



Save the Children

Funding for Public Research into Foreign Policy Issues

FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND
TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE

21 July 2021

INTRODUCTION

Save the Children appreciates the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for passing on additional written Questions on Notice from Committee Chair Senator Kimberley Kitching. We have prepared our answers, to be read together with our Submission to this Inquiry on Funding for Public Research into Foreign Policy Issues (henceforth “Submission”), and in the context of our engagement with Australia’s international development program. As we outlined in our Submission, our work across the Indo-Pacific has many points of connection with the foreign policy issues set out in the Australian Government’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.¹ Since the onset of COVID-19, our work has also aligned with the pivot in the Australian Government’s international development policy, Partnerships for Recovery: Australia’s COVID-19 Development Response.²

Save the Children is a civil society organisation (CSO) with a wide Indo-Pacific footprint and a 100-year history of working to protect children and advance children’s rights all around the world. Since the onset of COVID-19, we have argued that Australia should enhance its focus on assisting our neighbours to assemble the “social” infrastructure they will require to rebuild their societies and economies in the wake of the pandemic’s intersecting health and economic impacts. We argue for the primacy of human security considerations, especially the safety and wellbeing of children, in Australia’s approach to foreign policy; and for Australia’s international development program to have more prominence in discussions of Australian statecraft and geostrategy.

These responses were prepared by Dr Amrita Malhi, Senior Adviser Geoeconomics. As always, Save the Children would be delighted to build or elaborate further on the points we make within it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. International development programs and projects funded by Official Development Assistance (ODA) should allow for a 5 per cent research and policy advocacy weighting in the assessment of all funding to be invested in research, policy development, and policy advocacy that is integrated into operational activity.
2. Australia should establish an independent institution and standing fund that would invest in programs and projects aimed at understanding human security challenges and strengthening democratic institutions and cultures around the Indo-Pacific.
3. The Australian Government should fund a visits program that extends opportunities to Australian leaders to deepen their understanding of foreign policy by experiencing regional human security challenges first-hand, adopting the model of Save the Children’s Australian Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI).

¹ See Australian Government. Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017:

<https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper/fpwhitepaper/pdf/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>

² See Australian Government. Partnerships for Recovery: Australia’s COVID-19 Development Response, 2020: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/aid/partnerships-recovery-australias-covid-19-development-response>

WRITTEN QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

1. What particular expertise do organisations like yours bring to foreign policy research?

Civil society organisations (CSOs) like ours hold multidisciplinary analytical and technical expertise, as well as a great depth and breadth of knowledge of the Indo-Pacific region – derived both from fieldwork and close, long-term relationships with grassroots communities.

Our expertise covers the technical aspects of aid programming such as project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Alongside such forms of technical knowledge, our staff might also have advanced qualifications in area studies and/or frequent, long-term field experience, world-leading expertise in climate change mitigation and adaptation, or international careers designing social protection programs, for example. We have staff who have served in emergency humanitarian missions and understand the complexities of ensuring child nutrition and psychosocial wellbeing in refugee camps, and others with decades of experience analysing national and international politics. In short, across Save the Children's global and Indo-Pacific footprints, we have expert staff who can be seconded into programs and projects covering the entire, complex range of intersecting crises now devastating Indo-Pacific economies and societies since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From our experience of working across the gamut of humanitarian and development challenges, we know the profoundly destabilising effect of disease mortality, poverty, forced displacement, and inequality first-hand from cases around the world. Travel permitting, our staff are offered opportunities to cycle through a range of different roles, and we recruit from across the range of foreign policy institutions, from government departments to private sector development contractors, to universities. This approach allows for new people and fresh ideas to circulate through our organisation, exactly in the manner advocated by a number of other submissions to this inquiry, while gaining or enhancing their connectedness to a wide variety of Indo-Pacific sites and communities. Some of these sites are remote and/or challenging environments. Because we combine this experience with the technical and operational expertise described above, we represent a formidable combination of skillsets that could be better utilised to draw more diverse voices and forms of knowledge into Australian foreign policy debates.

