



**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY
INTO AUSTRALIA'S RESPONSE TO
THE PRIORITIES OF PACIFIC
ISLAND COUNTRIES AND THE
PACIFIC REGION**

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LA TROBE
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Centre for
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and Social Change

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Who We Are

The [Centre for Human Security and Social Change](#) at La Trobe University is delighted to make a submission to this Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry. This submission draws on our extensive experience working with development organisations, development programs, Pacific civil society organisations and development practitioners across the Pacific – and at a regional level – to support research, evaluation and learning.¹

The following sets out some of the main lessons we have learnt over the last decade which we believe are of relevance to the inquiry, as well as what we see as the implications for the future.²

What We Have Learnt

There are four main and linked lessons which we believe matter for how Australia should respond to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region.

1. **Start with understanding Pacific values and its existing knowledge and capacities.**

It is increasingly recognised that the success of development programs or policies are shaped by the social, cultural, political and economic context. This therefore requires policy or program interventions to be effectively aligned to that context from the outset and to build on existing knowledge, relationships and capacities. It is this that enables the harnessing of existing resources capabilities, norms and systems to kick-start change, even if that means defying orthodoxies and 'international best practice' and letting Australian solutions and expertise take a back seat.³ In the Pacific this means understanding what people value, how they relate to each other and the environment, and how they understand well-being or the 'good life'. As we found in our research with the Asia Foundation in Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu, contributing factors to the good life are considered holistically. Economic growth and material gains are important, but only to the extent that they do not compromise sociocultural norms of egalitarianism and connection with others, the environment, and with God, that provide life with meaning.

2. **Recognise the diversity of aspirations and priorities across the Pacific and between groups**

While there are a number of cultural, social and aspirational similarities across the Pacific, as well as a recognition of common challenges like climate change, there are also important variations between – and within – countries and between groups. This includes recognising the tensions related to gender and intergenerational dynamics and the relative lack of formal political power of women and youth, as well as rural-urban differences. For example, in the work with the Asia Foundation noted above we found that the balance between egalitarian and more materialist values was somewhat different in Nauru than in Kiribati and Tuvalu. In the latter countries, the value placed on communalism and egalitarianism mean that development progress is framed less as economic development, and more as collectively secure livelihoods, with a focus on sufficiency for all and maintenance of community harmony through equity. These differences in sociocultural

¹ For more detail on this work see <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/socialchange/projects>

² For more on our published work see <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/socialchange/publications>

³ See for example Yuen Yuen Ang (2017) How China Escaped the Poverty Trap

norms and values speak to the need for understanding specific contexts and how they shape different development trajectories and priorities for countries and what approaches to development progress will therefore be relevant and likely gain traction. Similarly, while gender equity and family violence did not emerge consistently as priorities among most informants in this research, women leaders and many others we work with across the region routinely raise this as a priority.

3. Understand that what is valued and how things work across the Pacific may be different to how development agencies see the world.

As we and our Pacific co-authors note in a paper on the characteristics of locally led development in the Pacific, how successful local initiatives have come about are often at odds with how conventional international development agencies tend to work.⁴ Local leaders have repurposed older Pacific traditions and narratives, including Christian themes, so that understandings of development and change are holistic, with economic, social, environmental and spiritual goals integrated and indivisible. This means that programming approaches that focus on individual elements (environment, economic reform, social protection) fail to grasp how Pacific Islanders see these as intimately connected and inseparable.

In other research in Solomon Islands, undertaken through the Developmental Leadership Program, successful local leadership involved navigating complex informal leadership networks across customary, church and formal political domains.⁵ These relationships were a primary engine of collective action: they are how leaders resolved disputes, solved problems, and built the necessary trust to realise shared interests. The challenge is that some dominant ways of thinking in Western development agencies (i.e. relatively reductionist, linear and categoric) can fail to see some of this relational complexity and its centrality to developmental change and collective action.

4. Take into account the role of power and politics in shaping not only priorities, but also underlying relationships.

Finally, the long-standing recognition that the generation and use of knowledge and evidence is shaped by power relations and political interests remains relevant.⁶ There is also a growing understanding that how knowledge and evidence is valued is not just political, but also social and dependent on different communities' worldviews. Different worldviews may, for example, lead to the privileging of collective approaches to learning,⁷ i.e. in groups or networks and through 'yarning', storytelling and oral communication, or it may lead to privileging of experimental, quantitative approaches based on numbers and the written word. These differences in worldview are important not because one is 'right' or 'wrong' but rather because if priorities are to be mutually understood in a way which respects genuine partnership then what forms those priorities and how those priorities might be implemented in practice needs to be understood. This includes being

⁴ See Roche, C., Cox, J., Rokotuibau, M., Tawake, P., & Smith, Y. (2020). The Characteristics of Locally Led Development in the Pacific. *Politics and Governance*, 8(4), 136-146.

