

Cutting the Hand Off

Exploring NZ Aid Programme Funding Cuts to Pacific Organisations

NZADDS Commentary^{1, 2} – 2011|3

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“FSPI is the trunk of a tree. The programmes are the branches and the network partners are the roots in the soil. The cut of the funding was like cutting the trunk – no connection between the programmes and the people”, explains Rex Horoi, the Executive Director of the Foundation of the Peoples of the South Pacific International (FSPI). FSPI is one of several Pacific human rights programmes and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that have had their funding cut as a result of the changes in New Zealand Government aid practices since 2008. These cuts have contributed to growing concern in the Pacific that the NZ Aid Programme is losing its touch with the needs of ordinary people in the region, despite the NZ Minister of Foreign Affairs’ stated desire to provide “a hand-up not a hand-out”. Exploring these cuts and their rationale is the topic of this NZADDS Commentary.

FSPI was the first Pacific NGO to have their NZ Aid Programme funding cut in 2009, coming as a shock to many as FSPI has long been viewed as exemplary in their innovative and unique projects founded on principles of community involvement and empowerment. FSPI works across the region through local affiliates in ten Pacific Island Countries, many of which are small, locally grown NGOs who walk closely alongside their communities, serving “through people-centred programmes to foster self-reliance within a changing world” (FSPI mission).

In 2006 a “ground-breaking relationship”, as Horoi calls it, was entered into between FSPI and what was then NZAID (now called the NZ Aid Programme). This strategic partnership was based on a ten-year timeframe with an initial funding agreement for five years, providing FSPI with ‘core support’ – funding that is not targeted for any specific project but supports general organisational functions such as organisational development, advocacy, communications and general operations. This core support “broadened FSPI’s ability to link with others, communicate, spend time with others, sharing best practices, give us time to think, be creative and innovative, research and connect with academic institutions, and add value to the work of national partners – a regional institution is important to support network [country level] partners” says Horoi.

¹ NZADDS Commentaries provide commentary from the perspective of the author, contributing to discussion and analysis of NZ aid and development work. NZADDS Commentaries do not necessarily represent an official NZADDS stance on any issue. Commentaries and other NZADDS papers can be read online at: <http://nzadds.org.nz/publications/>. Ms Spratt can be contacted at: jo[DELETE]sprattnz@gmail.com

² This Commentary is primarily based on information gained from the public sphere and through interviews with those quoted. Two Official Information Act requests of the NZ Aid Programme are also referred to in this Commentary.

This relationship was brought to a premature and abrupt halt, only three years in. As Horoi states, it wasn't just that FSPI lost funding but that it "was sudden, immediate, not enough warning and no evaluation about the programme – and it was just a decision to end it without any evaluation to assess how successful or not the whole thing is. No indication about looking at impacts."

An evaluation was scheduled in 2009, about the time that FSPI learnt that their funds were to be cut. This evaluation was never carried out. Defying the principles of transparency, accountability and partnership in their contract with the NZ Aid Programme, the news of the funding cut was a sudden blow: through the annual face-to-face meetings with the NZ Aid Programme, FSPI had thought that things were going well. As Mr Horoi stated "ask me two years ago how I am and I would have told you that things were going really well. Ask me now, and it is a different story."

FSPI was to receive more bad news. Their regional disaster programme – building Coping Communities that could be resilient to the impacts of disasters - was also cut several months later. Jennifer Wate, Executive Director of the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT), a country network partner to FSPI, commented on the impact of losing the funds for their Coping Communities project. "We had set-up well-functioning relationships in Simbu where people had lost family members in the tsunami. Things were working really well... then we heard the news that the funding was cut... we went through a period of uncertainty and challenge."

FSPI were not alone. The widely acclaimed Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), a human rights programme of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, who had previously won the prestigious UNICEF Maurice Pate Award for its ground breaking work on human rights across the Pacific, also lost their funding. In a similar partnership-based arrangement with the New Zealand Aid Programme RRRT were receiving core funding that supported human rights work in nine Pacific countries. This work enabled action on the ground develop legislation to address violence against women, as well as working with governments to protect and promote the human rights of their people. The funding cuts came out of the blue, just a month after a positive external evaluation of RRRT's performance.

