



2 February 2011

## **INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF AID EFFECTIVENESS**

Dear Panel Members

I write as someone who has been actively involved in aid projects, including project design, in education (AusAID, NZAID, EU, ADB, WB) over a period of twenty years. I have worked as team leader and/or consultant with AusAID projects in Indonesia, Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu, and projects with a major AusAID financial input in Samoa and Tonga. I have, in addition, worked in education in PNG (eleven years pre- and post-Independence), Solomon Islands and Hong Kong.

Two AusAID projects in particular (NTTPEP in Flores, Indonesia and VASTEP in Vanuatu) were highly successful and activities have sustained over a significant period of time. I say this, however, on the basis of personal observation and hearsay, as distinct from ongoing and longer term evaluation which AusAID seems strangely unwilling to engage in.

Other projects were less successful. In fact, I resigned (at considerable financial cost) from the two most recent projects I was involved in - in Tonga and Samoa - for a mix of reasons which included lack of commitment by the host government, inadequate oversight and intervention by donors, and poor project design.

The observations below are based on my personal experience and that of others whose work and professionalism I respect.

### **1. Project design**

There was a time when AusAID, having commissioned a design, undertook a fairly painstaking appraisal of the practicality of the design prior to implementation. Maybe it does still. If so, there is nevertheless frequent cause for wonder about design quality, as well as the genuineness of attempts to ensure that recipient countries are committed to the changes contemplated and able to actively contribute to the process.

NTTPEP almost collapsed in its early stages. It took a major redesign, recognition that the Australian Managing Contractor (and, implicitly, AusAID oversight) had been negligent, and a major cull of international consultants to remedy the situation.

The projects from which I withdrew in recent years were multi-donor projects but with a significant AusAID financial input. The designs were fatally flawed (I'm happy to expand on this) and can only have been drawn up by people with little practical knowledge of the elements of education involved (primarily curriculum reform) and their complexity, or else with scant regard for outcomes quality.

When the matter was raised with AusAID post officials the response was that the host government had signed up to the project, and they knew what was needed. That response begs some fundamental questions. Meanwhile, acceptance of a design that assures second rate educational outcomes might be seen as tantamount to ensuring that developing countries remain developing countries.

There can be no denying the importance of including, as project personnel, competent national specialists. I have worked with some gifted professionals, in Indonesia, especially. However, there needs to be a realistic assessment of the existence and availability of suitable professionals.

## **2. Commercial management**

The commercialisation of project implementation and management has been problematic. The reasons AusAID withdrew from direct development, implementation and management are well known. This isn't going to change any time soon, and there have been some genuine success stories. However, the tendering and reporting process is flawed insofar as:

- tendering companies seem to be forced to ignore design faults. They submit tenders regardless of the feasibility of effective implementation (and notwithstanding the risk management they are required to allude to);
- there appear to be inadequate checks and balances with regard to the quality of project personnel. Many are excellent. However, CVs are invariably dressed up to a greater or lesser degree. I recall the conversation with a (highly effective) Project Director employed by one of the major companies bidding for work: they put up as team leader a person who was not up to the task, but whose resume looked good. When I queried the decision I got the response, "You know how it works, Tony, win the bid and worry about the consequences later";
- reporting is largely geared to pleasing both the host government and AusAID;
- some companies are profit-driven to the detriment of project quality. I have been involved in both NZAID and AusAID projects where manipulation of a plethora of short-term inputs amounted to little better than a rort;
- in-country oversight and intervention by AusAID staff (both national and Australian) is sometimes poor. This was certainly the case in the countries I left prematurely. In one, in particular, the Ministry had a culture of quite simply falsifying progress reports to the project's steering committee. Quite the opposite was the case in successful projects alluded to above. Part of the problem here is the apparent need of AusAID personnel, donors generally, and host governments to spend up and to report success regardless of the realities;
- related to this is the youth and inexperience of many AusAID staff. This is compounded by the high turnover in positions, which can mean the absence of corporate memory and understanding of what has been tried before and worked/failed. However intelligent, committed, enthusiastic and well-qualified they usually are, AusAID officers often are not fitted by their work experience to effective appraisal of work on the ground. This problem is compounded in those instances where project directors/managers appointed by managing contractors are similarly short on experience or relevant experience. Spokeless wheels are constantly reinvented, with many local Ministry officials, who often have seen it all before, unwilling for a variety of reasons to intervene. Exuberance about fine-sounding theoretical concepts like the Sector-wide Approach overlook the difficulty many Ministries have planning around and coping with single-focus aid, let alone those that purport to be all-embracing. I should add that the successful, sustained projects with which I have been associated have enjoyed the support of sound, committed post staff – both national and Australian;
- all this is compounded by frequently ponderous decision-making by AusAID when major issues are raised. This can result in continuing mis-direction, and appalling waste of resources.