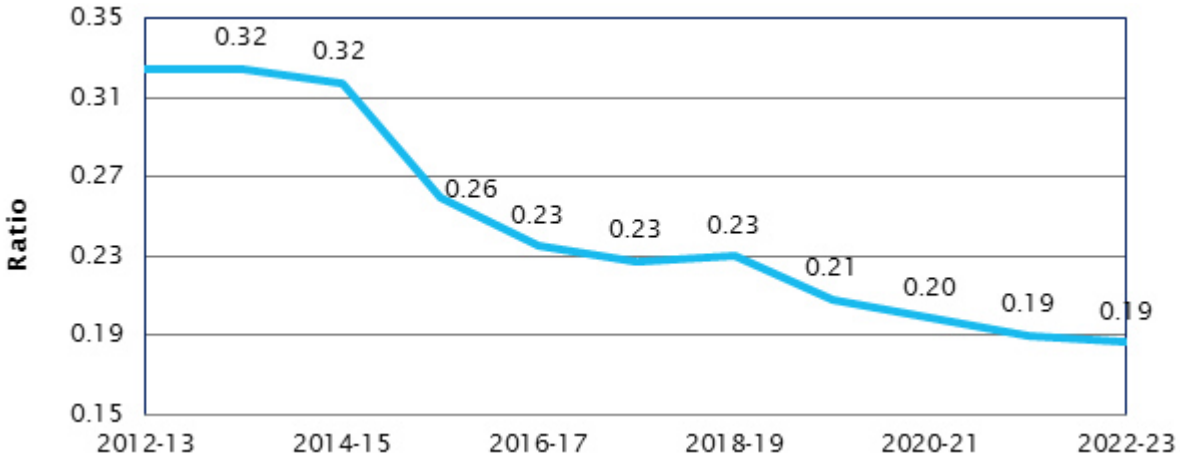
[2] https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD

[3] See Matt Wade, Guns vs giving: the trend that says everything about our priorities", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 August 2020 https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/guns-v-giving-the-trend-that-says-everything-about-our-priorities-20200807-p55jpg.html

[4] *loc. cit.*

[5] *loc. cit.*

Figure 1: Australian ODA to gross national income



Source: ANU DevPolicy 2019–20 Aid aggregates spreadsheet, 3 April 2019.

It is especially sobering to analyse Australia's overseas aid spending as a proportion of Australia's defence spending. The two are rapidly diverging, with the defence spend estimated to reach almost 16 times that of the aid spend by the end of this decade. This divergence suggests that, far from having a comprehensive national security policy that incorporates regional human security, we are prepared to trade off regional human security investment in favour of higher defence (as distinct from security) spending.

This divergence also suggests a failure on the part of the agencies that assess the regional security environment. There are two critical features of the current regional security environment that, if left unaddressed, will generate exactly the kinds of problems that will be amenable only to military interventions and solutions.

First, the accelerating effects of climate change on the smaller Pacific nations will generate the humanitarian emergencies for which the Australian Defence Force (ADF) is the only available remedy. And in the absence of any clear plan for the safety and welfare of the communities subject to such threats, what might happen to climate refugees is currently unknown. The eyes of the world will be on Australia, and to a lesser extent, New Zealand. Australia's record on refugee settlement and evident unwillingness to plan for the human security consequences of climate change in the Pacific do not augur well for a constructive outcome.

It is important to recognise the global nature of the rising sea level problem. The Pacific micro-states, especially those that comprise atolls (Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshal Islands) are already suffering tidal inundation, and have moved to purchase

land in other Pacific states such as Fiji to relocate their populations.[6] Small uninhabited islands in the Solomon Islands archipelago disappeared five years ago.[7] But the micro-states of the Indian Ocean, along with the Andaman and Nicobar, Indonesian and Philippines archipelagos, are also subject to inundation and the consequent displacement of local populations. This is compounded by the vulnerability of Bangladesh, Burma and Vietnam to flooding of the great Asian riverine deltas and the displacement of large populations. For Bangladesh and India, which together control the giant Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta, the risk of global sea-level rise threatens the lives and livelihoods of 200 million people.[8] The world faces a refugee catastrophe by the end of this century.