Other programmes and organisations have also had their funding support ceased. In mid-2010, as covered by press at the Pacific Island Leaders' meeting in Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Women's Centre was told it would lose its NZ funding, despite a glowing evaluation (Latu, 2010). This caused the NZ Prime Minister to publically comment on the issue. Subsequently the Vanuatu Women's Centre funding was reinstated. The Tonga Women and Children's Crisis Centre did not have its funding renewed following a change in their organisational structure. This loss of funding has since seen staff working off the floor and feeding women at the centre from their own personal finances. The Pacific Island AIDS Foundation, who had led the way on bringing the issue of HIV to the fore in the Pacific also lost their core support. Country-level organisations that gave support and capacity building to local NGOs have also lost their core funding, often part-way through agreed contracts. Local NGOs in Pacific Island developing countries need this support to learn how to run organisations, as many of the people involved are new to the work of organisational and project management. As one interviewee stated, "I started not even knowing how to manage an organisation".

The most recent organisation to lose their funding is the Pacific Disability Forum (PDF), a regional organisation supporting some of the most neglected people in the region. The funding support from the NZ Aid Programme was pivotal in establishing the PDF and

responding to the needs of thousands of Pacific people with disabilities. In a grant funding agreement, somewhat similar in arrangement to that of FSPI and RRRT, the NZ Aid Programme gave core support to PDF, which enabled PDF to work closely with their local 'Disabled Persons' Organisations' in 15 countries across the region. People with disabilities tend to staff these Disabled Persons' Organisations through their volunteer time, and some are new to running organisations and projects. The work of PDF and their local partners was just starting to bear fruit and on-going, committed funding was what was needed to take their work for people with disability to a higher level. Again, PDF had just received a positive evaluation. As Setareki Macanawai, PDF's Chief Executive Officer said "the NZ Aid Programme has deserted us at sea and AusAID came to our rescue".

Adding insult to injury, these cuts generally came as an unanticipated surprise, leaving organisations scrambling to figure out how to continue their work with as little impact as possible on the people they work with. It does appear that NZ Aid Programme staff tried to mitigate the impact of these sudden decisions by negotiating piecemeal extensions where possible. Despite this, these decisions to cut funding support from the New Zealand Aid Programme left organisations in precarious positions, having to search for funds to survive. This created an immense amount of stress for staff, and organisations lost valuable local expertise that they had spent time and resources investing in. In some cases AusAID has come in to mop-up the mess.

What is Happening Here?

Highly respected and positively evaluated Pacific human rights programmes and non-governmental organisations have lost NZ Aid Programme funding for no apparent reason. This raises the question: why?

The NZ Aid Programme continues to fund some non-governmental organisations, although as of January 2011 an Official Information Act request response highlighted that many NGO activities had drawn to an end and few new funding relationships had been forged.³ Yet it can be assumed from the support to some NGOs that the NZ Aid Programme does not have an aversion to funding NGOs per se. Indeed, the New Zealand Aid Programme International Development Policy Statement clearly states support for civil society and regional associations (MFAT, 2011).

One can draw at least three potential explanations as to why these organisations had their funds cut. These are:

1. A Change in Aid Policy
2. The 'Bigger, Deeper, Fewer, Longer' approach
3. Poor performance.

These explanations are examined more closely below.

³ This Official Information Act request requested basic information about all activities that had started since Jan 2009 and all that had stopped since Jan 2009, up until Jan 2011. The information provided was not complete, excluding funding where there were ongoing funding arrangements, such as to multilaterals, regional agencies and partner country governments. Small grant/project funds were also not included, such as the Pacific Island Participation Fund.

Change in Aid Policy

The most common rationale for these funding cuts is that the activity no longer fits with the new NZ Aid Programme focus of sustainable economic development. This rationale is given both by the people in organisations that lost funds, as well as MFAT in responses to Official Information Act requests.

Yet the highest-tier of policy direction for the NZ Aid Programme, as articulated in its mission, is: “to support sustainable development in developing countries, in order to reduce poverty and to contribute to a more secure, equitable, and prosperous world” (MFAT, 2011, p. 2). Sustainable development is a well-recognised concept in the world of international development. Its globally accepted definition outlines the importance of ensuring that people today have their needs met without jeopardising the needs of humanity in the future, with priority placed on meeting the needs of the poorest people (Brundtland, 1987). Three pillars shape action in sustainable development: environmental, social and economic (United Nations General Assembly, 2005). At this level, the NZ Aid Programme’s policy directions are not only about economic development but encompass much more than that. In line with this broad approach to development, the NZ Aid Programme International Development Policy Statement articulates the importance of investing in health, education, climate change adaptation and mitigation, disaster preparation, and safe and secure communities (MFAT, 2011), all of which involve the basic human rights of all people.

