

Australia urged to use aid reset to focus on the world's most vulnerable

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Almost 60 per cent of Australians want the nation's aid budget to primarily serve those most in need, rather than focusing on Australia's own interests

Aid groups say the Morrison government's revamp of the foreign aid program must focus on the needs of the world's most vulnerable people while also deepening Australia's relationships in the Indo-Pacific.

After it was [flagged last month](#), the government officially announced on Tuesday it was preparing a new international development policy, which will be informed by an expert panel and public submissions.

Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne said Australia was committed to supporting its developing country partners and creating sustainable outcomes for the region.

"The new policy will reflect Australian values, including our commitment to human dignity, gender equality and inclusive development, and our commitment to poverty reduction and helping those impacted by natural and manmade disasters," Payne said.

Building on the [Foreign Policy White Paper 2017](#), the policy is expected to focus on leveraging private sector investment and expanding opportunities for Pacific workers to fill workforce gaps in regional Australia.

To mark the review announcement, the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) released polling showing that the public wants aid money to serve the world's poorest people.

The YouGov poll found that 59 per cent of Australians expected the nation's aid budget to primarily serve those most in need, compared to 34 per cent of people who said it should primarily serve Australia's interests. The remaining seven per cent said they did not know.

ACFID CEO Marc Purcell said prioritising the poorest and most marginalised people should be the foundation stone of Australia's \$4 billion aid program.

"The Australian people have a long tradition of helping the most vulnerable and giving everyone a fair-go. This should be mirrored in the purpose of the government's new policy," Purcell said.

"Setting a target for our assistance to reach the bottom 40 per cent of people by income in poor countries would allow the government to assess and communicate impact against a measurement the public want to see."

Purcell said by taking this approach, Australia could help build a "more open, peaceful and stable region from the ground-up".

Micah Australia's executive director Tim Costello added that the aid review offered the chance to canvass Australia's role in the world.

"The opportunity to review aid isn't simply about the Pacific or about dollars and figures, it's also about soft diplomacy and deepening our relationships in the Indo-Pacific," Costello said.

"This review will be a consideration for the whole of our nation – our security, our diplomacy, our compassion and humanitarian responsibilities and our hard and soft power. All of these factors should be looked at in the review."

Plan International Australia (PIA) meanwhile has urged the government not to overlook girls in its review.

PIA CEO Susanne Legena said Australia needed to reaffirm its strong commitment to advancing gender equality through its aid program.

She noted the multi-agency [Unseen and Unsafe](#) report, launched in July this year, that found one in four adolescent girls in the Pacific experienced physical violence, while one in 10 experienced sexual violence.

“Thanks to a more strategic focus on gender equality in Australia’s aid program since 2014, Australia has shaped a role for itself globally as an advocate and champion for the rights of women and girls,” Legena said.

“Our Pacific neighbours have made important progress in advancing women’s and girls’ rights, but they continue to face significant challenges in achieving gender equality.

“We expect that gender equality and a stronger focus on girls will be a foundational part of the new strategy as Australia continues to strengthen its role as a champion for women and girls globally into the future.”

Australia’s aid budget is [currently the least generous it has ever been](#), equal to 0.21 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) in 2019/20, and dropping to 0.19 per cent in 2021-22.

The government is calling for written submissions on the review by 31 January 2020. More information can be found [here](#).



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