Second, Papua New Guinea's economic and social problems are both accelerating and deepening. With a population of just under 9 million growing at almost 2 percent, PNG's population is estimated to exceed 14 million by 2050.[9] Three quarters of its population is under 35 years of age, and 40 percent of its population is under the age of 15.[10] With some 80-85 percent of PNG's population dependent on subsistence farming and small cash-crop agriculture,[11] PNG's official unemployment figures mask high levels of youth un- and under-employment. This provides a significant reservoir of alienation and disaffection generating high levels of crime and violence throughout PNG. Corruption at senior levels[12] and growing economic inequality render PNG increasingly vulnerable to civil unrest. Like the effects of climate change, this may impose challenges for the ADF that a more strategic overseas aid program could mitigate.

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[6] See Saber Salem, "Climate Change and the Sinking Island States in the Pacific", E-International Relations, 9 January 2020 https://www.e-ir.info/2020/01/09/climate-change-and-the-sinking-island-states-in-the-pacific/

[7] See "Five Pacific islands lost to rising seas as climate change hits", The Guardian, 10 May 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/may/10/five-pacific-islands-lost-rising-seas-climate-change

[8] Se Mélanie Becker et al, "Water level changes, subsidence, and sea level rise in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 28 January 2020 https://www.pnas.org/content/117/4/1867

[9] See World Population Review: Papua New Guinea https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/papua-new-guinea-population

[10] See "About Papua New Guinea", UNDP https://www.pg.undp.org/content/papua_new_guinea/en/home/countryinfo.html#:~:text=PNG%20is%20demographically%20a%20young,and%20could%20double%20by%202050.

[11] See Papua New Guinea country brief, DFAT https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/Pages/papua-new-guinea-country-brief

[12] Transparency International ranks PNG at 137/180 in its 2019 report https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/papua-new-guinea#

For the fundamental problem facing Australia's ODA policy is its highly transactional character. Since the abolition of AUSAID and its incorporation into DFAT – itself a frontal attack on ODA as a key element in Australia's foreign policy – Australia's ODA has been framed in terms of "things to do" rather than "objectives to be achieved". The reliance on action-man slogans is indicative of a transactional approach to the development tasks in the Pacific as distinct from a transformational approach that identifies strategic goals and disciplined priorities. The transactional nature of Australia's approach to development assistance is further illustrated by the reliance on contractors and sub-contractors to undertake both the planning and delivery of programs, the emphasis being on getting the money out the door rather than the transformative uses to which funding might be put.

The State of the Union: Australia's current performance

The Australian Parliamentary Library's 2019-20 budget analysis paints a dismal picture.[13] The following paragraphs are drawn from the Parliamentary Library's commentary dated 30 April 2019.

> Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper provides the policy framework for the aid program. Australia's Pacific 'step-up', one of the priority initiatives under this framework, gathered momentum in 2018 with a range of new government commitments, including strengthened security cooperation and increased financing for infrastructure. Countering China's growing influence and investment in the region is one of the main drivers of Australia's heightened Pacific engagement. . . .
>
> The $2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) is the Government's major initiative in the Pacific. Announced in November 2018, the four-year AIFFP comprises a $1.5 billion loan facility and $500 million grants component. The Facility aims to fund priority gaps in telecommunications, energy, transport and water infrastructure. While the loans will be non-concessional and therefore not ODA-eligible, the grants are ODA-eligible and will be drawn from the aid budget. DFAT will receive an additional $12.7 million to manage the AIFFP when the facility starts in the middle of the year. The AIFFP spend in 2019–20 is estimated to be $50 million.
>
> Total aid to the Pacific includes the $70 million Pacific Labour Scheme (2018–19 to 2022–23), which has been expanded to include Timor Leste as well as Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The scheme enables workers from Pacific Island countries to take up low and semi-skilled work opportunities in rural and regional Australia for up to three years.
>
> Expanded funding for secondary school scholarships and scholarships for vocational training and education is also a feature of Australia's aid to the Pacific in 2019–20.

