UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION TO
THE NEW INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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WHO IS THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA?

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest mainline Christian denomination in Australia, uniquely the first to be created in and of Australia. At our inception in 1977, ***we pledged to the nation that we would "seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur"*** and remain committed to this cause today.[1]

Almost 900,000 Australians identify as our members and our network of agencies is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia,[2] reaching over 1.4 million Australians across 1,600 sites.[3]

The UCA is home to large diaspora communities from across Asia, Africa and the Pacific who have made the UCA their home church since their settlement in Australia.

We have established 12 'National Conferences' (Tongan, Fijian, Indonesian, Samoan, Vietnamese, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, Niue, South Sudanese, Middle East, Ibero-Latino) who maintain and celebrate their language and culture, and link back to their countries of origin through partnership agreements between the UCA and their church of origin.

The UCA has over 200 congregations with non-Anglo backgrounds, and services in more than 26 languages.

The UCA carries a legacy of international engagement that goes back more than 150 years.

The three denominations that formed the UCA had strong overseas mission connections from the 1850s and we continue to hold close partnerships with the churches they planted – now independent, indigenous denominations.

The UCA has strong relationships and collaborations with churches and their regional bodies across Asia and the Pacific, and some in Africa.

We have partnerships with 37 overseas churches and are the only Australian church that is a member of the Pacific Conference of Churches and the Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific. We are also a member of the Christian Conference of Asia.

The people of the Uniting Church are long-standing financial supporters of international aid. Our members give generously to aid programs overseas through our own aid and partnerships agency (UnitingWorld) as well as other faith-based and secular NGOs.

They are also active in volunteering and collaborating with partner churches overseas. UnitingWorld is accredited by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and works exclusively through church partners.

In FY2019, 202,305 people benefited from UnitingWorld's collaborative programs in poverty alleviation, leadership, gender equality, disaster response, climate change and disaster risk reduction.[4]

Our Christian faith teaches us that all who are marginalised and vulnerable have a claim on us for justice and equality that transcends national and racial boundaries.

Our faith also teaches us that security, peace, stability and prosperity can only flourish when it is achieved in unity with our neighbours through respectful and mutually transforming relationships.

It is based on this identity as a significant body of Christian citizens in Australia, that we make the following recommendations to DFAT regarding Australia's new International Development Policy.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

We recommend that the International Development Policy targets the alleviation of poverty and inequality as a primary objective, understanding that this will best serve Australia's national interests.

We understand that the Australian Government has a commitment to deliver security, stability, prosperity and resilience in line with Australia's national interests.

However, we believe that putting national interest first—without due consideration of the dignity, autonomy and rights of those whom the aid program seeks to serve—can result in unsustainable development, wasted resources and eroding good will and trust in international relations; ultimately undermining security, stability and prosperity in our region.

1) UCA Statement to the Nation 1977, https://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/introduction/item/134-statement-to-the-nation-inaugural-assembly-june-1977.
2) Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016; and https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/.
3) https://unitingcare.org.au/about-us/.
4) UnitingWorld Annual Report 2019, https://www.unitingworld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/UW-Annual-Report-18-19-Web.pdf.

Australia's national interest is entirely compatible with people-centred, sustainable development, and the new International Development Policy should focus on advancing both, by doing the following:

- **Ensure development outcomes benefit women, children, people with disabilities; ethnic, religious or social minority groups; and other particularly marginalised or vulnerable people**
- **Target development programs that shift underlying social norms that exacerbate the exclusion and vulnerability of certain groups of people**
- **Use indicators of change that recognise people's spiritual, as well as material, wellbeing**
- **Recognise and respond to ongoing vulnerabilities and inequalities faced by people globally, not just in our immediate region**

RECOMMENDATION 2:

We recommend that the International Development Policy prioritises development that is demonstrably owned and driven by the communities it seeks to impact.

Development scholarship has established that development outcomes are more effective, inclusive and sustainable when local civil society organisations and communities are established as equal and respected partners, and when local indigenous knowledge is prioritised in designing solutions.