<https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/3551>

⁵ See Mcloughlin, C. et al (2023). Co-producing local public goods in rural Solomon Islands: evidence from Malaita

<https://dlprog.org/publications/research-briefs/co-producing-local-public-goods-in-rural-solomon-islands-evidence-from-malaita/>

⁶ Parkhurst (2017) [The Politics of Evidence From evidence-based policy to the good governance of evidence](#)

⁷ Zubrzycki J, Shipp R, Jones V. [Knowing, Being, and Doing: Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Collaboration in Cancer Services](#). Qual Health Res. 2017 Jul;27(9):1316-1329

sensitive to how those with power are able to insist on their ways of knowing and being privileged at the expense, often inadvertently, of other ways of seeing the world.

What Are the Implications?

Prioritise action on issues we know the Pacific cares most about, but also focus on the process by which priorities are arrived at.

Our engagement with the region and research suggests that priority issues include: climate change, food security and governance. Issues of gender equity and family violence, while less pronounced by some actors across the board are routinely raised by Pacific women leaders as priorities. These issues should be the flagship areas for cooperation and should not be overshadowed by geopolitical prerogatives to focus, for example, on infrastructure or other sites of geo-strategic competition. It is also important to recognise that given different groups may prioritise different things, and may see the interactions between these priorities differently, attention needs to be paid to the process by which priorities are identified. This includes engagements between citizens and government, which is particularly salient given the volatility and short-term nature of many governments in the region. In many situations this might mean Australia using its convening power and influence to help create an 'enabling environment' for local decision making.⁸

Get our house in order in Australia with Indigenous people and their worldviews.

Australia's failure to reconcile and embrace its Indigenous history is not lost on our Pacific neighbours. They see this failure as a weakness of Australia's sense of identity and continued racism that overlooks the value of Indigenous knowledges and worldviews. Engaging productively with the Pacific will benefit from approaches that harness Australia's Indigenous heritage and put this front and centre in our regional diplomacy. As we noted in our submission the International Development Aid Policy review in 2022, we believe there is much to be gained in harnessing the commitments the Government has made to embedding Indigenous perspectives, experiences, interests and people into foreign policy.⁹ This necessitates understanding and valuing different ways of knowing and being. This in turn can assist Australia to partner internationally in respectful ways and to value how other worldviews can contribute to development outcomes. Being a respected and legitimate international citizen in our region is closely tied to Australia's domestic capabilities to reconcile with its own First Nations people.

Learn from development programs that have partnered well and respected locally led development priority setting and use the lessons to amplify effective practice.

Australia has a back catalogue of impressive development programs that are well-regarded within the Pacific and that have worked in ways that have privileged Pacific priorities, relationships and knowledges. Notable examples include the Pacific Leadership Program, Vanuatu Skills Partnership and Balance of Power. These are programs that have not only aligned themselves with local priorities but have worked in ways that have created space for those priorities to emerge. Using these as models to develop further support can provide a solid foundation for a productive approach to understanding not just what to prioritise but how to do that.

While many of these individual programs have research streams, these are primarily oriented towards supporting partner research or in learning about the impacts of discrete programs or activities. What is

⁸ For more on how this might be done see Maia King (2020) [Why does local agency matter? Ownership, partnership, and decision spaces in foreign aid](#)

⁹ See <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/new-international-development-policy-submission-institute-human-security-social-change-la-trobe-university.pdf>

missing is a portfolio-wide view of what these investments are learning about what works for who and what does not in aggregate, and in particular why and how they work in particular contexts. Learning from this portfolio of successful investments could provide important learning dividends in relatively short order.

Address some of the well-known obstacles to being more partner led in terms of program management, design and monitoring and evaluation

While DFAT have made some impressive strides in articulating an approach to genuine partnerships and locally led development in the International Development Policy (2023), these have some way to go to be felt in practice in the region. There is a risk that they are perceived as political rhetoric rather than commitment to change. Ensuring that efforts to support regional priorities genuinely seek to shift the power to local leaders will require a number of changes. Building on our submission to the 2020 Aid Policy Review¹⁰ these might include:

- Integrating assessments of the use of locally generated evidence, and the effectiveness of learning systems, into program design, management and evaluation processes;
- Placing a greater emphasis on generating feedback on how effective Australia's relationships are in the region;
- Assisting in building greater accountability between citizens and the state, as well as helping to create a better enabling environment for this (see above); and
- Ensuring that the investment in DFAT's staff capabilities, for example through the Diplomatic Academy, includes supporting the emergence of individual, collective and systems leadership capacities. These skills are appropriate for the kinds of complex issues DFAT seeks to address, and in building effective relationships and reaching mutually agreed priorities.

¹⁰ See <https://bit.ly/2SCO8tn> and https://www.latrobe.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1097826/Policy-review-IHSSC-2.pdf

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

La Trobe University acknowledges that our campuses are located on the lands of many traditional custodians in Australia.

We recognise their ongoing connection to the land and value their unique contribution to the University and wider Australian society.

We are committed to providing opportunities for Indigenous Australians, both as individuals and communities through teaching and learning, research and community partnerships across all our campuses.

La Trobe University pays our respect to Indigenous Elders, past, present and emerging and will continue to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems and protocols as part of our ongoing strategic and operational business.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

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