[13] https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1819/Quick_Guides/ODA

Unfortunately, the increase in aid to the Pacific is offset by cuts to other regional and country programs, as shown in the table below. Total aid to Pakistan will fall from $49 to $32 million, Nepal drops from $31 million to $23 million, and Indonesia and Cambodia will each fall by around $18 million. Aid to the Middle East and Palestinian Territories also drops from $137 million to $81 million in 2019–20.

Table 1: Total Australian ODA, 2017–18 to 2019–20 (A$,'000) by program

Region	*2017–18 (a) (actual)*	2018–19 (b) (est.)	2019–20 (b) (est.)	Real change (c) (%) 2018–19 to 2019–20
PNG and the Pacific	*1 107 200*	1 286 300	1 381 400	+5.0
Global	*1 199 400*	1 301 200	1 187 400	–10.8
Southeast and East Asia	*1 065 900*	1 027 200	1 005 800	–4.2
Middle East and Africa	*339 400*	258 500	199 800	–24.4
South and West Asia	*361 500*	284 800	266 200	–8.6
Latin America & the Caribbean	*8 900*	5 900	3 300	–45.3
Total ODA	***4 082 328***	**4 161 000**	**4 044 000**	**–5.0**

Sources: (a) DFAT, *Australia's international development assistance: statistical summary 2017–18* (b) DFAT, *Australian aid budget summary, 2019–20* (c) Parliamentary Library calculation: real conversion based on CPI for 2017–18 and Budget 2019–20 CPI forecasts for 2018–19 and 2019–20.

In line with its shift towards economic partnerships and away from funding services in Southeast Asia, the Government is investing $121 million to provide technical advice to ASEAN governments on how best to manage infrastructure development, including avoiding debt traps. It is also increasing funding for cybersecurity in both ASEAN and the Pacific from $15 million in 2018–19 to $34 million in 2019–20.

Humanitarian aid (which includes funding for emergencies and disaster risk reduction as well as for international organisations providing support to refugees and displaced people), will increase from $410 million to $450 million, moving the Government a step closer to meeting its 2017–18 commitment to increase overall spending in this area to $500 million per annum.

Non-government organisations (NGO), which have previously warned that there is no fat left to trim after more than $11 billion of cuts since the Coalition came to power in 2013, have attacked the aid budget as short-sighted and ill-

conceived. Aid groups are particularly critical of the Government's move towards using aid for more strategic purposes at the expense of traditional aid, such as health and education programs, as well as climate change and inequality. . . .

The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific has been cautiously welcomed as a step towards meeting the region's infrastructure needs. It has also been seen as a significant shift in Australia's financing for development, which to date has been provided almost entirely in grants.[9] While full details of how the AIFFP will be managed are not yet available, a number of concerns have been raised about its potential operations. These include the non-concessional nature of loans, the region's capacity to effectively absorb more finance, and how policy reform, skills transfer, good governance and infrastructure maintenance can be built into its projects.

Whether a declining aid budget can effectively support Australia's foreign policy objectives remains a critical issue for aid and foreign policy analysts. Some argue that Australia's Pacific 'step-up' has come at the expense of South and Southeast Asia. Citing the Coalition's $690 million of cuts to aid to Asia since 2012–13, the ANU's Stephen Howes asks:

... does it make sense to keep robbing Asian aid programs to expand Pacific ones? Asia has a bright future, but it also still has a lot of need, and instability. Aid works better in Asia – DFAT's own data shows that. And whatever the strategic arguments for providing aid to the Pacific, they are equally strong for aid to Asia."

The provision of aid to Southeast Asian countries would likely support their transition through middle-income status, and possibly better position Australia to advance the shared socio-economic, environmental and strategic interests in the region. A re-balance of the aid program towards Asia may assist future governments to shore up Australia's position as the 'partner of choice' for its regional neighbours.

Looking more widely, Jonathon Pearlman (*Australian Foreign Affairs Weekly*) writes that in the face of intensifying international challenges, the budget presents a 'pitiful response':

Admittedly, many of the problems that the nation and region face will not be solved by spending measures but by careful, creative diplomacy. This would include handling alliances and partnerships shrewdly, and demonstrating a

commitment to active and humane global cooperation that can serve as an international example and ensure that Australia has a credible voice when it demands that other nations do more. Yet, when it comes to funding, the budget indicates that the government is unwilling to commit to long-term solutions to the challenges it outlined. . . .

