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SUBMISSION TO INDEPENDENT REVIEW INTO AIDS EFFECTIVENESS

If Australian development assistance is to be both effective and efficient it will need to be better integrated into a whole of government approach towards Australia's interconnections with the rest of the world, in particular those regions [Asia/Pacific and Indian Ocean] where we have clear national interests, and are often the closest significant western donor. For a country in Australia's position the integration of international development into foreign policy is not a choice: our security depends upon positive responses to the major non-traditional threats to global and regional security such as climate change, environmental degradation, food and water security, new epidemic diseases and growing population movements.

Recognition of these factors was a major factor in LaTrobe University establishing the Institute for Human Security, and while I am aware that there is currently a review of AusAID's specific research policies taking place it is also important to suggest better ways of linking AusAID to researchers as part of developing its overall capacity. If Australia is to be a significant middle power, as has been determined by government, it will also need to develop its own analytic capacities. This seems particularly relevant to those terms of reference in the Review which refer to comparative advantage and lessons learned from Australia's approach to aid effectiveness [TORs a and b].

My contacts with AusAID over the past few years suggest that it is not well equipped to know what research expertise is available in Australia, and has shown little interest in developing such expertise. While considerable effort has gone into developing ongoing links, both formal and informal, with the NGO sector, this is not replicated vis-à-vis Universities. While ACFID and the Institute for Human Security have established a consortium of interested academics and NGOs, which is attempting to support research across the sectors, there is far less contact between the relevant sectors of AusAID and University-based researchers than in other significant donor countries. This may be more difficult than in some other donor countries because of the comparative weakness of development studies within Australian Universities, and the fact that much of the most relevant work takes place in a number of disciplines and organisational units that do not regard themselves as working in development.

It is disappointing that much of AusAID's support for research goes offshore, sometimes because of a lack of awareness of local capabilities to conduct the required research. If the critical mass for strategic research cannot be found within Australia the national interest requires encouragement to develop it, and Universities should be challenged to build appropriate expertise. Beyond specific research needs as determined by AusAID, a growing emphasis on international development requires thicker ongoing interaction between practitioners, researchers and recipients of aid. Mechanisms should be developed to bring new ideas based on research and evidence into the planning processes of AusAID, and to assist in the formulation of new programs.

It is not uncommon to confuse research with evaluation and monitoring, or to see research as merely providing evidence to support policies already in place. Aid effectiveness requires both evidence of efficacy (derived from research and evaluation) as well as implementation capabilities. From this perspective, action research that informs implementation is important and necessary, and could be done via institutional linkages between Australian and overseas institutions – and such an approach can help build institutional capacity overseas. Action research would likely to be more effective than one-off training for individuals, which has been traditionally seen as the solution to capacity building.

But there is also a need for larger conceptual research, which provides conceptual frameworks within which government departments can frame new responses to a rapidly changing external environment. So far AusAID's approach to research seems to have been characterised by a certain timidity and an unwillingness to fund research that is not immediately linked to already existing programs.

I understand that DFID has established senior research fellowships, which is a scheme whereby academic researchers are asked to provide ongoing advice on long term implications for aid and development. A similar scheme would allow AusAID to tap into a range of expertise and, equally important, to build links with a number of Australian tertiary institutions. There is always a danger of placing too much emphasis on one or two institutions, which tends to reinforce existing patterns and prevent contact with new and innovative ways of thought. As AusAID expands its links with research centres it needs to create room for the unexpected and the unorthodox, but it also has a strong interest in supporting the growth of Australian expertise in development studies, broadly understood.

I applaud the decision of the Minister to commission this review, and hope that one of its outcomes is a more imaginative and ambitious approach to establishing better links between Australian Universities and AusAID.

Dennis Altman AM FASSA
Director Institute for Human Security
LaTrobe University