Take for example, our Country Office in Papua New Guinea (PNG), a strong example of how Save the Children's wide project and staffing footprint connects us to some of the most remote, under-served, and least well-known areas of the Pacific. One such area is Bougainville, now preparing to become a new nation on Australia's doorstep, where we maintain an operational presence, and have done so for many years. Our operations in PNG also reach the whole of Western Province, Telefomin in West Sepik province, the remotest districts of East Sepik province along the Sepik River, and remote highlands districts. Another example is our Country Office in Solomon Islands, where we have operations in Choiseul Province (adjacent to Bougainville), where very few CSOs work. Our work is therefore not only in the region, but of the region, and is qualitatively different to fly in, fly out operations that mostly use consultants, and from research organisations that mostly operate through Track 2 dialogues in hotel conference rooms, with few other connections. We have a footprint in some of the most remote parts of the Indo-Pacific that no academic institution, think tank or government department, including the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, can match.

In addition to this grassroots embeddedness in the region, our organisation brings this local connectedness right into its leadership structure. Returning to our PNG example, our management team consists of experienced and emerging leaders who are PNG nationals, including its Country

Director, Ms Fiu Williame-Igara. Ms Williame-Igara's pan-Pacific experience extends from occupying senior roles in the PNG public service to leading the Public Leadership and Reform team in the PNG/Australia Governance Program, to working as an adviser the Pacific Island Secretariat. Ms Williame-Igara was also a founding member of the Coalition for Change PNG, the body instrumental in developing the *Family Protection Act 2013*, which criminalised spousal violence and violence against children in PNG. Supporting Ms Williame-Igara as Deputy Director is Ms Rosario Sam, whose recent Guardian Australia column remembers the violent murder of 19-year-old mother of two, Jenelyn Kennedy.³ In her column, Ms Sam points out that Pacific cities need not only hard infrastructure, as regional major power competition might lead donor states to believe, but social infrastructure like safer streets, more effective courts, jobs, and programmes addressing violence against women and children. As a survivor of gender-based violence herself, Ms Sam has called on PNG's leaders to think beyond infrastructure and liveability surveys.

As these examples demonstrate, our profile is different from other organisations with prominent positions in foreign policy debates, who demonstrate a far lesser degree of staff and especially leadership diversity. In PNG, 70 per cent of our Senior Management Team consists of PNG nationals, and all our provincial offices are also led by nationals. In addition, 66 per cent of our PNG management team are women. Less than 5 per cent of our PNG workforce consists of expatriate staff. All reviews and evaluations of our PNG projects are conducted in-country, and PNG nationals perform our technical advisory work in Education, Health, Child Safeguarding and Gender, Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion. For example, the feasibility risk assessment for our Cash Transfer Program was conducted by PNG nationals in seven provinces in PNG in 2020. The resulting report was presented to DFAT, the World Bank, and the Department of Community Development, among other national and international agencies. As these examples show, we demonstrate an excellent commitment to equal opportunity recruitment and investing in leadership breadth and depth, including locally. We also bring a diversity of perspectives that extends to marginalised communities and complex operational environments. We therefore employ a strong cohort of "double" and "triple" threats of the nature called for by Professor Simon Jackman in his submission for the United States Studies Centre, or staff who combine foreign policy-relevant degrees, relevant languages, and one or more technical proficiencies.⁴

In summary, we are a strongly localised organisation whose remotest project workers are connected with grassroots human security challenges and local political responses to them. Because we are also global, these staff are also connected with a strong pool of area knowledge and general technical expertise located in Australia and around the world. Our recommendations to the Inquiry, therefore, are aimed at encouraging the Australian Government to provide us with some additional support, to help us scale up our research capacity beyond our project operations and to better bring our deep regional knowledge to Australian foreign policy debates. We are the type of organisation that a range of other submissions to this inquiry argue should be better represented in these debates.

³ Rosario Sam. "If We Want Port Moresby to Rise in the Liveability Rankings, Start By Protecting Its Women," *The Guardian*, 16 July 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/16/if-we-want-port-moresby-to-rise-in-the-liveability-rankings-start-by-protecting-its-women>.

⁴ Simon Jackman. "Funding for Public Research into Foreign Policy Issues," Submission #18 to this Inquiry, United States Studies Centre, p. 11.

2. Are there examples from other countries of better models for tapping into research expertise within foreign policy oriented civil society organisations?

