

Submission to the new DFAT International Development Policy by Children and Youth Focused INGOs

Overview of Recommendations

Plan International Australia, Childfund, Oaktree and Save the Children Australia, as child and youth focused international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), recommend that the new international development policy incorporates children and young people as a cross-cutting priority. This is in explicit recognition of the rights of the child, and the urgent and unique needs, circumstances and agency of both children and young people, particularly girls and young women. This should be achieved through both a standalone policy goal that promotes a focus on child and youth individuals, and integrated programming through a life cycle approach.

In order to implement a child and youth-focused new international development policy, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should:

1. Develop a children and youth strategy for Australia's development cooperation program in line with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, with a focus on the building blocks of adolescence, healthy environments, girls' education, ending violence against children and social protection systems for children.¹
2. Expand DFAT capability – for example through a child and youth focal point or unit – to establish and deliver development and humanitarian programs that respond to the lifecycle, and are attuned to their impact on the most marginalised children and young people.

The below asks set out the suite of measures agreed by our child and youth-specific INGOs that would progressively centre children and young people to achieve a child-focused development policy. These are core issues to be addressed through an implementation strategy:

1. Prioritise quality and inclusive education, from primary to secondary and beyond, as a key building block of a children and youth-focused development strategy. Target investment to address the barriers faced by the most marginalised children - particularly girls, children with a disability, and LGBTIQ+ young people - in accessing and staying in school.
2. Respond to the scale of violence against children and young people, both online and offline through increased investment and data collection.
3. In order to address key gaps in resourcing and programming for adolescent and young people in particular, embed a life cycle approach, recognising the significance and differences of the various developmental stages in a child's life, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. This should incorporate a focus on the diversity of children and young people and their intersectional experiences.

¹ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, opened for signature 20 November 1989, 1577 UNTS 3 (entered into force 2 September 1990).

4. Take an intergenerational approach to gender equality, with greater emphasis on educating and empowering adolescent girls, and working with adolescent boys as agents of change to address gender-based violence and discrimination.
5. Commit to empowering children and young people to safely participate in decision-making at all levels, with particular focus on intersecting forms of exclusion and discrimination that impact children's involvement in decisions, including on the grounds of gender, disability, sexuality and ethnicity. Start with including consultation with children and young people to inform the new international development policy.
6. In line with the approach taken by USAID, open up small grants – outside of the ANCP program – to fund and empower grassroots youth-run organisations in the Asia-Pacific region.
7. Recognise children and young people's right to a healthy environment, and prioritise inclusive, gender and youth responsive climate mitigation and adaptation responses and climate finance.

Introduction

Children and young people are critical to the development and ongoing security and stability of the region. Yet evidence is mounting that they have paid dearly for the pandemic's intersecting impacts on health, education, nutrition, and household budgets,² along with the negative coping mechanisms with which families and communities can respond. Despite this, there is no clear picture of investment and impact for children and young people within Australia's existing development policy. There is no clear strategy for protecting and empowering children through our development cooperation program, children are not currently recognised as a distinct vulnerable group in their own right. Without a clear plan, we risk missing the mark for millions in the Asia-Pacific, and limiting progress to the SDGs.

Through Australia's past development efforts, child and youth-focused INGOs have learnt that **children and young people are far too easily sidelined**. This has been detrimental to progressive realisation of the SDGs and must be remedied. **They are important stakeholders – both as a participant in projects and programming, and as active agents to achieving the SDGs**. In fact, girls aged 10 have been recognised as the key group whose potential, if unlocked, will create the economic and social conditions needed to achieve the SDGs.³

Children and young people were overlooked in the COVID-19 response, and yet are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, conflict and climate – the mega trends of this era. These trends are also exacerbating existing gender inequalities, which are particularly acute for young women and girls, who already face distinct risks of harm such as gender-based violence, being pulled out of school, child, early and forced marriage and early pregnancy.⁴ Many of Australia's goals for advancing gender equality are not possible unless girls are empowered in their adolescence, yet they are consistently underserved in Australia's gender equality programs, with less than five per cent of funding going towards programs that directly target adolescent girls.⁵

² World Bank (2022) *Poverty and Shared Prosperity*, retrieved from: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/37739>

³ UNFPA (2016) *State of the World Population Report*, retrieved from: <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/state-world-population-2016>

