

January 31st, 2011

Mr Sandy Hollway, AO
Chair
Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness
GPO Box 887
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

By email: submissions@aidreview.gov.au

Submission

Dear Mr Hollway,

On behalf of Palms Australia, I would like to make the following submission.

Palms Australia is an international development volunteering agency which has operated for 50 years, including 23 years with support from AusAID (1983-2005). Since 1961, Palms Australia volunteers have provided over \$200million in-kind value to our partner organisations. Palms Australia has recently submitted an application to AusAID for renewed funding and looks forward to an ongoing relationship.

First and foremost, let it be known that **Palms Australia supports the proposed growth in the Australian Aid** program as a proportion of Australia's budget to 0.5% by 2015, and hopes the government and public service take seriously the call to reach 0.7% first made by the UN in 1970¹. Any suggestions about the potential for increased aid effectiveness, made subsequent to this statement, should not be taken to suggest that overseas aid should not be a significant and increasing part of the federal budget.

It is important that doubling the dollar value of the aid program does not simply involve doubling the amounts currently allocated. Small non-government organisations (NGOs) often achieve effective outcomes despite economies of scale, because of the commitment of their limited staff who know the value of each fundraised dollar. Unfortunately, funding from large agencies such as AusAID is often out of reach. Without seeking the same strict accreditation standards, with attendant increased workload, required of World Vision, Oxfam, Caritas and others, **AusAID should investigate ways of supporting smaller NGOs in their work**, both to continue their programs and to assist them meet the accepted standards in international development work. The process of accreditation which Palms Australia underwent in 2002-2004, improved both Palms' ability to provide volunteers for

¹ <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/press/07.htm>

sustainable development and AusAID's understanding of the nuances of volunteer-sending as a mode of development assistance.

A greater proportion of Australia's aid budget should be given through NGOs, big and small. Too much of Australia's aid is tendered out to private corporations or is in the form of "technical assistance. Tendering risks promoting the achievement of short-term outcomes with limited long-term monitoring of effectiveness. The ongoing relationship NGOs have with local communities, beyond the project cycle, make it possible to ensure the benefits of development are sustainable and long-term. Development that does not achieve this is neither effective, nor good value for money. The value NGOs provide is increased as a result of the generosity of their volunteers and supporters.

The tendering model reduces NGOs to "service providers" and disregards the expertise they bring to development design, implementation and evaluation. While safeguards must be in place, overly bureaucratic processes take time away from other aspects of program management and may encourage double-speak and mistrust. Diversity in development programs is essential and a "template" approach to project assessment should be avoided. While this might prove challenging as AusAID grows towards 2015, face-to-face time with NGO representatives would prove more productive in ensuring effective and efficient use of funds than an arms-length application and reporting process. The development of relationships in which AusAID employees see their role as assisting, rather than to assessing NGOs, will improve communication in all directions and increase aid effectiveness.

As part of efforts to improve AusAID's external relations, **continuity within AusAID sections must be sought.** The seemingly continual flux in job titles and role descriptions makes it difficult for outsiders to maintain a consistent line of contact in AusAID, something which surely would increase effectiveness. The author is unsure of the best way of achieving this, short of requiring an employee to spend at least a year in a position before allowing internal advancement, but hopes the review panel considers methods to enhance consistency and continuity.

Palms Australia welcomes the recently foreshadowed move away from highly-paid consultant advisors². Feedback from our overseas partners indicates that the gross discrepancy between the salaries of these highly paid consultants and local people is often widely mocked and reflects poorly on AusAID and Australia. While at times a particular salary might be required to obtain the specialist skills required, Palms' experience shows that volunteers working alongside local counterparts can be equally or more effective. As a point of comparison, the price of one such advisor³ could have funded the entire program of Palms Australia, which in 2009-10 sustained 35 volunteers providing 303 months of skilled, professional volunteer service.

Volunteering must remain an essential part of AusAID's program. The recent creation of a separate Volunteers Section and the announcement of a Pilot Volunteer Fund, separate from the Core Partner funding, is welcomed and it is hoped that the

² <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/makediff/adviser-review.cfm>

³ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/aid-workers-earning-more-than-the-prime-minister/story-e6frg6nf-1225831568482>

value of long-term volunteering, with appropriate preparation, in particular can be noted. Over 50 years Palms Volunteers have given over \$200million in value to our partner communities. This includes:

- Educating over 65,000 students and 1,600 teachers;
- Providing over 120,000 days primary health services, including mentoring local nurses, doctors and health administrators;
- Mentoring over 2,000 in trades and agriculture; and
- Training over 700 staff in administration of local projects and services.

Each Palms volunteer was present for an average of two years, meaning they had an enhanced understanding of the local context, developed relationships beyond a patronising and disempowering giver-receiver model and had sufficient time to exchange skills with their local counterparts to the betterment of all parties. These outcomes highlight the value of investing in longer-term volunteers. **This is exactly the sort of development we hope the review panel will encourage.**

While highlighting that the skills volunteers themselves develop in the field significantly benefit Australia, Palms Australia would argue finally that the terms “Australia’s national interest” should be removed from all documents relating to the purpose of our international development programs. We should not be afraid to speak of justice and equality in these documents. **AusAID should be allowed to be a passionate advocate for global justice** without the requirement that it apologise for our commitment to poverty reduction by retreating to “enlightened self-interest”. Australia has a proud history of egalitarianism and this should not be limited to our own borders. Though the benefits may be interconnected, military and trade concerns should be kept separate from our aid program. To this end, AusAID should be removed from the purview of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and should be its own department with a Cabinet-level Minister.

Yours sincerely,

Brendan Joyce
Assistant Director