



Submission No 1

Inquiry into Australia's Aid Program in the Pacific

Name: Dr Max Quanchi

Address: School of Humanities and Human Services
Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
Carseldine Campus
Queensland 4034

15 May 2006.

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into Australia's aid program in the Pacific

Comment from

Dr Max Quanchi

Senior Lecturer, Pacific Studies Program, School of Humanities and Human Services,

QUT, Brisbane

Brief Summary of Key points

Positive aspects of the White Paper's policy directions

- Appropriate focus on governance and "Pacific leadership program"
- Appropriate focus on major diseases (HIV/AIDS, pandemics and Malaria)
- Appropriate focus on scholarships and education awards to Pacific Island nations (PINs)
- Appropriate call for more engagement and research on the region (but lacking in details)
- Founding of ODE and A-PTC
- Emphasis on water supply (one of few village-level aid projects mentioned)
- Potential to link Australian and Pacific Island schools
- Identifying "local champions" as leaders and agents of change
- Giving priority to poverty alleviation, gender balance, and "investing in people" (but failing to give details)

Negative aspects of the White Paper's policy directions

- Over-emphasis on terrorism and security agenda
- Over-emphasis on seeing aid only "in our national interest"
- Failure to acknowledge PINs as "major partner countries"
- Over-emphasis on promoting "greater regional integration" as a solution
- Doubt over focus areas of "Australia-Pacific Technical College"
- No commitment to continue Youth Ambassadorships
- Over-emphasis on changing land tenure systems
- Over-emphasis on roads as "development"
- Failure to address aid potential of short-term labour migration and remittances
- Over-emphasis on call for PINs to be "integrated with the global economy".
- The failure to recognise NGOs and Civil Society as a means of delivery
- No connection with the lives of ordinary Pacific peoples.

The writer's background

These comments are based on personal engagement with the people of the Pacific Islands (1971-2006), through conducting workshops (1990-2001), supervision of undergraduate student visits (1975-82) and most recently during a series of annual three-week undergraduate fieldwork classes in remote villages and urban centres in Fiji, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Samoa and Vanuatu (1995-2006). As well as research on Australia's historical links with the Pacific, I also teach the only course in an Australian university to address the topic of Australia's historical and contemporary relations with the Pacific islands. (QUT course code; *HBB242 Australia and the Pacific* – taught from 1990 to present). In 2005-2006, I was interim-Secretary and Convenor for the inaugural conference of the newly formed Australian Association for the Advancement for Pacific Studies (AAAPS).

Comment

(relevant to the terms of reference of the Inquiry)

1 “... national interest” (eg., pp.7 and 20 and passim)

The proposed program is seriously flawed in placing repeated emphasis on aid being conducted in Australia's national interest – aid should be described as a humanitarian “gift” to those in need. In a policy statement, aid should not be described repeatedly in terms of benefits to the donor.

The “Pacific Plan” is mentioned several times, (eg., p.13, 30, 56) but without details to enable the reader to understand how it will link to aid delivery.

2 “... pooling of functions ... regional integration” (pp.29, 34 and 55, and passim)

The proposed program mistakenly suggests that benefits will accrue to individual PINs if they merge, join regional institutions and integrate – but, Pacific regionalism already has a long history (with only some success at international and regional levels). It is characteristic of past and present Euro-American engagement with PINs, but no research exists to show that ordinary populations or villagers benefit from this regionalism – and up to 90% of populations in PINs are rural villagers. To base aid programs on regionalism is faulty. It is a priority that belongs in a Trade and Foreign Affairs White Paper, not in an Aid White Paper or Program.

Aid planners discussing regionalism need to look at the map. The Pacific as a single unitary region does not exist. There are 14 individualistic and proud nations, (and 9 other territories and dependencies) with few real or artificial connections, and to date only limited desire to join regional associations with distant (and culturally exclusive) entities.

Australian involvement in promoting regional institutions historically does have a “strong track record” (p.55), but this has been perceived by PINs as bullying, lecturing and the taking over of key roles. Australia has funded worthwhile

attempts, but mostly failed to exert leadership, or develop shared-leadership in the long-term in concert with PINs leaders.