Yes, Australia could look to the independent research and policy advocacy institutions fostered in the United States and United Kingdom, some of which purposively focus on human security and development, as well as promoting democracy. Australia should consider emulating these approaches, in combination with better integrating research activities into development projects.

CSOs like ours perform research on topics relevant to human security challenges across the Indo-Pacific, often aimed at understanding issues that are simply not priorities for other institutions and drawing on internal resources rather than project funding received from DFAT or other donors. In our Pacific work, for example, we have published a range of research reports whose findings have been both rigorous and well-received, and these reports have established an essential evidence base for further projects aimed at improving outcomes beyond the baseline results they set out. As we outlined in our Submission, in some cases, our findings have led to additional funding for related projects, including in relation to preventing the trafficking and commercial exploitation of children in Solomon Islands.⁵

Some additional examples of the research we have performed in the last five years include:

- Analysing the multi-layered barriers to educating girls aged 4 to 8 in Papua New Guinea, drawing on insights derived from our Australian Government-supported project, RISE (Rapidly Improving Standards in Elementary Education). Our findings were that girls are disadvantaged by gender norms, disrupted family environments, caregiver ambivalence, a lack of safe school transport, malnutrition, inadequate facilities and materials, teacher availability and skills, financial barriers, and disability.⁶
- Understanding the underinvestment in ending violence against children in the Pacific and Timor Leste. We found that across the region, more than 4 million children across the region are experiencing violent discipline, 1 in 4 adolescent girls is experiencing physical violence, and 1 in 10 adolescent girls is experiencing sexual violence, and donor responses are inadequate.⁷
- Understanding why Solomon Islands has experienced difficulty prioritising, resourcing, and monitoring child-related laws, policies, and services, hampering its otherwise good improvements in meeting its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Research for this report was supported by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, a European union initiative for promoting democracy and human rights.⁸
- Establishing the extent to which the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances affects population health outcomes in Solomon Islands, especially those of young people. This study

⁵ Save the Children. "Submission on Funding for Public Research into Foreign Policy Issues," Submission #14 to this Inquiry, p. 5.

⁶ Michelle Lokot. "Tangled Threads: Multi-Layered Barriers to Educating Girls Aged 4-8 in Papua New Guinea," Save the Children, Rapidly Improving Standards in Elementary Education Program.

⁷ Kavitha Suthanthiraraj. "Unseen, Unsafe: The Underinvestment in Ending Violence Against Children in the Pacific and Timor-Leste," Save the Children, ChildFund, Plan International, and World Vision, 2019: <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/our-stories/unseen-unsafe#:~:text=Unseen%2C%20Unsafe%20is%20a%20new,being%20invested%20to%20address%20it>.

⁸ Save the Children. "Solomon Islands Non-Government Organisations' Alternative Report on the Combined Second and Third Periodic Reports of Solomon Islands to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child," 2017: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/solomon-islands-non-government-organisations-alternative-report-combined-second-and-third>.

found that overall, levels of alcohol and other substance abuse were high, and 58 per cent of participants who had drunk alcohol in the previous year reported becoming violent or aggressive at least once during a session of alcohol abuse in that period.⁹

- Assessing the scale of the nutrition crisis affecting children in PNG. Our research found that almost one in two children in PNG have stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition, and that PNG has the fourth highest child stunting rate in the world – more than twice the global average. Our report estimated that child undernutrition cost the PNG economy the equivalent of USD \$508 million in the financial year 2015-16. The report was launched at Parliament House and led to a series of round tables at DFAT.¹⁰

Such reports are the culmination of significant efforts on our part to formalise and draw together grassroots insights from the frontlines of our work and channel them into debates about development and human security across the region. As we outlined in our original submission, our concern is that without such efforts, the knowledge we hold will be fragmented and privatised or siloed within individual projects instead of informing Australian foreign policy debates. We value the opportunity to conduct research in the context of our funded projects, and one of our recommendations is for all project funding sourced from Official Development Assistance to allow for a 5 per cent research and policy advocacy weighting at the assessment stage.