The aid budget continues to be a topic that ignites public debate. Senator Pauline Hanson's February 2019 Senate motion sparked ongoing social media debates on the proposal to divert the aid budget to farmers and others affected by natural disasters in Australia.

In March 2019 over 50 community leaders and public figures called for bi-partisan leadership to rebuild Australian aid, after five consecutive years of cuts which they claim has left Australia's aid budget at its lowest level in history. NGOs have welcomed Labor's commitment to increase the aid budget over time if elected to government, which includes modest increases to the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP).

Non-government organisations, led by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), have long campaigned to halt cuts to the aid budget and restore ODA levels. ACFID's 2019 pre-Budget submission calls on the Government to increase the aid funding by ten per cent each year for the next six years, towards the UN-recommended target of 0.7 per cent of GNI by 2030.

Recalibrating the Development Assistance Program

Australia's development assistance program is presently constructed around a set of confused and conflicting activities and projects. It's a case of no-one's in charge and everyone's in charge. It's what happens when slogans replace policy. Even DFAT's website on the Pacific cannot escape the slogan – Pacific Step-up.[14]

"Pacific Step-up" is itself the linear descendent of a slogan. In 2016, Prime Minister Turnbull coined the expression "step-change" to signal his new Pacific strategy,[15] though "change" was seen by DFAT as discontinuity and accordingly was quickly amended to "step-up". To improve the policy's marketability, Prime Minister Morrison announced the "Pacific Step-up" as a "new chapter in relations with our Pacific family",[16] thereby providing just enough sentimentality and condescension to signal the triumph of spin over substance. By describing the Pacific as "not just our region, or our neighbourhood", but "our home", Morrison implicitly ties the security of the Pacific community to that of Australia. Whether the nations that comprise the Pacific community welcome the idea that they are living in Australia's "home" is moot. But the ambit of Australia's political claim suggests hubris and hyperbole rather than strategic sensitivity. And the hubris is only heightened by the equally condescending claim that the peoples of the Pacific are "our family".

It is particularly revealing that Morrison chose to announce his new Pacific "step-up" at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville, the home of the Australian Army's 3rd Brigade. The delivery of a major Pacific aid announcement at an ADF base is consistent with the Morrison government's predilection for securitising policy matters to give them a sense of gravity and urgency. The deeper securitisation of Australia's Pacific aid policy means that ODA becomes an instrument of strategic positioning and aid programs become artefacts of a regional security policy in the traditional sense: the competition between states for position and power. In other words, Australia's approach to development assistance is more a product of raw political interest than it is of cooperating with Pacific nations to enhance their interests.

[14] See https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/Pages/the-pacific

[15] See Malcolm Turnbull, "Remarks at Pacific Island Forum", 9 September 2016 https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-40440

[16] See Scott Morrison, "Australia and the Pacific: A New Chapter", 8 November 2018 https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australia-and-pacific-new-chapter

This, sadly, is consistent with the findings of a recent Pew Research Center report entitled *International Cooperation Welcomed Across 14 Advanced Economies*,[17] which reflects poorly on Australia. While almost 60 percent of those surveyed in the 14 most advanced economies think that their country should take other countries' interests into account when dealing with major international issues (like climate change, aid, global health), almost 60 percent of Australians thought that Australia should pursue its own interests rather than supporting international compromise. Ominously, this is consistent with the Pew Research Center's comment that, "in every **European** [emphasis added] country surveyed, those with favourable views of right-wing populist parties are much more likely to say their country should follow its own interests even when other nations disagree".[18]

And, of course, by situating a new Pacific aid policy in a defence and national security context, the Prime Minister's emphasis on Australia's "abiding interest in the Southwest Pacific that is secure strategically, stable economically and sovereign politically" (whatever all of that is intended to mean) played the China card without mentioning China.

The centrality of Australia's fear and mistrust of China in the further development of the "step-up' program was nowhere more clear than in the Prime Minister's address to the Aspen Security Forum in August 2020, where he described the Pacific as "the epicentre of strategic competition".[19] That statement has no meaning if it does not comprehend current tensions between the US and China.

