
DCI's Submission to the Review of Australia's Official Aid Programme

by Sharon Bessell

The Australian Government is currently undertaking a review of Australia's official aid programme, the first since the Jackson Report of 1984. This review, which will be influential in shaping the future of Australia's official aid, is taking place in an international environment characterised by situations of conflict that have resulted in human upheaval and suffering on a massive scale. As a result, significant portions of development assistance are being channelled to emergency situations. At the same time poverty continues to plague the world and the global distribution of resources remains distorted. The irony is that the extension of basic services to people currently in absolute poverty is now a real possibility.

UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF projections indicate that such an achievement is well within our grasp at a relatively modest cost. The principles and declarations agreed upon by the world's leaders at recent international fora, such as the World Summit for Children (1990), the World Summit on Social Development (1995) and the Beijing Conference on Women (1995) provide us with the guidelines by which to achieve the goals of poverty eradication and equity. The need for overseas development assistance, or aid, is more urgent than ever, yet levels of official aid are steadily declining.

DCI's submission to the review argues that a central premise of the Australian aid programme must be that development is a basic human right which will not only benefit those now living in situations of dire need, but will also contribute to the regional and global stability. DCI urges the Australian Government to make every effort to achieve the UN aid target of 0.7% of GNP, and to adopt a timetable for such an achievement. We also recommend that the official aid programme place *highest priority* on humanitarian objectives, with an emphasis on poverty alleviation, while reflecting an explicit

commitment to the promotion of basic human rights, as set down in the international human rights framework.

A Focus on Children

While DCI's submission makes a number of general recommendations, emphasis is placed on the ways in which the aid programme can best respond to the needs and rights of children. It is essential that the aid program adopts a framework through which to explicitly address children's needs and effectively assess the impact of aid on children. Such a framework must be based on research and analysis rather than assumptions about what is good for children. To achieve these objectives, DCI recommends that all programs undergo a child impact assessment, analogous to the way aid is assessed for its impact on women and the environment. This impact assessment should be a prerequisite for all programs, not only those that focus specifically on children.

A Children's Desk in AusAID

A primary recommendation is that a Children's Desk be established within AusAID. This Desk would deal specifically with children in development and the promotion of children's rights and should have a two-pronged approach: (i) to mainstream children's issues into the aid program and (ii) to develop child-centred programs. The Desk should work in close collaboration with other AusAID policy and program areas, particularly country desks and women in development (WID).

The Desk should ensure that children's interests are included in the design and implementation of Australia's aid program and monitor its impact on children to ensure that children's needs and interests are enhanced and not damaged in the development process. For example, micro enterprise development *may* have an unintended impact on children, resulting in their withdrawal from school to work within

the family enterprise or to take on household duties to free their mother for work within the enterprise. A Children's Desk should work to minimise the possibility of such detrimental and unintended outcomes.

The Children's Desk should also develop child centred policies and programs to address issues that are central to children. Projects that specifically target children should be designed and implemented in a child sensitive way, whereby the children themselves are seen as the principle stakeholders. The Desk should ensure that children's opinions are sought and taken into consideration in planning aid projects that impact significantly on them.

Survival, Development and Protection for Vulnerable Groups

The Australian aid program should reflect Australia's commitment to the promotion of children's development, survival and protection, as expressed in the Declarations of the World Summit for Children, the World Summit for Social Development, and the World Congress against the Commercial Exploitation of Children, and set down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children which is the most widely ratified international human rights instrument. It is notable that, despite some progress, a number of the 1995 targets adopted at the World Summit for Children have not been met. The need to reaffirm the commitment undertaken at the Summit through a strengthening of the practical commitment to children is clear, and Australia has an instrumental role to play through its aid program.

With increasing urbanisation and the spiralling poverty in which many urban dwellers struggle to exist, there is a need to develop effective programs targeting the most vulnerable and marginalised groups within cities.



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THERE IS NOTHING SO FINELY PERCEIVED AND SO FINELY FELT, AS INJUSTICE."

CHARLES DICKENS, GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

DCI recommends that the aid program target the following vulnerable groups:

- Street Children
- Working Children
- Sexually Exploited Children
- Female-headed Households

It is also vital that efforts to alleviate poverty are continued in remote and rural areas. Rural poverty places children in extremely vulnerable situations, for example child labour remains most widespread in rural areas in almost every country where the problem exists. Income-generation and employment creation programs in rural areas are vital in stemming the flow of people from rural to urban areas. Access to appropriate and quality health care and education is also vital in encouraging both adults and children to remain in rural areas

Children and Women

DCI's submission notes that the protection of children and the promotion of their interests is intimately linked to women's rights and gender equity in the development process. Within the Australian aid program, priority should be given to women's health, particularly maternal mortality and morbidity; family planning; and female literacy. Within these areas, emphasis should be placed on the participation and empowerment of women.

Children must be Central

DCI's submission stresses that the policies and priorities recommended are not necessarily expensive, on the contrary well-designed and targeted programs make extremely good sense in both human and economic terms. We consider education to be the key, both through basic literacy and numeracy skills and through empowerment. In sum, the submission emphasises that the best development assistance is based on poverty alleviation, meeting basic needs and promoting human rights.

Within this approach, children must be central.