In addition to such contextual research, however, we have also called for an institution, equipped with a standing fund, to improve Australia’s overall national capacity to support research by CSOs in general, including in partnership with counterparts in Indo-Pacific nations. This is because Australia lacks a purposive focus for tapping into the research expertise held in CSOs like ours. As a result, when it commissions research on new challenges or policy directions, it turns to organisations overseas, like the United Kingdom’s Overseas Development Institute, the trans-Atlantic Centre for Global Development, the US-founded Asia Foundation, and the US-based Brookings Institution, among others. We do not object to such organisations being used, but we point out that the US and UK have deliberately fostered the founding and continuation of organisations like these, and in our view, Australia should seek to emulate their success. For this reason, we have recommended that Australia invest in an organisation, equipped with a standing fund, that can both conduct research of its own and invest in CSO-led projects that address Australian foreign policy debates directly, including by advocating for specific policy outcomes.

In considering the role such an organisation could play, we also draw attention to the problem of democratic regression in the region and the question of democracy promotion. Many of Australia’s Indo-Pacific neighbours, including key development and security partners, are experiencing democratic regression. As Joshua Kurlantzick of the United States Council on Foreign Relations explains, this regression is characterised by “growing political polarisation, illiberal populism and sectarianism, the legacy of authoritarian rule, and the continuing influence of militaries in politics.”¹¹ Yet, as James Gomez of the Asia Centre points out, Australian foreign policy action and discussion alike is often concentrated in thinktanks, military exchanges, and trade and business relationships.

⁹ Brendan Quinn. “Alcohol, Other Substance Use and Related Harms Among Young People in the Solomon Islands,” Save the Children, 2016.

¹⁰ Majella Hurney. “Short Changed: The Human and Economic Cost of Child Undernutrition in Papua New Guinea.” Save the Children, 2017: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12459/pdf/png-nutrition-report.pdf>.

¹¹ Joshua Kurlantzick. “Addressing the Effect of COVID-19 on Democracy in South and Southeast Asia,” Council on Foreign Relations Discussion Paper, November 2020: https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/dpkurlantzick-front-and-back-cover_final_1.pdf.

Australia could do better to invest in deepening its relationships with CSOs in the region, including by promoting and diversifying its “Track 3” stream of international diplomacy – CSO dialogue. Following the United States and its long-term investment in its National Endowment for Democracy (NED), South Korea and Taiwan have legislated the establishment of democracy foundations, supported by state endowments. So has the European Union, which funded one of our projects listed above. Australian funding for CSOs, however, offers no such opportunities as it remains project-based, and as Gomez argues, this funding model does not permit Australian CSOs to adapt quickly enough to changing conditions in the region.¹²

Further, democratic regression is one more obstacle hindering CSOs from addressing all the other multiplying and intersecting human security challenges now besetting the Indo-Pacific, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To our thinking, democratic regression is therefore a human security challenge in its own right, especially insofar as it constrains civic space and makes it more difficult for CSOs like ours, and more importantly, our partners in Asia and the Pacific, to operate. It can also have material – and deadly – impacts for children. For example, we found on 1 April this year that at least 43 children had reportedly been killed by armed forces in Myanmar in the two months since the military coup on 1 February.¹³ That number will certainly have risen since then, and the fear, stress, and grief caused by the coup and its associated violence is having a deep impact on the mental health of millions of children in Myanmar. It is for such reasons that the importance of CSOs comes to the fore in circumstances like this coup, when donors and partners immediately react by redirecting humanitarian and development assistance away from governments and towards CSOs. They do this to help relieve the immediate humanitarian crisis by supporting us to perform our work, while avoiding channelling money to the governments in question. It is therefore critically important that CSOs be supported to survive and thrive – if we were not present on the ground, there would be no way to assist these children and their caregivers.

To support the CSO ecosystem across the Indo-Pacific region, we recommend that the institution we have called for also draws on the example of the United States NED, to better support Australian CSOs to research and understand regional political dynamics and advocate for democracy.¹⁴ CSOs need the opportunity to develop evidence bases to better argue for their role and place in society, including in ways that are sensitive and appropriate to local conditions, and not heavy-handed, ideological, or serving the interests of one major external power or the other. As we argued in our original submission, the value of CSOs lies in their mission and capacity to organise ordinary people to take action to solve their own problems, working in both cooperative and contested relationships with governments. Rights-oriented CSOs’ specifically democratic character is critical to maintaining democratic resilience and a culture of valuing democracy even in imperfect or authoritarian systems. We are important advocates for many of the norms Australia values, even as we work as important service providers where states cannot, or will not, deliver those services.