⁴ Plan International (2018) *Half a Billion Reasons*, retrieved from: <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/half-a-billion-reasons/>

⁵ Plan International (2022) *Girls to the Front: Time for foreign aid to see adolescent girls*, retrieved from: <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/girls-to-the-front-time-for-foreign-aid-to-see-adolescent-girls/>

Evidence suggests that the Asia Pacific is not on track to achieve 11 child-focused indicators of the SDGs. Even more evidence suggests Australia's investment in children is least generous in absolute terms when compared with similar countries – Sweden, UK, Norway, and Canada – with critical work such as ending violence against children underfunded and not prioritised as pressure on public ODA grants grow.⁶

Without a means to direct, track and measure outcomes and impact for children, communicating the composite picture of development for most vulnerable children to the broader Australian community is decidedly difficult.

What is a Child and Youth-Focused International Development Policy?

For the new international development policy to be truly inclusive, it must be adequately child and youth-focused. This means childhood and adolescence (across the lifecycle) and child and youth rights are understood and are visible in the new policy. It also requires a systematic way of understanding and addressing the development needs of children and young people in the Asia-Pacific region, and transparent and measured investment in children and young people. There are practical steps the Australian Government can take to put the rights of children and young people at the centre of the new international development policy, and prioritise key strategic mechanisms to ensure implementation:

1. Create a development policy that prioritises and centres children and young people through rights-based and transformative approaches across the lifecycle.

Child and youth focused INGOs recommend the new international development policy be centred on evidenced rights-based and transformative approaches for children and young people, aligned with Australia's obligations as a signatory to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. This would support dedicated child and youth focused initiatives but also consider them as a key cross cutting issue across all programming, alongside gender and disability mainstreaming.

This requires clear commitments, which could be achieved through a child and youth specific strategy, that:

- Identifies outcomes for children and young people, alongside targeted thematic priorities;
- Sets out clear means of measurement to track progress;
- Includes specific investment; and
- Commits to increasing technical expertise and capacity from DFAT to implement the strategy and investment.

2. Develop a children and youth strategy for Australia's development cooperation program.

A children and youth strategy should be adopted in Australia's development strategy, as has been the case in other leading aid agencies.⁷ A children and youth strategy would focus on the areas of greatest need for protecting, promoting and fulfilling child and youth rights, and setting a clear pathway to achieving the SDGs. Key themes should

⁶ World Vision Australia (2020) *NextGen Aid: Report Card on Children and Australian Aid*, retrieved from: https://www.worldvision.com.au/docs/default-source/publications/children/world-vision-nextgen-aid-report-card-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=2ab1b63c_2

⁷ Oaktree & ACFID (2016) *Practice Note: Youth Participation & Development*, retrieved from: https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource_document/ACFID%20Practice%20Note%20-%20Youth%20Participation%20in%20Development%20FINAL.pdf

include a greater emphasis on adolescents and young people – particularly young women – in the development program; education; ending violence against children including online harm; intergenerational approaches to gender equality and leadership for young women and girls; healthy environments and social protection.

The children and youth strategy should be guided by dedicated efforts, with child and youth metrics, targets and benchmarks. This enhanced capability should allow for the assessment and tracking of the overall wellbeing of children in Australia's priority countries and crisis settings, to ensure children's needs are identified and addressed. It should also engage young people at the grassroots as active agents and leaders in development programs.

With this approach, Australia would shift into greater strategic alignment with regional and international standards and donors. USAID ensures children's needs are met through their 'Child in Adversity' approach, Youth in Development Policy, and its Adolescent Girl Strategy, and further, has worked to implement a small grants program for youth-led movements. MFAT has delivered a children and youth strategy and is pursuing systems of corresponding measurement – which has changed the way their agency considers children across the board. FCDO (formerly DFID) has established a Youth Agenda and a Child Rights Unit and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community have outlined their Pacific Youth Development Framework. Children in All Policies 2030 was launched in April 2021 with the support of the WHO, UNICEF and The Lancet, to ensure children are prioritised in sustainable development and nations can achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.⁸ Multiple donors and agencies, including the European Union, UNICEF and the World Bank have developed child impact assessment tools to ensure their aid investments are sensitive to the needs of children, and to assess the potential impact of development projects on children and adolescents.