3 Nauru, Tuvalu, FSM, Palau, Kiribati

The proposed program ignores engagement with several independent nations and territories. It places a priority in engagement only with PNG, Solomon Is and Vanuatu, and makes passing reference to Fiji, Tuvalu and Samoa. This is therefore not a “Pacific” aid program. It is at best described as a “Melanesian aid program”. (Even then it still has gaps - see below under Kanaky/New Caledonia and West Papua.)

4 West Papua, Kanaky/New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia

The proposed program particularly ignores two key entities. They are both territories under foreign control – West Papua by Indonesia and New Caledonia by France (as are Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia). Both have problems with water, health, HIV/AIDs, education, poverty, etc – the issues the proposed program addresses – but the program ignores the people of these entities, presumably because they are sovereign territories of other nations, or in whose affairs it is politically inappropriate for Australia to interfere. But they are also Pacific peoples and our neighbours and can benefit from Australian humanitarian aid now, and in the future when autonomy or independence is granted. The absence of a commitment to help the people of these two entities is a serious oversight, and would be negatively received in the Pacific and at regional organizations.

5 Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue

While the Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue are nominally in New Zealand’s sphere of interest, the program assumes we have no interest in or obligations to these people – who are also neighbouring Pacific Islanders in what the Prime Minister has called “our patch”. This is a serious oversight, and would be negatively received in the Pacific and at regional organizations.

(A very inappropriate judgement on Tonga on page 30 should be removed.)

6 Terrorism and regional stability (pp. ix, xi, 6, 10, 34, and passim)

The claims of potential terrorism in the Pacific are unsupported by research or events to date. It is a very negative judgement on which to base an aid policy (and quite amazingly, to identify it as the fourth of four interlinked aid program themes). It would be read in the Pacific as a policy direction with an overtly domestic electoral motivation. It would be received very negatively in the region. Strangely, the one entity – West Papua – with a level of demonstrated “terrorist” activity (recently arriving non-Papuan fundamentalist Islamic militia) is not mentioned in these discussions.

7 A-PTC

The statement on A-PTC’s focus lists eight occupations (p.39), but ignores the three most pressing and urgent skilled, training areas – maritime engineering, aviation and electronic media – all growing fast and key elements of Pacific daily life, economy, politics and global engagement. Why, for example, automobile-

related skills are rated a priority at the exclusion of maritime, aviation and Information Technologies needs to be addressed in the planning for A-PTC, and certainly before its presentation to the 2006 Pacific Islands Forum meeting.

8 Scholarships

One of the enduring and beneficial linkages with PNG was formerly the personal links between postgraduate supervisors and their PNG students who returned to take on key roles in PNG (and to a lesser extent formerly in Nauru, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji). The emphasis on scholarships for future leaders in PINs (p.43) is a positive step. The scholarship program also needs re-thinking on why Australia is losing out to postgraduate destinations in India, NZ, USA, and other Euro-American universities. The number of scholarships should take a quantum leap. It must not only be tied to governance. The skill and human resource needs of PINs crosses into many fields and disciplines and all need to be given an exaggerated number of scholarships in the first instance (say, over the next ten years).

9 Australian engagement with AID policy and with the region

The White Paper is silent on promoting further engagement with the region, or teaching about issues that affect PINs through school and tertiary education in Australia,. The White Paper calls for Australians to understand where aid goes and how the policy applies, but no indication is given of funding for universities, associations or special projects within Australia that might help Australians appreciate Australian involvement in aid. A simple project might replicate, for example, a QUT and UNSW program in which fieldwork classes are conducted annually in Pacific villages. Several hundred students have taken these classes, and returned excited and informed about the Pacific. (One student became a Youth Ambassador, and many have taken up postgraduate Pacific studies). A period of funding to support all universities to undertake such a program would be a simple and effective step forward. Another step is to fund a Professorial Chair in Aid, Security and Development (or in another related Pacific studies discipline) at an Australian university (outside of Canberra to avoid excessive centralism). This would signpost Australia's interests, highlight existing excellence and expertise in these fields, and promote understanding of aid.