Australia has long sat on the sidelines of the competition between China and Taiwan in the Pacific, happy enough, it would seem, to see Pacific countries test the credibility of the "one China" policy as they sell diplomatic recognition to the higher bidder, but disconcerted to find China gradually gaining the upper hand, both muscling Taiwan out and cementing new relationships with cash and development assistance projects. And with China now well and truly a player in the south Pacific, Australia is belatedly attempting to limit China's access and influence by means of a security-inspired ODA policy. As Graeme Dobell has pointed out, the 2020 Defence Strategic Update

[17] See James Bell *et al*, "International Cooperation Welcomed Across 14 Advanced Economies", Pew Research Center, 21 September 2020 https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/21/views-on-international-cooperation/

[18] *loc.cit*.

[19] Scott Morrison, "Tomorrow in the Indo-Pacific", 5 August 2020 https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-aspen-security-forum-tomorrow-indo-pacific

mentions the “step-up” seven times – the same number of times that China is named.[20]

The plain fact is, however, that worry as it might about China’s growing influence in the Pacific, there is little Australia can do to contain or constrain China. Cash-strapped and poor, the countries of the Pacific will accept money with or without conditions. A competitive relationship with China in the Pacific may make some strategic sense for the US (though one cannot be sure about that), but it makes no strategic sense for Australia. The economic and military power imbalance, together with the disparity of interests, suggests that Australia may be better advised to pursue a more nuanced and subtle policy in the Pacific that plays to Australia’s strengths rather than to China’s. Should China wish to outspend Australia in the Pacific, it probably can. And should it want to outmuscle Australia in the Pacific, it certainly can.

So, where does Australia have comparative advantage in the Pacific, if not in cash and weaponry? The answer is, almost everywhere else. First and foremost, as the leading aid donor in the Pacific, Australia enjoys considerable agency, authority and legitimacy in the realisation of its interests in the Pacific. And as a thriving and prosperous democracy in a community that needs leadership, Australia is well positioned to take on the leadership role on the basis, of course, of consultation, respect and transparency. With so many disconnected and competing programs underway in the Pacific, an early initiative for Australia to consider would be to propose improved coordination and planning among the major donors.

And that certainly includes China. Rather than seeking to constrain or contain China, Australia would be better advised to encourage China into habits of cooperation that are easier, cheaper and more effective than competition. China may well be attempting to expand its strategic influence in the Pacific. But it needs to recognise that influence is a consequence of cooperation and collaboration, not a cause of development. So, instead of contesting China’s wish for influence, Australia should seek to guide it. Australia should also be aware that China’s exercise of influence faces substantial obstacles in the Pacific. As a communist country in a largely evangelical Christian Pacific community, China’s values are not shared, and the Pacific’s experience of Chinese entrepreneurialism has not always been a happy one. Consequently, trust is in short supply. Without common ground and trust, influence is difficult to exercise.

Second, Australia has a long history of mostly constructive engagement with the nations of the Pacific, especially since the end of WW2 (the forced migration of so

[20] See Graeme Dobell, “Happy fourth birthday, Pacific step-up”, *The Strategist* (ASPI), 7 September 2020 https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/happy-fourth-birthday-pacific-step-up/

many men and boys from Vanuatu, the Solomons and New Caledonia in the 19th century was tantamount to slavery).[21] While, for the past two decades, the effectiveness of Australia's development assistance programs has flatlined, and political relations have had their ups and downs, especially with Fiji, Australia has for the most part been a good neighbour. Due in part to the British colonial legacy and the British Commonwealth, Australia's values are largely consistent with those of the Pacific and, outbursts of arrogance and condescension notwithstanding, Australians are largely welcome in the Pacific and generally trusted.

Third, many of the inhabitants of the Pacific, especially the young, would, if Australian migration laws so permitted, migrate to Australia. Australia is a popular destination, and the opportunity to provide remittances to their families and villages is a strong inducement for many people in the Pacific to avail themselves of the Pacific Labour Scheme and the Seasonal Worker Program. Labour mobility is a strategic asset that is not currently available to China, but one that Australia needs to refine and improve if it is to derive the relationship advantages and economic effects that the programs could deliver.[22] Education and training in Australia (and New Zealand) also provide strategic opportunities for the Pacific nations.

