



YWCA Australia
Submission
February 2014

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Inquiry into Australia's overseas aid and development assistance program

YWCA Australia welcomes the opportunity to make this short submission to the Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee inquiry into *Australia's overseas aid and development assistance program, in light of the Government's \$4.5 billion cut to international development assistance.*

About YWCA Australia

YWCA Australia is the national association of YWCAs in Australia and is part of the World YWCA movement. We are a women-led organisation that achieves positive change by providing advocacy, programs and services for women, families and communities.

YWCAs undertake advocacy and deliver services and programs that develop the leadership and collective power of women and girls, support individuals, their families and communities at critical times, and promote gender equality and community strengthening.

YWCA Australia is a smaller Australian-based NGO which is not currently accredited to deliver Overseas Development Assistance, though we have been in the past. Through our global membership movement we are connected to YWCAs in countries targeted by the Australian aid and development. YWCA Australia is also very active in advocating for women's human rights at the international level, including participating each year at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

In our view, it is critical that the Australian aid and development assistance program provides a greater focus on gender issues and supporting women (and young women in particular), recognising that developing women's social, economic, political and social status positively affects the outcomes of general development projects. We are also interested in how the international aid and development assistance program can be used to develop women as leaders within their countries, particularly across the Pacific.

Introduction

MDGs and 0.5 per cent GNI target

YWCA Australia greatly values Australia's bipartisan commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**) and to achieving the target of contributing 0.5 per cent of Gross National Income (**GNI**) for Australia's Overseas Development Assistance (**ODA**).

We were therefore extremely disappointed when the Coalition announced, shortly before the 2013 federal election, its intention to cut \$4.5 billion from Australia's ODA budget over four years and to remove the timeline for Australia to achieve the 0.5 per cent GNI target.¹ We note that a 2013 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development peer review report (**OECD peer report**) concluded that:

*Australia is in a very strong position to deliver a growing aid budget effectively and efficiently. In line with its commitment to punch at or above its weight in international development, Australia should achieve its stated aid goal of 0.5% ODA/GNI by 2016/17.*²

There has been remarkable progress in tackling poverty and inequality globally over the last two decades. A recent United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report found:

*Between 1990 and 2010 the number of people living in extreme poverty fell by half as a share of the total population in developing countries (from 47 per cent in 1990 to 22 per cent in 2010), a reduction of 0.7 billion people. Women gained parity in primary education in a majority of countries, maternal mortality fell by 47 per cent, 6 and over the same period, the global total fertility rate fell by 23 per cent.*³

However, the report also highlighted that gender inequalities persist and the development gains from the past 20 years cannot be sustained unless governments tackle the inequalities that hurt the poorest and most marginali[s]ed. Adolescent girls, in particular, are at risk in the poorest communities, with lack of access to secondary education, comprehensive sexuality education and employment opportunities remaining key barriers to equality.⁴

YWCA Australia is very concerned that global momentum towards the achievement of the MDGs and other development targets is not lost. As the international community develops the post-2015 strategic development agenda, we urge the Australian Government to continue to play a key role in improving the lives of the world's poorest. Unfortunately the loss of \$4.5 billion from the ODA budget over four years will decrease Australia's ability to contribute effectively.

Funding cuts in current financial year

We were also concerned that cuts to the ODA budget for this current financial year were announced in January 2014, more than halfway through the financial year and when funds had already been committed to specific programs, leaving NGOs with significant shortfalls.

¹ Judith Ireland and Bianca Hall, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Coalition slashes foreign aid as part of \$9b savings measures', 5 September 2013, (<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2013/coalition-slashes-foreign-aid-as-part-of-9b-savings-measures-20130905-2i786.html#ixzz2tdvPWC2w>)

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Review: Australia 2013 (OECD peer report)*, 2013, p.18.

³ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Report of the Operational Review of the Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and its Follow - up Beyond 2014 (ICPD Beyond 2014 Global Report)*, p.9.

⁴ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *UN Launches ICPD Beyond 2014 Global Review Report*, February 2014, <http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/site-map/ICPDReport>

We refer the Committee to paragraphs 1.10 to 1.12 of the submission to this Inquiry by the Australian Council for International Aid and Development (**ACFID**) for information about the impact of this decision on their member organisations. We also note that Plan estimates that 10,111 children who were to benefit from activities that the organisation had planned will potentially be impacted by the cut to current funding, which will also impact on the families and communities of those children.⁵

Asylum seeker management regime

In our view, the use of ODA funds to meet the cost of Australia's asylum seeker management regime does not qualify as effective overseas aid and undermines Australia's standing in the international community. Indeed, the OECD peer review report expressed concern that such diversions could jeopardise development outcomes.⁶ We recommend that a separate budget allocation be made for the cost of Australia's asylum seeker management regime.

International Seminar Support Scheme

YWCA Australia is concerned to learn of the decision to cease funding of the International Seminar Support Scheme. The ISSS enables women and men in developing countries to access funding to participate in international meetings. In our experience we have been fortunate to receive funds from the ISSS to support the participation of young women and women in World YWCA Council Meetings, which has provided our members with exposure to capacity building training, program development, and life changing experiences. Please see attached at Appendix A an account of how participation in the World YWCA Council meeting fundamentally transformed the life of one of our colleagues from the YWCA in PNG.

Gender equality and development

It is well understood that increasing gender equality supports economic and national development. In the words of James Wolfensohn, former President of The World Bank:

where gender inequality persists, efforts to reduce poverty are undermined....numerous studies and on – the - ground experiences have shown that promoting equality between men and women helps economies grow faster, accelerates poverty reduction and enhances the dignity and well - being of men, women and children.