DFAT's own review of the ANCP program in 2015 showed that while the ANCP was only 2.7% of the aid budget, it was responsible for delivering over 18% of the total development impact, demonstrating that working through civil society organisations and local communities has a competitively high return on investment.

Programs that involve grass roots communities and civil society organisations aren't just more efficient and effective, but also strengthen citizen participation and democracy, and can protect against the rise of authoritarianism.

Evidence for this is easily seen in the DFAT-funded PNG Church Partnerships Program, where seven mainline PNG churches collaborate to not just deliver services and development more effectively than government, but also actively engage in advocacy to hold government to account.

To maximise the impact of community-driven development, the new International Development Policy should prioritise programs that:

- **Require a design process that involves deep consultation with beneficiary communities and local civil society actors**
- **Identify a mechanism for prioritising local civil society organisations as development partners**
- **Strengthen the capacity of local civil society organisations and foster south-south learning and collaboration**

RECOMMENDATION 3:

We recommend that the International Development Policy recognises the unique roles of churches and faith communities in delivering social change and seeks to target them as development partners.

While much of this logic may apply to institutions of other faiths, our arguments are based on our experience of the global Christian church.

In many development contexts, regardless of the religious demographics, churches already exist as strong civil society organisations, with a focus on serving local people, deep roots in the community and commitment to permanent presence.

In majority Christian contexts, churches have significant influence in public discourse and extensive institutional networks in remote areas where no government department or secular institutions exist.

Churches have a long track record of serving the poor and the marginalised, working for peace and reconciliation in conflict-affected areas (e.g. Bougainville) and are often the first responders in humanitarian emergencies.

Finally, faith-based organisations are central to community and family life and often play a fundamental role in forming and shaping social norms. Faith-based organisations and faith leaders

5) Evaluation of the Australian NGO Cooperation Program Final Report 2015, https://dfat.gov.au/aid/how-we-measure-performance/ode/Documents/ode-evaluation-australian-ngo-cooperation-program-final-report.pdf.

are often best placed to address and sustain behavioural and attitudinal transformation regarding key social issues, such as gender-based violence, child protection and disability inclusion.

Therefore, we recommend that the new International Development Policy includes:

- **Developing new partnership principles to guide partnerships with churches and faith groups**
- **Creating a formal structure, such as an advisory group, to advise the aid program on the faith dimension of policy and programs**

RECOMMENDATION 4:

We recommend that the International Development Policy acknowledges climate change as the most significant cross-cutting issue that impacts security, stability, prosperity and resilience in Australia and beyond.

Climate change concerns us because it compounds global poverty and inequality and disproportionately affects the world's most vulnerable people.

Almost 60 million people are displaced by climate-related disasters each year, up to 80% of whom are women and girls,[6] and most of this displacement occurs in the Asia Pacific region.[7] These disasters exacerbate existing inequalities and threaten longer-term development outcomes.

Addressing climate change is essential for Australia's development assistance to be effective.

The UCA believes that God's will for the Earth is renewal and reconciliation, not destruction by human beings.[8]

Climate change is a serious threat to the integrity of life on Earth, now and for future generations. We also recognise the spiritual value of the environment. For many cultures, identity is found in the land, ocean, place and language.

The General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches Rev James Bhagwan has stated:

"In most traditional Pacific Island cultures, the self does not exist. We exist in community. We exist as part of the natural environment; which is the land, the sea, the sky, and all creation… as people of God, you are called to care for those who are affected by this, by their vulnerability, because of climate change." [9]

We in the UCA have also heard and share the concerns of Australians, especially young people, who are worried about their future due to the impacts of climate change. 83% of 18-34-year-olds are concerned about climate change,[10] and 86% of children and young people view climate change as some form of threat to their safety.[11]

We want children to grow up with hope and optimism about the future, in a society that recognises the inherent right of every person to experience fullness of life.

Considering the significant threats that climate change poses to life on Earth, we believe the new International Development Policy must:

- **Require programs to measure and report their impact on long-term carbon emissions and environmental sustainability**
- **Prioritise investment in programs that enable social and economic empowerment without detrimental increase in environmental degradation, including through carbon emissions**
- **Invest in efforts that reduce vulnerability and increase the resilience of communities and countries to endure the impacts of climate change**

BACKING UP OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

Below we give two examples of projects that have been driven by local civil society organisations and churches that are deeply rooted in the context and reality of the communities they serve. Each case shows the profound impact they have on their communities.

