

26 March 2018

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: Australian Parliamentary Inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a facilitator of core SDGs

Dear Sir/Madam,

It is a great pleasure to make a submission to your inquiry into the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I welcome the Committee's inquiry into the present level of Australia's engagement in the global efforts to achieve core SDGs. For the purposes of this submission, I have limited my submission to areas where I believe my knowledge and experience may assist the committee most.

I refer to the following two Terms of Reference (TOR). These are:

- (e) *what SDGs are currently being addressed by Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) program; and*
- (f) *which of the SDG is Australia best suited to achieving through our ODA program, and should Australia's ODA be consolidated to focus on achieving core SDG.*

My submission identifies several gaps in policies and provides recommendations by which Australia's future Official Development Assistance (ODA) program can be aligned with the objectives of the SDGs. In particular, it identifies needs of Australian ODA for two Asian countries Lao PDR and Mongolia, where I am currently

implementing two Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) funded projects under Australia Awards Fellowship (AAF) 17, which are aimed at enhancing the capacity of human resources to achieve core SDGs more specifically, Goal #6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all), and Goal #8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all).

Background and Motivation

I am a political economist working on the role of governance for sustainable development based at Griffith Asia Institute that produces interdisciplinary research on key economic, political and cultural developments in contemporary Asia and the South Pacific. I am also the Director of Engagement and Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Business and Asian Studies, and Research Chair of Griffith Centre for Sustainable Enterprise. I have published in leading academic journals, and in more popular forums, such as the Griffith Review, The Conversation, and ABC Drum. I have been a consultant to the World Bank, and the Government of Mongolia. I have been quoted in the media ranging from ABC Science, 612 ABC Brisbane, The Courier Mail, Queensland Times, Sky News, SBS, VTV Mongolia to several international newspapers and magazines. In my career spanning more than two decades, I have successfully bid for highly competitive external grants totalling AUD 2.6 million provided by the World Bank, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and several other Australian government departments. A majority of these grants and projects have been implemented towards building capacity of human resources that can help achieve SDGs in the developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region. More recently, I have worked as the Chief Investigator on a range of DFAT funded projects that have addressed important core SDG issues such as improving water governance in Lao PDR¹, promoting governance for mining sector development in Mongolia², climate change and growth in Indonesia³, and improving corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards in

¹ DFAT funded training program led by Dr Tapan Sarker on water governance for Lao officials (2017) <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/training-program-on-water-governance-for-lao-officials/>

² DFAT funded training program led by Dr Tapan Sarker to promote governance and sustainable development in mining in Mongolia (2017) <http://irim.mn/news/871>

³ Sarker et al (2018), Incentives and Disincentives for Reducing Emissions under REDD+ in Indonesia, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-67702-6_11

the oil and gas industry in Malaysia⁴. In addition to my extensive experience in implementing international development focused projects, I regularly participate in outreach activities and contribute to public debates on national and international policies. My professional profile and list of publications are available at <https://experts.griffith.edu.au/academic/tapan.sarker>

Brief overview of submission

In September 2015, all 195 member countries of the United Nations adopted the 17 SDGs to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all as part of their new global “Agenda 2030”. The ambitious scale of the SDGs requires an unprecedented level of investment. ODA is at the core of the financial portfolios of many developing countries as well as essential to deliver long-term sustainable development. From the analysis of extant literature, and my personal experience in implementing development initiatives, I believe that ODA does not always contribute to achieve sustainable development and SGDs. Thus a substantive shift is needed to consolidate the ODAs around a set of principles and targets that can enhance effectiveness of Australia’s ODA in achieving the SDGs.

Australian ODA and SDGs

(e) what SDGs are currently being addressed by Australia’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) program

Australia has made a commitment to the SDGs in its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper and explicitly links each thematic aid program to the SDGs⁵. In the financial year 2015-2016, Australia’s ODA was more than AUD 4 billion⁶. The biggest investment priority was promoting effective governance, policies, institutions and functioning economies, and DFAT has explicitly linked this theme to SDGs 1, 8, 10, 16 and 17⁷. This was followed by education, which is linked to SDGs 1, 4, 5, and 17⁸. Other priority areas of investment included building resilience, health, and infrastructure as well as agriculture,

⁴ DFAT report (2011), Dr Tapan Sarker led a research collaboration between Australia and Malaysia (p.10), <https://dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/foundations-councils-institutes/australia-malaysia-institute/management/Documents/ami-annual-report-2010-11.pdf>

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, DFAT, 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, DFAT, Australian engagement with developing countries: Part 2: Official Sector Statistical Summary 2015–16.

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, DFAT, Effective Governance Aid Factsheet

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia, DFAT, Education Aid Factsheet

fisheries and water, which are linked to SDGs 2, 6, 8, 9, and 11. DFAT is working closely with private sector to advance the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development⁹, and partnering with Global Compact Network Australia and SDG Business Hub which would provide a more flexible way to address development challenges.

(f) which of the SDG is Australia best suited to achieving through our ODA program, and should Australia's ODA be consolidated to focus on achieving core SDG.

There have been increasing concerns over the aid effectiveness in achieving development goals both in Australia¹⁰ and internationally¹¹. Adding to this concerns, there are some non-aid factors that also affect the aid effectiveness. These include unsustainable fiscal deficits in aid recipient countries¹², climate change¹³ and its impact on food and energy prices, trade credits and other macroeconomic factors. Given these uncertainties, it is important for Australia to adapt with the changing SDG needs and target the ODA programs more strategically, with a view to make long term positive impacts in the aid recipient countries. Focusing on capacity building and strengthening governance, policies and institutions should get utmost priority. Improving the research capacity should also be linked with ODAs.

My own experience in implementing DFAT funded projects in Laos and Mongolia have shown that capacity building can be a more effective tool to achieve multiple SDGs. My project 'Economic growth and institutional development through increasing expertise in water governance in Laos' enhanced knowledge on water sector management among practitioners in Laos, where the top investment priorities of DFAT are education, followed by agriculture, fisheries and water. Similarly, my project 'Promoting Effective Governance for Mining Sector Development through building capacity in research and engagement in Mongolia' has increased capacity of the Fellows of the recipient country

⁹ Commonwealth of Australia, DFAT, 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

¹⁰ The Guardian, Australian aid: it's just not working

¹¹ Measuring Aid Effectiveness Effectively: A Quality of Official Development Assistance Index,

<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/measuring-aid-effectiveness-effectively-a-quality-of-official-development-assistance-index/>

¹² Sarker, Tapan (2015), The role of fiscal sustainability in enhancing sustainable economic growth in South Asia, via UN ESCAP <http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/6-Part5-Sarker.pdf>

¹³ Sarker, et al. (2013) The Asian Century, Sustainable Growth and Climate Change Responsible Futures Matter, <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781781005743.xml>

to undertake independent research on governance, which resonates with DFTA's focus on education and governance in Mongolia.

In sum, there is a need for a shift in the way Australia's ODA program is designed to address core SDGs. This may include: providing training and education of new generation public, private and civil society sector leaders in good governance, building capacity in research and engagement that can enhance core SDGs, and strengthening and sustaining long term development initiatives. Thus the aid program should adopt an integrated approach to the many aspects of life, such as health, education, vocational training and economic growth.

Sincerely yours

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