

Australia the good neighbour

Our role in the Pacific region:

THE GREENS.

The Australian Greens
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The Australian Greens believe that Australia has an important role to play as one of the wealthiest and most stable nations in the Pacific region. The developing nations of the Pacific region are Australia's nearest neighbours and Australia has a great responsibility to provide greater funding and support to create better health, educational and humanitarian opportunities and outcomes in these countries.

The Greens are proposing a package of policy initiatives to improve health and well-being of those living in developing nations in the region:

- Leading the way on asylum seekers and refugees
- Increase total overseas development aid to 0.7% of GDP by 2012
- Increased funding to improve maternal health and reduce the rate of maternal deaths
- Extend funding for education in the region
- Create a new category of humanitarian immigration entrants – permanent residence for Pacific Islanders displaced by climate change
- Provide Australia's fair share to the Global Climate Adaptation Fund
- Fairer Fair Trade Agreements for the Pacific

Leading the way on asylum seekers and refugees in our region

Worldwide an increasing number of refugees, including millions of women and children, are fleeing their homelands in fear of persecution. In 2009, Australia received just 0.5% of the 1.18 million new asylum applications for that year.¹

(This figure ranks Australia 16th in the world among industrialised countries who receive claims for asylum.)

For the Pacific region nations to work together effectively to address the number of asylum seekers in our region, it is critical that the rights of refugees are recognised or protected within our region. Australia must work to ensure that all countries immediately sign the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees to better ensure that human rights are upheld.

Australia must actively engage and work with our Pacific neighbours to combat people smuggling, by providing a real and humane solution – not the Pacific solution, not the Indonesian solution, not the Timor solution.

As one of the wealthiest countries in our region, Australia must take a leading role in helping to:

- assess people's claims quickly;
- ensure that those in need of protection are resettled swiftly; and
- ensure that for those that are not found to be refugees, they are returned safely.

For Australia to play a leading role in the region we must host processing claims on the Australian mainland, where the federal government can provide ready and appropriate access to essential resources and services, and protect the rights of vulnerable asylum-seekers.

It is generally agreed that the people smuggling trade exploits and puts at great risk vulnerable individuals who are in a desperate situation. The Greens differ in wanting Australia to take a key role in combating the global rise in the numbers of asylum seekers fleeing their homelands in search of protection.

Overseas Development Assistance

Developed nations have long recognised the need to provide official development aid (ODA) to developing nations. The figure of 0.7% of GDP as a target developed nations should aim for was first made back in 1970. Such a commitment has been subsequently re-affirmed as a vital target to meet the Millennium Development Goals to end poverty and hunger, ensure universal education and gender equity, and improve child and maternal health. Increased international aid is also a key factor in addressing global population growth.

¹ - UNHCR's 2009 Global Trends <http://www.unhcr.org/4c11f0be9.html>

The United Nations has urged countries to commit to the 0.7% target by 2015, the date for achieving the Millennium Goals. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands met this target several years ago and the new UK Government has a target to meet it by 2013². The Australian Government has only committed to increase ODA to 0.5% by 2015 and it is currently at 0.33%.

The Australian Greens believe that as a wealthy nation, Australia has a responsibility to increase its ODA budget to 0.7% before 2015

We can ensure Australia plays its role in meeting the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals by immediately increasing our ODA to 0.5% (at an estimated cost of \$2.620bn in 2010-11) and the further increasing it to 0.7% in 2011-12 (estimated cost of \$3.324bn).

In the 2010 / 11 budget 37.9% of the Overseas Development Assistance budget was spent in PNG and the Pacific³. The Greens believe this proportion is too low and will investigate increasing this amount in consultation with Pacific Island nations.

Measures to improve maternal health

Each year, 34,000 mothers and over 400,000 children under the age of five die in our immediate region⁴. The mothers generally die from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, the children from largely preventable causes, including poor neonatal care, diarrhoea, pneumonia, malaria and malnutrition.⁵ Papua New Guinea, the recipient of the largest proportion of Australia's aid funding, has the worst rate of maternal death in the Pacific.⁶ These shocking figures highlight the need for Australia to increase its efforts to address this situation. The Australian Greens are proposing that greater funding to train health workers and midwives to work directly with families will assist the Pacific nations to curb the maternal death rate.

Australia currently spends just 16 percent of its aid budget on health.⁷ In comparison, Ireland spends 34 percent, the United States spends 32 percent, and Canada 30 percent.

With only five years remaining in the fifteen-year Millennium Development Goals action plan to tackle degrading poverty, it is goal number 5, improving maternal health that has made the least progress, and is the least likely to be achieved.

In order for Australia to commit to its fair share of long-term and predictable aid towards health, the Australian Greens are calling for a doubling of our current aid spending on health from 16 percent of total official development assistance (\$600m)⁸ to at least 20 percent (\$1200m).⁹

Sharing our educational expertise

Australia has an excellent higher education and vocational education and training system. Scholarships for international students studying in our higher educational institutions are one way that a developed nation such as Australia can provide support to developing communities and build more neighbourly ties between nations and people. Currently the Australian Government provides a range of scholarships through its Australia Awards.