The first example is partly DFAT funded, and the other presents an opportunity for the Australian Government to support an innovative initiative led and designed by influential civil society partners in the Pacific.

6) United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 2015, UNDP and Climate Change: Zero Carbon, Sustainable Development.
7) International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2018, Disasters and Displacement in a Changing Climate: The Role of Asia Pacific National Societies.
8) Our Vision for a Just Australia, Uniting Church in Australia 2019, https://uniting.church/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Renewal-of-the-Whole-Creation.pdf.
9) General Secretary for the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) Rev. James Bhagwan at the UCA President's Conference in Fiji from 13-17 July 2019.
10) The Australia Institute 2019, Climate of the Nation 2019: Tracking Australia's attitudes towards climate change and energy.
11) UNICEF 2019, A Climate for Change 2019 Young Ambassador Report.

Example 1: Gender Equality

95% of people across the Pacific identify as Christian and the Church has a massive influence on people's behaviour. But ~68% of women and girls experience violence in their homes and communities.

Churches in the Pacific have identified the critical role of the Church in addressing this issue and acknowledge that transformation needs to come from a change in the understanding and teaching of biblical theology on the questions of gender, violence and equality.

Following a request from many of its 11 Pacific partners, the UCA through its partnerships agency UnitingWorld is supporting Pacific churches to address gender inequality and violence against women by re-examining their theology. This project is partly funded by the Australian Government through the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development initiative.

The impact of this program includes:

- **Seven mainline denominations in PNG officially adopted gender equality as their doctrinal position and have committed to teaching this theology as part of their ministerial training.**
- **The ten denominations that make up the Fiji Council of Churches made a joint public statement condemning violence against women as sinful, publicised through a cinema advertising campaign.**
- **The Methodist Church in Fiji adopted a code of conduct for its leaders rejecting violence against women and children and took disciplinary action against those who did not comply. They changed their advice to women seeking help for domestic violence, suggesting they access the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, an organisation previously condemned by churches for supporting divorce.**
- **In Vanuatu, the Presbyterian Church has conducted awareness of biblical gender equality across all regions represented by the Church, and national leaders have released an advertising video stating that the Church is taking the stance that violence against women is a sin.**

Example 2: Reweaving the Ecological Mat

The 'Ecological Mat' is a metaphor for the experience of life in the Pacific. One 'mat' woven of the strands of spiritual, economic, physical and environmental factors that support fullness of life. The Ecological Mat urgently needs repairing. The Pacific Theological College and Pacific Conference of Churches are working together to facilitate a dialogue across the Pacific to develop this shared vision.

One objective this project is to produce a shared Ecological Framework for Development, to be finalised by August 2020. It will include indicators for cultural, environmental and spiritual wellbeing. On request, several Australian churches have provided some seed funding through their aid agencies.

"Several distinct Pacific values have not been adequately reflected or are absent in the systems used today to govern many Pacific Island economies. The result has been governments driven by an economic system that neither delivers a fair or equitable distribution of resources, nor ensures that we respect the boundaries set by our natural environment.

A collaborative initiative is demanded at this time that will require our governments and our civil societies, including businesses, to shift away from an endless growth development model towards a model that delivers the collective well-being needs of our people living on our lands and sea."

Jamie Tanguay,
Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2019.

"It's about reframing the narrative in the way we address the issue of life in the Pacific, holistic life. Looking at the way we learn things and the world, the influence of global structures and systems, recognising those, and offering alternatives so that people of the Pacific are able to live a truly sustainable life and we are able to grow into the future with a more healthy outlook, not just spiritually, physically, emotionally but also in the sense of how we thrive.

We need to change the conversations around resilience in the context of climate change disaster from survival mode to thriving."

Rev James Bhagwan, General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches.

12) https://www.unitingworld.org.au/projects/partnering-women-for-change/