YWCA Australia welcomes the Australian Government's clear statements about the positive link between gender equality and economic development⁷ and its commitments to promote gender equality and to give women a stronger voice in the world, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.⁸ We also welcome, in support of these commitments, the appointment of Natasha Stott Despoja as Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls and hope that her role will be fully resourced.

⁵ Plan International Australia, Submission to the Senate Inquiry on Australia's overseas aid and development assistance program, February 2014, p.3.

⁶ OECD peer report, as above, p.18.

⁷ See Coalition, *The Coalition's Policy for Foreign Affairs*, September 2013, p. 8.

⁸ See <http://www.dfat.gov.au/women/>

We urge the Australian Government to retain gender equality as a critical cross-cutting theme across the aid program, and to prioritise and invest in specific aid programs that support gender equality as well as integrating gender into mainstream programs.

YWCA Australia commends the submission to this Inquiry by International Women's Development Agency (**IWDA**), particularly paragraph 3.3 in relation to specific initiatives and investments that are important to sustain, "not only for their potential to address inequalities but because they will help the Government give effect to its broad policy commitments to women's leadership, economic empowerment and ending violence against women."

YWCA Australia backs IWDA's calls for programs such as the *Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development* (PWSPD) and the *Australian NGO Cooperation Program* (ANCP) to be sustained. We also back calls for sexual and reproductive health and rights remains a priority in the aid program and in Australia's diplomatic and international engagements where relevant, especially in discussions concerning the post-2015 development framework, and for a diverse gender advisory and specialist team within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to be sustained.

Recommendations

- Set a clear timetable to grow the ODA budget to 0.5 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI).
- Provide a separate budget allocation for the cost of Australia's asylum seeker management regime.
- Reinstate funding for the ISSS.
- Fully resource the role of the Australia's Global Ambassador for Women and Girls
- Retain gender equality as a critical cross-cutting theme across the aid program.
- Prioritise and invest in specific aid programs that support gender equality, and integrate gender into mainstream programs.

More information

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. We would be happy to discuss any of the information provided in more detail.

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Appendix A: Sylvia's Story

Sylvia knew something wasn't right. She and the youngest of her three children had been sick for some time, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get better.

One day, Sylvia happened to be attending an awareness talk at her local YWCA and the facilitator described some of the symptoms of HIV/AIDS. She immediately recognised these as symptoms that her and her son had been experiencing.

It took Sylvia a few weeks to get the confidence to visit her local clinic for an HIV test. The result came back positive. Sylvia will never forget that day. *"I thought my world had ended"*, she said, *"I was bitter, angry and scared"*. Shortly after that she took her son to the clinic and found out that he too had the virus.

When she finally found the courage to tell her husband, Sylvia was severely beaten. He accused her of being unfaithful and denied that it was through him that she contracted the virus. However, as his health continued to decline, Sylvia's husband eventually went to the clinic for a test, where he discovered he was HIV positive.

For the next five years, Sylvia experienced daily violence from her husband and his family. Most of this time, her and their three children were forced to sleep underneath the house while her husband lived upstairs with another woman. On several occasions she sought refuge at the local women's shelter, but the support was only temporary and she had no choice but to return home to a life of violence and abuse.

Eventually the violence got so bad that Sylvia took her children and slept on the streets. *"For awhile we slept outside the Post Office"* Sylvia said, *"but we never missed a day of Church. We never lost our faith in God"*. Little did she Sylvia know that she was about to meet a man who whose love and kindness would ultimately change the course of her life.

Mr. Lifu was an Australian man working in Port Moresby and the boss of Sylvia's husband. When he heard her story, Mr. Lifu was furious at Sylvia's husband for treating his wife so badly. Every payday, Mr. Lifu withheld a portion of Sylvia's husband's salary, which he gave directly to Sylvia her three children. Then one day he surprised the couple with a gift of money, enough to build a house of their own.

After the new house was built, Sylvia once again returned home to her husband, but things only got worse. He continued to sleep with other women, even though he knew he was HIV positive. *"I couldn't bear the fact that these women could be contracting the virus without knowing, so one day I photocopied his test result and showed them. It caused a huge argument,"* recalls Sylvia.

Tragedy struck again when their youngest son passed away from AIDs. Sylvia blamed herself for her son's death and wondered if she too would be better off dead. During this difficult time, Sylvia continued to volunteer at her local YWCA, where she was supported by staff.

In 2011, Sylvia was nominated to go Zurich as a delegate for the World YWCA International Women's Summit. There she attended events specifically for HIV + women, where she was able to share her story and learn strategies to advocate for the human rights of other HIV + women.

She describes this experience as a turning point in her life. When she returned, she took every opportunity to use what she had learnt to support other HIV + women in her community. No one could believe that someone like Sylvia would ever get such an important opportunity. Her husband began showing her respect and the community started to listen to what she had to say.

Sylvia spent almost every day volunteering at local hospitals, listening and talking to women who had recently discovered their HIV status. She realised that she was not alone and most of the women had also been beaten and rejected from their families. She saw a need for safe and supported housing, specifically for HIV+ women and their children who were experiencing violence as a result of their status.

Today Sylvia is employed as a Counsellor with the Clinton Foundation in Port Moresby, where she provides support and advice to HIV+ mothers and their children. She continues to work towards her goal of establishing a safe house in Port Moresby where HIV+ women can access housing, counseling and medical services until they can find their feet.

As for her own life, Sylvia is focusing on staying healthy and strong so she can live to see her two remaining children (now 9 and 11) get married and have their own families.