The need for CSOs like ours to actively demonstrate the important role we play is one of the reasons we established the Australian Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI) in 2015. Recently, ARLI’s 2020 learning tour led a group of five Australian Members of Parliament through Dhaka and Cox’s Bazar in

¹² “Is Asia Becoming Less Democratic?” Asia Rising Podcast, featuring James Gomez, Regional Director, Asia Centre, La Trobe University: <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/166-is-asia-becoming-less-democratic/id920247755?i=1000525702243>.

¹³ Refer to our media release of 1 April 2021: <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/myanmar-43-children-killed-armed-forces-just-two-months-coup-began>.

¹⁴ For further information, refer to the NED’s grant rules. See National Endowment for Democracy. “Apply for Grant”: <https://www.ned.org/apply-for-grant/en/>.

Bangladesh, where almost one million Rohingya refugees live in the largest refugee camp in the world after fleeing Myanmar. The tour focused on a range of issues like women’s safety, child protection, education, sanitation, health, and extreme poverty. As we outlined in our Submission, these tours are well regarded and well received for the insight they provide into the lives of millions of our regional neighbours, along with how CSOs like ours help address their challenges.

3. What measures do you take to ensure the independence, and perception of independence, of your research?

As a registered not-for-profit, a recipient of Official Development Assistance, and a participant in Australia’s international development program, Save the Children has reporting obligations, and/or is subject to rigorous accreditation, compliance, and ethics procedures instituted by:

- The Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC), which requires operational reporting to ensure that charities comply with its Governance Standards;¹⁵
- DFAT’s Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP), which requires demonstrations of capacity and performance against a range of indicators, to demonstrate the delivery of quality development outcomes and accountability to stakeholders;¹⁶ and
- The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), whose Code of Conduct requires us to meet a set of obligations both in terms of industry good practice and to maintain eligibility for participation in the ANCP.¹⁷

Our work is also subject to regular DFAT performance management and evaluation in the context of its monitoring of the broader international development program. Further, we regularly commission independent evaluations of our own work.

As such, we are rigorously evaluated and we compete for funding within competitive programs that are transparent and managed by government – just like universities, as the Group of Eight submission outlines.¹⁸ We also receive funding from international and multilateral donors including the Green Climate Fund and the Global Partnership for Education to which we are accredited, along with philanthropists and the Australian public.

In addition to these sources of funding, we have several affiliated social enterprises and a social impact fund.

Save the Children also has a stringent set of policies and processes which govern our acceptance of donations. For example, our Donation Acceptance and Refusal Policy Guidelines lists donors for which we are not prepared to accept donations from, because the products or technologies constituting their principal activities cannot be generated or used without harming children. They include:

- Tobacco growing and manufacture of tobacco products;
- Armaments manufacture or export;
- Adult entertainment, including pornography, prostitution, and men’s clubs; and
- High intensity gambling, including gaming machines and online gaming.

¹⁵ Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission. “Reporting Annually to the ACNC”: <https://www.acnc.gov.au/for-charities/manage-your-charity/obligations-acnc/reporting-annually-acnc>.

¹⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade. “Accreditation of Australian NGOs”: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/aid/who-we-work-with/ngos/ancp/accreditation>.

¹⁷ Australian Council for International Development. “Code of Conduct”: <https://acfid.asn.au/code-of-conduct>.

¹⁸ Group of Eight Australia. “Submission on Funding for Public Research into Foreign Policy Issues,” Submission #12 to this Inquiry.

Further, as several submissions to this inquiry propose for think tanks, we publish information regarding the funding we receive in documents like our annual report – previously provided to the Committee in response to Senator Jacqui Lambie’s request.

In the context of these measures that ensure our financial and political independence and transparency, we do, nevertheless, have a mission to work for the rights and interests of children and draw attention to conditions that harm them. Indeed, our work motivated the creation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and a key part of our 100-year history has been our consistency in putting children’s interests ahead of those of states.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we have pointed out that as development gains are reversed in Australia and across the Indo-Pacific, it should be more apparent than ever that strategy and foreign policy debates that narrowly focus on states are simply redundant. For this reason, it is time for Australia to better recognise our role as foreign policy partners, and better utilise our operational and analytical capability as part of Australia’s stock of Indo-Pacific knowledge.