The medical services available to the nations of the Pacific are well below an acceptable international standard and are chronically under-resourced. Refugees housed in Australia's offshore detention centres enjoy higher standards of medical care than many Pacific islanders, yet even they need to be transferred to Australian hospitals for medical issues demanding treatment. Broadening accessibility to Australian (and New Zealand) medical services to the peoples of the Pacific is a high priority, at least until adequate services are available locally. To some it may appear cynical to use a term like "family" when parsimony prevents any display of care, compassion or kindness.

The welfare systems that Australians enjoy are absent in most of the Pacific. Yet if Australia's "step-up" is to be anything more than "tough love", we need to discover avenues for improving the long-term health outcomes of the peoples of the Pacific.

[21] See Tracey Flanagan, Meredith Wilkie and Susanna Iuliano, "The role of South Sea Islanders in Australia's economic development", *Australian South Sea Islanders: A century of race discrimination under Australian law* (2003) https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/australian-south-sea-islanders-century-race#:~:text=Between%201863%20and%201904%2C%20an,forced%20removal%20from%20their%20homes.

[22] See Stephen Howes and Holly Lawton, "The Pacific Labour Scheme: is it a flop?", *Devpolicyblog* (ANU), 29 July 2019 https://devpolicy.org/the-pacific-labour-scheme-is-it-a-flop-20190729/

This, in turn, demands a change in our development assistance mindset from scattered transactions to targeted transformation. The question is: how do we do that?

The Key to Transformation: Human Security

If the global community has learned anything from its experience with the coronavirus, it is this: human security is fragile. It the citizen cannot be safe, the nation cannot be safe. Yet the jostling for position and power in the Pacific does not deliver human security for the peoples of the Pacific. To the contrary, power competition undermines the well-being and security of the peoples of the Pacific because it distracts attention from the key health, education and economic issues and subtracts from the funding levels available for non-defence investment. Remember, the ratio between Australia's defence and development assistance spending is trending to 16:1.

In April 2020, The Australia Institute released a discussion paper entitled *Re-thinking national security in the age of pandemics and climate change catastrophe*.[23] In that paper, we argued that social inclusion, the protection of rights, the promotion of values and resilience – all of them supported by a strong economic base – are basic elements of security policy. In a way, this turns conventional security thinking on its head: far from being the starting point for any consideration of human well-being, happiness and security, the security of the state is a consequence of social harmony, happiness, inclusion and well-being.

As we have seen, terms like "Pacific step-up" and "Pacific family" may represent a measure of rhetorical flourish. But unless they intend outcomes that are properly strategic and transformational, they are merely labels for the kinds of transactional programs that have left the Pacific where it currently is – poor and disconnected. As an objective describing a long-term development strategy for the Pacific, human security goes to the heart of the Pacific's problems – economic, physical, political and social. Climate change, economic collapse due to the pandemic, declining health standards among women and children, poor educational outcomes – each of these is a pressing human security matter.

A human security mindset could reform Australia's ODA policy in fundamental ways. Not only could it provide the key to improved coordination among the major donors, but it could also create innovative ways of addressing the consequences of absent

[23] See Allan Behm," Re-thinking national security in the age of pandemics and climate change catastrophe", *The Australia Institute*, 20 April 2020 https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/Rethinking%20National%20Security%20%5BWEB%5D.pdf

health and social security measures. For example, while continuing to invest in preventive medical programs and medical extension services, Australia could consider admitting those Pacific communities that are without a basic level of healthcare to Australia's *Medicare* program for life-saving medical procedures. And lest anyone think that this would be prohibitively expensive, just remember that 16:1 defence vs aid ratio.

For many Australians, it is a matter of national shame that the medical infrastructure of PNG is so precarious and that the basic medical procedures that Australians take for granted – oncological services, for example – are inaccessible to most of PNG's citizens. The same applies to dialysis, diabetes treatments and, of course, basic obstetric services. And while the shortfalls are massive, and cannot be rectified overnight, a targeted approach in conjunction with other major donors offer some hope of improvement, especially if done in conjunction with enhanced child health and welfare.

It is time to dispense with platitudes. It is time to address the core issues affecting the well-being of the people of the Pacific.