2 - OECD, 2010

3 - ACFID, 2010

4 - Making Maternal Health Matter: Report of the New Zealand Parliamentarians' Group on Population and Development: Open hearing on Maternal Health In the Pacific, September 2009

5 - Reducing maternal, newborn and child deaths in the Asia Pacific: strategies that work The Nossal Institute for Global Health and World Vision 2009 http://www.worldvision.com.au/Libraries/3_3_1_Aid_Trade_and_MDGs_PDF_reports/Reducing_maternal_newborn_and_child_deaths_in_the_AsianPacific_Strategies_that_work.sflb.ashx Investing in maternal and child health: the case for Asia and the Pacific, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Network for Asia and the Pacific WHO 2009 <http://www.who.int/pmnch/topics/investinginhealth.pdf>

6 - http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2008/MDG_Report_2008_En.pdf#page=27

7 - The Greens policy calls for the total level of Australian overseas aid to be increased to a minimum of 0.7% of GNP (ie. GNI) by 2010, as mandated by the United Nations, with provision for greater increases should natural disasters or conflicts requiring major humanitarian interventions occur (<http://greens.org.au/node/789>) This figure is for health spending in our region.

8 - 2009/10 Budget expenditure

9 - World Vision Policy recommendations on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health November 2009

Of particular importance are the Australian Development Scholarships and Regional Development Scholarships targeted at our broader regional neighbours. AusAid provides around 1000 of these scholarships a year¹⁰. This program has many benefits but there is concern that Australia's current aid program focuses too heavily on this type of support which can result in trained student joining the global market for professionals rather than taking these skills back home. The Australian National Audit Office review of Australian aid to tertiary education which is currently underway would be expected to consider these issues.

The Greens propose that greater support is provided for tertiary institutions in Pacific nations and a range of educational support for key areas tailored to the needs in each country, in addition to the tertiary scholarship program. For example training midwives in developing countries in non-university based programs with some complimentary scholarships to Australia for midwifery teachers and leaders. Greater funding should also be made available for secondary education, where there has been less development assistance in the past.

A new category of humanitarian immigration entrants – permanent residence for the Pacific Islanders displaced by climate change

Australia has great responsibility to assist the developing island nations in the Pacific region to deal with the significant environmental effects of climate change. As the wealthiest nation in the region, and the highest per capita greenhouse gas emitter in the world, the Greens believe Australia has a moral obligation as well as our responsibilities as a global citizen to address the human consequences of the changing climate in the Pacific. There is a tragic irony that the people least responsible for creating climate change will be the most adversely affected by it. Nowhere is this more obvious than the situation facing the Pacific Island countries. While these island states have effectively made no contribution to climate change, they will be the first to suffer its most devastating consequences.

The Greens believe that Australia needs to be a good neighbour by responding in three ways:

- Australia leading the way in reducing greenhouse gas emissions to limit the severity of climate change,
- Australia providing new funding assistance for adaptation, and
- Creating migration opportunities for Pacific Islanders who have been displaced by climate change or are at risk of displacement.

The impact of sea level rise, flooding and storm surges will result in a range of challenges for island nations, including loss of fresh water supplies, less land for food production, reduction in fishing supplies, increasing outbreaks of disease and loss of tourism income. Over the coming decades, it is likely that some of the most vulnerable island communities will be forced to migrate as their homelands become uninhabitable.

The Greens acknowledge the preference of Pacific Island people to remain in their traditional homelands where possible. However given the likelihood that some places will become increasingly difficult to live, the Greens will introduce a new sub-class to the humanitarian program that allows entry and permanent residence for Pacific Islanders who have been displaced or made stateless by the effects of climate change.

Climate Adaptation Fund

As part of the Copenhagen Accord there was agreement that high per capita polluting nations such as Australia would contribute to an adaptation fund to be spent on marketing developing communities more resilient to climate change.

¹⁰ - <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/scholar/studyin.cfm>; <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/scholar/studyout.cfm>; <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pdf/studentstats.pdf>

Australia's commitment under the Copenhagen Accord for climate change funding is approximately \$763 million over three years, in addition to Overseas Development Assistance budget increases. This would be funded through the revenue for the Greens proposed carbon tax.

In addition to championing this additional funding, the Greens will ensure Australia argues for a global Adaptation Fund to provide fair entitlements to the most vulnerable regions of the world, including the Pacific. The Adaptation Fund must support projects at the local level to help strengthen resilience in the face of climate change impacts and disaster. Planting of mangroves, grasses and reforestation are all priority areas for community led adaptation funding. Community education, planning and disaster response training are also important areas of need.

Fairer Fair Trade Agreements for the Pacific

The Australian Government is driving the development of a free trade agreement with Pacific Island nations called PACER Plus. Negotiations were launched in 2009 and the Government hopes to gain increased access to Pacific markets — so Australian companies can sell more goods and services in the islands.

The Greens are concerned that the pace and power of these negotiations is unbalanced in favour of the largest nations in the region, Australia and New Zealand. Pacific Island nations have small domestic markets and competition from “big brother” neighbours just wipes many of the small job-generating businesses out.

The Greens believe these negotiations should focus on utilising trade to reduce poverty. Independent environmental and social impact assessments should not be undertaken through Australian or New Zealand Government appointments. There should also be a funded public consultation process run throughout the region to better understand the impact of the agreement on local communities and businesses.

Contact my office

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