

Message from the Secretary to all AusAID and DFAT staff

The Prime Minister today announced the Government's intention to integrate AusAID and DFAT.

The decision reflects the Government's view that bringing our operations together is the next logical step in ensuring the alignment of our aid, foreign policy and trade objectives.

We do not start from scratch in achieving this objective. Our two agencies and our staff have a strong tradition of cooperation. For many years we have worked closely together — both within the portfolio and in many of our posts — to advance Australia's international interests. We know each other's work and we value the contribution we have each made towards achieving the goals of successive Australian Governments. The Government now wants this to go much further.

Clearly, this will be a major undertaking, both for the two agencies and for all our staff. As with all significant Machinery of Government changes of this nature, it raises a wide range of questions — about how this will be done, what it will mean for our current positions and individual work practices, and how we will operate as a single agency.

We are at the beginning of what will be a lengthy and complex process which we will approach logically and strategically, in a considered and transparent way. We need to think through clearly how we can best realise the Government's vision of a single department which not only strategically aligns our foreign, trade and development objectives but also carries a pre-eminent role in guiding Australia's international engagement, and how best to structure the department to achieve these objectives.

As a first step, it is my intention to establish a full-time Task Force to oversee this major task, and to map out the best way forward. The Task Force will begin work immediately to outline the wide range of organisational, operational, and corporate/staffing issues that will need to be addressed in the months ahead. It will be led by Jennifer Rawson who has extensive experience in both DFAT and AusAID and it will include senior officers from DFAT and AusAID and draw on external input as necessary.

I expect the Task Force to consult widely and to keep colleagues in both agencies closely informed of their thinking. As a first step we will circulate a set of principles which will guide the merger. These principles will address core issues such as the level of integration, staffing policy, how best to maintain expert skills in aid policy and program management and the balance between Australian and overseas operations.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the leadership role of Peter Baxter, who has served with distinction as Director General of AusAID for the last four years. I expect Peter will continue to serve in a senior position elsewhere in Government and I thank him for the outstanding work he has done.

I look forward to working closely with Ewen McDonald who will act as Director General and with the senior leadership of AusAID and with all staff in both agencies as we carefully address this complex merger.

I know there will be many questions on your mind. I want to reassure you that we will not rush this process and we will keep you as closely informed as possible as we work our way through the many complex issues we will inevitably face. I look forward to the cooperation and understanding of all staff as we go forward.

Peter Varghese

18 September 2013