Priority issues to be addressed by an Australian strategy should include:

Quality and Inclusive Education

Education is a catalytic investment – it improves the intergenerational wellbeing of communities, lifts children and their families out of poverty, and it is transformative when it comes to progress on gender equality. However, the impact of crises such as armed conflict, food insecurity, COVID-19 and climate-related disasters on children and girls' education threatens to undo the years of progress and hard-won gains that Australia's aid and diplomacy efforts have achieved for poverty alleviation and gender equality, especially in the Asia Pacific region.

Worldwide, 130 million girls⁹ – 15% of all girls under 18 – were already out of school before the COVID-19 pandemic, a situation that has only worsened over the last two years. It is estimated that every seventh girl globally – 222 million in total – was unable to access remote learning programs when schools were closed due to COVID-19,¹⁰ with at least 20 million at risk of not returning to secondary school at all.¹¹

⁸ See Children In All Policies 2030: <https://cap-2030.org/>

⁹ See UNICEF (2021) *The State of the World's Children 2021: On my mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*, retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/media/114636/file/SOWC-2021-full-report-English.pdf>. The global population of U18 (all children) is 2,353,672,000 --> 2.5 billion. The total number of U5 children is 677,942,000 --> 678 million. Total number of school aged children would be around 1,675,730,000 worldwide --> 1.676 billion. Let's say half (837,865 million) are girls. If 130 million girls worldwide were out of school prior to the pandemic, this is 15.5%.

¹⁰ UNICEF (2020) *COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies*, retrieved from: https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/COVID-19-Remote-Learning-Factsheet_English_2020.pdf

¹¹ UNESCO, UN Children's Fund, Plan International, UNGEI, Malala Fund (2020) *Building back equal: girls back to school guide*, retrieved from: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374094>

Quality and inclusive education, particularly for girls and those children most marginalised, should be a central pillar of a child focused development policy and implementation strategy.

Ending violence against children

The link between child safety and global development is recognised in the SDGs as a pre-condition for global development. Safe and healthy development throughout childhood and into the second decade is the bedrock for sustained economic and social development. But violence against children weakens the foundations of progress and sustainable development, as it “diverts billions of dollars from social spending, slows economic development and erodes nations’ human and social capital”.¹²

At least three out of every four of the world’s children – 1.7 billion – have experienced violence, and it is particularly prevalent in the Pacific. Globally, levels of physical, emotional, and sexual violence as well as neglect, are exceptionally high, and have only worsened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ The rise and rise of digital technology, whilst providing a plethora of opportunities to children and young people alike, is also making children more susceptible to harm both offline and online, with children who are already vulnerable at much greater risk of harm.

Strategic investment to end violence against children requires a greater depth of partnerships in the region in order to address a key social challenge that knows no boundaries. The benefits of this collaboration are clear: healthy and happy children are more likely to become educated, healthy, and happy adults ready to participate actively in their communities. Upholding children’s right to live free from violence, will not only protect children now, but set them up for fulfilling lives in adulthood.

Addressing the development gap on adolescence

With over 50% of the global population under the age of thirty, the world today has the largest ever generation of young people. This youth population is currently concentrated in the Global South – 9 out of 10 young people live in majority world countries. There are over 500 million adolescent girls aged 10-19 living in developing countries, and over half are in the Asia Pacific region. In our Pacific neighbourhood, over half of the region’s total population of 10 million is under the age of twenty-five.

Our closest neighbours are coping with the joint effects of an unprecedented youth boom, poor economic conditions that have exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and protracted crisis and climate change. As a result, the rights of adolescent girls and gender diverse young people in particular have seen devastating setbacks.

Only by meaningful involvement and increased focus on the key demographic at the intersection of these challenges can we co-create the best solutions to our regional challenges. Investing in children and young people, particularly adolescent girls, is not only a moral imperative, but with adequate support and investment in the capabilities and skills of young people, the booming youth population across the Pacific has the potential to lead positive outcomes in

¹² UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (2015) *Why ending violence against children is essential to sustainable development*, retrieved from: https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/why_ending_vac_is_essential_for_development_viewpoint

¹³ Save the Children (2020) *Protect a Generation: The impact of COVID-19 on children’s lives*, retrieved from: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/protect-generation-impact-covid-19-childrens-lives/>

sustainable development. It is clear that any effective Australian international development strategy must adequately address the challenges and opportunities presented by the youth bulge in our region.