10 National Histories, nation-building and Education

A priority should be given to the development of national histories and their teaching in the Pacific Island school curriculum. The list of 7 priority strategies (p.53) ignores the need to develop national histories. This is an important counter to the old colonial dominated curricula. It promotes an understanding of their own history by students in PINs, and through studying their own histories, to appreciate their place in civil society and responsible membership later as an adult of the nation (and electorate.) The excellent embryonic work of the Japan-funded *TTPF/HistoryCOPs* project in promoting a national history curriculum and professional development for teachers (led by QUT and UNSW in 1995-2001), the excellent recent *Histri blong Yumi long Vanuatu* (funded by NZAid) and similar smaller locally initiated advances in Samoa and Kiribati, could easily be replicated as nation-building educational projects with Australian funding.

11 Roads

It is claimed that PNG will gain economic, health, education, law and order advantages from a highlands road network (p.35), and similarly from an oil-gas link to Queensland (p.30) but the proposed White Paper program takes the wrong direction in relation to the Pacific if it calls road-building “growth” or “development”. What most PINs need are not roads but improved jetties, landings and inter-island wharves. The second most necessary infrastructure is provision of, and improved landing strips for aviation traffic. The Pacific, apart from the larger land mass of PNG, and perhaps Viti Levu in Fiji, is a region of dispersed small islands, atolls and archipelago. A road is useful, but less important than a berthing facility and an airport to improve exports, imports, passenger traffic and general communication. A road falls into third place well behind berthing facilities and airstrips as required infrastructure. A road as a sign of growth therefore sends the wrong message to the Pacific and ignores the most pressing need in the islands, atolls and archipelago of the region.

12 Land tenure a “Pacific land mobilisation program” (pp. xii, 37 and passim)

No matter how this policy is phrased, up to 90% of Pacific Island people who live and die on “their land” (next to their ancestors) have so far not shown any propensity to give up that land for “national projects” or for its transfer to commercial, corporate or multi-national uses. Freeing up some land and changing lease arrangements is required, but the concept of a wholesale shifting of kin and clan land tenure to private-sector management (called “growth” on p.xii) is fraught with obstacles and probably impossible in the short or long-term.

An inappropriate comment regarding “jobless urbanization” should be deleted (p.12) unless it is followed by discussion of possible aid programs and policy directions to address the issue. It is not clear why Kiribati was identified in this phrase, and it also sends a message that Australian policy makers over-generalise from one example to a whole region.

13 Concluding comment

In visits in the 1970s and 1980s to the Cook Islands, Tonga, Kiribati, Guam, CNMI, FSM and Nauru, and extended visits to the villages of Soso (Yasawa Is, Fiji), Savaia Lefaga and Manono (Samoa), Tendo and Canala (New Caledonia), Nukukaisi (Makira, Solomon Is), Paungnisu (Efate, Vanuatu) in 1995-2006 it is clear that Pacific island people do not expect aid from Australia (although they do visibly receive it from NZ, Japan and Canada). But they know that if they need a roof for the clinic, a tank for the community meeting house or a dormitory at the school – they can rely on a friendly Australian Rotary or Apex club or church. Pacific Islanders understand that for aid delivery at the local level it is overseas friends that can provide it - not governments. They also know that the Australian government’s aid disappears into the capital cities, to politicians, to bureaucrats and mostly to Australian consultants and companies imported to do jobs at a national level.

What the White Paper ignores is local level engagement. It ignores the kin and clan groups, villages and provinces and talks the language of capital city politicians, bureaucrats and consultants. Paungnisu village, where I took my undergraduate students last year, is on Efate Island, 2 hours by truck from Port Vila. In Paungnisu there is no sign of Australian aid delivery or impact. Yet in Port Vila overseas funded Australian “improvements” are very obvious. Does this White Paper’s approach to aid offer any help to the ordinary village people of Vanuatu – no!

It is clear that despite many admirable moves (noted in the summary above) an improved and Pacific-focussed aid approach for the next decade will not emerge from the policy priorities identified in this White Paper. This is apparent from the opening page, where Mr Downer’s foreword (p.vii) ends with the phrase – “and our own national interest by promoting a secure and prosperous region”.

Signed by Dr Max Quanchi
 (on his own behalf)

Date 30 May 2006

Return Address

Dr Max) Quanchi,
School of Humanities and Human Services,
Queensland University of Technology (QUT),
Carseldine, Queensland, Australia 4034
Tel 61-7-38644519;
FAX 61-7-38644719;
Mobile 0402042879