

A responsive agenda for New Zealand's international development efforts

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New Zealand goes to the polls on 23 September, presenting a time of opportunity for policy renewal. What would a post-election agenda for New Zealand's international development cooperation efforts look like? What is an appropriate response to the evolving global context, what New Zealanders want, and what we know works?

The current National Party-led government's core foreign policy priority is to boost New Zealand exports. While there are other foci, such as security and global rules, trade dominates New Zealand's foreign policy. New Zealand's Official Development Assistance (ODA) is aligned with efforts to advertise, brand and sell New Zealand across the world. This approach undermines quality development cooperation efforts. We now have a mediocre aid programme, in a world where the challenges for global prosperity and peace demand more of New Zealand.

We can do better. Our government needs to do better. As a country of open hearts and open minds ([NZ Story](#), our national brand), [approximately 70%](#) of Kiwis think their ODA should help the poor. When [surveyed in 2015](#), key aid programme stakeholders, including the private sector, believed not enough ODA was focused on poverty. So what would a responsive agenda in our development cooperation look like?

A responsive approach to New Zealand in the world would see our foreign policy more carefully balance New Zealand's close and distant interests overseas (see [here](#) for description). Of course, New Zealand's foreign policy should aim to achieve domestic benefits over the short-term (close interests), such as helping our exporters through negotiating trade agreements. Yet, our future New Zealand benefits from a peaceful and prosperous world. A balanced foreign policy (indeed, a sensible one) would ensure the meagre amount we give in ODA would focus only on achieving New Zealand's distant interests: spending every ODA dollar in the best way possible to help poorer countries and their people to flourish.

Governments like to use ODA as a flexible fund to help whatever foreign policy goals are most pressing at any point in time, in any particular part of the world. Yet, this trades away our ability to engage in long-term development cooperation efforts, which we know is key to successful outcomes in partner countries. This undermines our efforts to contribute to a future world that New Zealand benefits from. To prevent this, we need to legislate for ODA expenditure (see [here](#)), requiring all ODA to achieve social, environmental and economic progress for the poorest people in partner countries. This then means any government who wishes to repeal this legislation has to explain itself to parliament, not merely make a closed-door decision in Cabinet.

We need to right the one-legged stool our aid programme has become. By 2018, [45% of the aid programme](#) (p. 7) will be spent on the economic and productive sectors. This excludes the whopping amount to be spent on tertiary [scholarships – almost 10%](#) (p. 9) of the entire aid programme. Scholarships are useful for New Zealand's educational exports and diplomacy efforts, but have contentious development outcomes. Neglecting the social and environmental aspects of sustainable development in partner countries ignores fundamental facts about human existence. We are not merely economic beings, but have significant social needs, and these are pronounced in poorer countries. Not only climate change, but also environmental resource depletion, threaten our ability to thrive and survive on this planet. Side-stepping social and environmental needs in our development cooperation means our ODA is poorly spent.

Alongside the prioritisation of New Zealand's marketing needs in ODA decision-making, the lop-sided focus on economic development leads to inefficient and ineffective ODA decision-making. One of the clearest lessons learned from almost 70 years of global development cooperation efforts is that the partner country

context is the paramount consideration when making ODA decisions. ODA is a scarce resource and one we cannot afford to squander in poor decision-making that disregards what we know about what works. A responsive agenda would see ODA decisions made based first and foremost on country context, with published country plans for transparency.

Once the fundamental principles for quality development cooperation are in place, it is time New Zealand gave more. We are quite simply miserly, have been since the mid-1970s and are trending towards our [lowest ODA amounts ever](#). This, at a time when we need to be adding extra on top of ODA to respond to climate change, and when the need for collective action on global issues, such as antimicrobial resistance, was never greater. A responsive agenda would see a return to a timeframe to increase our ODA to at least 0.5% of GNI.

Alongside this, New Zealand needs to boost its investment in the multilateral system. On average [DAC donors provide 33%](#) of their ODA to and through multilaterals. New Zealand [currently sits](#) at less than 20% and historically we haven't done much better. New Zealand likes to think of itself as a constructive voice in global development issues, but does not back this with the funding or depth of engagement it could.

While the aid programme's evaluation mechanisms have improved markedly over the past years, meaningful accountability and learning do not appear to be prioritised systematically throughout the Ministry. While an internal commitment to building a culture of learning and quality improvement is essential (and already exists in pockets in the Ministry), external scrutiny is also crucial. This is particularly so to ensure attention to climate change, human rights, and gender and environmental issues. A parliamentary function, such as the UK's [Independent Commission for Aid Impact](#), could be considered.

The longer we leave it, the further behind New Zealand gets. Surely a land of open hearts and open minds can do better. I'll be watching for [political party election manifestos and assessing them against the criteria above](#). I hope you will too. A commitment to eliminating poverty in its broadest sense demands this of us.

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