The right to a healthy environment

An estimated 1 billion children – nearly half the world's 2.2 billion children – live in one of the 33 countries classified as “extremely high-risk” for climate and environmental shocks, with a high vulnerability due to inadequate essential services and wider climate resilience measures.¹⁴ The climate crisis is intensifying gender inequalities, such as increasing the risk of girls' dropping out of school – which is often permanent. If current trends continue, by 2025, climate change will have contributed to at least 12.5 million girls each year not completing school, further entrenching existing gender gaps in education and prevent them from gaining the necessary knowledge and skills for climate adaptation, disaster risk resilience, leadership and secure livelihoods.¹⁵

Children and youth, especially girls and young women, are among the most impacted by climate change despite contributing the least to the climate crisis; however, all around the world, they consistently tell us they want to be part of the solutions that will address the problems and help their communities and the world.

A child focused development policy and implementation strategy must recognise children and young people's right to a healthy environment, and prioritise inclusive, gender and youth-responsive climate mitigation and adaptation responses. A particular focus on working with girls and young women to develop their technical and leadership skills in climate resilience and adaptation should also be prioritised, as girls' education and leadership can play a catalytic role in fighting climate change; for example, supporting girls to develop the skills to lead a low carbon economy and play a critical role in disaster risk reduction and responses.¹⁶

Social protection

Social protection systems are critical to addressing child poverty and building children's human capital while also building the forms of state capacity that enable developing nations to focus more attention on children and their needs.¹⁷ However, surveys seeking to understand the impact and experience of COVID-19 indicate that many Pacific families remain reliant on informal and customary mutual help traditions, with more than 60% of Solomon Islanders having accessed financial and non-financial support from friends and family, churches, or community-based organisations during the course of the pandemic.¹⁸ Of the 41 per cent of households who received some form of

¹⁴ UNICEF (2021) *The climate crisis is a child rights crisis*, retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>

¹⁵ Malala Fund (2021) *A greener, fairer future: Why leaders need to invest in climate and girls' education*, retrieved from: https://assets.ctfassets.net/0oan5gk9rqbh/OFqutQPKIFoi5IfY2iwFC/6b2fffd2c893ebdebee60f93be814299/MalalaFund_GirlsEducation_ClimateReport.pdf

¹⁶ Plan International (2021) *Raising Our Voice: Funding Climate Education and Youth Leadership in SE Asia and the Pacific*, retrieved from: <https://www.plan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/raising-our-voice.pdf>

¹⁷ See also Save the Children (2020) *Strengthening Australia's Relationships with Countries in the Pacific Region*, Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade, retrieved from: <https://devpolicy.org/coalition-starts-to-reverse-aid-cuts-20210121/>; Save the Children (2020) *Activating Greater Trade and Investment with Pacific Island Countries* Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence & Trade, retrieved from: <https://devpolicy.org/coalition-starts-to-reverse-aid-cuts-20210121/>

¹⁸ World Bank (2020) *Solomon Islands High Frequency Phone Survey On COVID-19: Results from Round 1*, retrieved from: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/167041607012187892/pdf/Solomon-Islands-High-Frequency-Survey-on-COVID-19-First-Round-Results.pdf>



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assistance in PNG, the vast majority came from informal sources.¹⁹ Less than five per cent of households in PNG and 11.5 percent of households in the Solomon Islands received direct government assistance.²⁰

In recognition that these networks are being pushed to their limits, the Australian Government has already introduced measures to strengthen our region's formal social protection systems and capabilities. However, there is a need to ensure that ongoing social protection measures centre the rights and wellbeing of children in order to mitigate lifelong impacts on their health, education and prospects. This should be achieved through piloting universal child benefit payments to ensure universal social protection coverage for all children aged under 10 years (plus additional disability benefit payments for children and adults), with ongoing costs to be borne in the medium to long term by both national governments and donors, albeit with the assistance of an initial investment by a child- and social infrastructure-oriented Australian development cooperation program.

Further Consultation: Contact Details

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¹⁹ World Bank (2020) *Papua New Guinea High Frequency Phone Survey On COVID-19: Results from Round 1*, retrieved from: <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/459511607010120078/pdf/Papua-New-Guinea-High-Frequency-Survey-on-COVID-19-First-Round-Results.pdf>

²⁰ World Bank, *ibid*, 2020.