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### **Tim Costello: Pacific Step Up Is Pinching Money from the Poor in Asia**

Tim Costello today said it was clear Australia had backed down from its responsibilities in Southeast Asia.

“I’ve said from the start the Pacific Step Up should not come at the cost of stepping down elsewhere in the world but sadly, it already has.”

“We are blessed to be a blessing, not just steal the crumbs from the table of the poor in Southeast Asia, this is not worthy of Australia.”

Figures from Senate Estimates reveal that Aid has been cut to Southeast Asian countries by 42 per cent, while the Pacific has been the only region to have a boost in aid in six years.

Aid in Cambodia was down 33 per cent, Laos was cut 41 per cent, and The Philippines by 44 per cent.

Mr Costello said it did not make sense to cut funding to Southeast Asia from both a humanitarian and security sense.

“Australia needs strong trading partners, reliable allies and close relationships in our immediate region.

"Aid plays an important role in creating soft power and we are now seeing the Defence and security sector in Australia speak up and say, ‘We have lost influence, we have lost soft power’.

"I absolutely support the Pacific Step Up, Micah has been meeting with the Prime Minister and Pacific Church leaders about that, but neglecting our humanitarian responsibilities elsewhere in the world, is neither the right thing, nor the smart thing to do.

“Like many other Australians, I’ve been to these countries now experiencing big cuts – Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam – and while development is coming to a select few in the big cities and tourist hubs, poverty is still rife and a daily part of many lives.”

Mr Costello said the Australian government should rebuild the aid budget.

“The Pacific Step Up should not be a burden carried squarely on the shoulders of an already diminished aid budget.

“Yes, bushfire and drought are realities we must face in our nation, but other nations like the UK and Scandanavia have kept the promise to world’s poor of 0.7% GNI – our aid budget is at we are 0.21% and we have awarded ourselves a leave pass.

“The Aid review represents a chance for this government to re-engage with Southeast Asia and reconsider our responsibilities in this region.”

“Micah’s submission to the review made clear that emerging global threats will need collective global effort in our region and beyond. We are eager to work with the government to ensure Australia’s aid budget is both strategic and moral.

“We believe we can have both – a principled approach to Australian aid that is also in the national interest.”

**ENDS**

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Micah Australia is a coalition of Australia's largest Christian non-government organisations raising a powerful voice for justice and a world free from poverty.

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