Examining the activities of the organisations that received funding cuts, each of them worked in some or all of these areas. Each of these agencies worked to achieve sustainable development and to contribute to a region that was more secure, prosperous and just. In light of this it seems unlikely that top level policy changes explain why Pacific organisations had their funds severed.

However, the next level of policy direction description notes that the agency’s “primary focus [is on] on supporting sustainable economic development” (MFAT, 2011, p.2). The NZ Aid Programme’s International Development Policy Statement predominantly justifies its investment in areas such as health and education by articulating how health and education contribute to economic development (MFAT, 2011). The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hon. Murray McCully (hereafter referred to as ‘the Minister’) has clearly outlined his view that the aim of the NZ Aid Programme is now to achieve economic growth. The Minister states that the new NZ Aid Programme policy mandate:

“requires a clear focus on sustainable economic growth as the means by which we seek to improve the lives of our poorest neighbours... Rather than just ticking boxes, we will track the performance of our aid against objective measures such as trade and tourism statistics; income growth... Lifting people out of poverty depends directly on increasing economic growth and strengthening trade... We need to make choices resulting in sustained economic growth for our aid recipients - a hand up, not a hand out” (McCully, 2009).

Combined, this information raises suspicion that not only the primary focus, but the *sole* focus, of the NZ Aid Programme is economic development to achieve the end of economic growth. But even given this, a focus on economic development does not provide a rationale for why these programmes and organisations have lost funding. FSPI is an excellent example. FSPI works in the areas of sustainable tourism, coastal and marine resource management, agricultural development and sustainable livelihoods. These are all core economic development areas, many of which the NZ Aid Programme is now focussing on.

FSPI also worked to build good governance amongst communities across the Pacific. Economic development and growth that benefits all people in a country only occurs in situations where there is good governance – when ordinary people can hold their governments to account and ensure the gains of economic growth are spent appropriately. Jennifer Wate of SIDT explains “You can provide infrastructure, whatever, but if the governance bit is missing, then it is incomplete... It is governance that makes things work.”

As well as this, issues such as the right for women to live free of violence underpin economic development. The difficulty of going to work if your eye is swollen shut due to the beating you got the night before cannot be underestimated, let alone the confidence-sapping nature of being hit or verbally abused by a man who is supposed to care about you. In 2009 the cost to the Australian economy due to violence against women and their children was estimated at AU\$13.6 billion and rates of violence against women are higher in many Pacific Island Countries than in Australia. RRRT was working to address the issue of violence against women (and continues to do so). Similarly people with a disability have additional barriers to overcome (many societally produced) to enable them to contribute their skills to the workforce.⁴ Setareki Macanawai, the Chief Executive Officer of the Pacific Disability Forum, puts it well

“even with the focus on economic development there will still need [to] be a provision towards people with disabilities to get them out of poverty so they can become economically contributing members of their society. I think there still has to be a human face even in an economic argument” (Radio NZ International, July 2011).

Bigger, Deeper, Fewer, Longer

‘Bigger, deeper, fewer, longer’ is the long-time informal motto for the delivery of New Zealand Official Development Assistance. NZAID started using this motto several years ago as it worked to engage in fewer activities that were bigger, spanned longer timeframes and reached deeper into communities. This need to reduce activities and focus how NZ aid money is spent dates back to the late 1990s when it was explicitly recognised that NZ aid was spread across too many activities. The current Government continues this trend and has adopted the NZAID motto, as the Minister recently stated in an opinion piece in the Dominion Post: “[t]he key to getting better value for money is to be running fewer programmes targeting bigger, longer- term initiatives in which we can make a difference” (McCully, May 2011); and as written in the NZ Aid Programme International Development Statement: “support will be provided for large, longer-term, comprehensive initiatives which evidence proves are more likely to lead to effective results” (2011, p.10).

A potential rationale for the funding cuts to FSPI, PDF, RRT and others could be that they were cut loose to reduce the number of activities the NZ Aid Programme was engaged in, and to perhaps put the money elsewhere (remembering that the NZ aid budget has continued to increase under the current Government) into bigger and longer-term initiatives. But in fact, it was the ‘bigger, deeper, fewer, longer’ approach that was what guided NZAID’s investment into FSPI, RRRT and PDF in the first place, and they were, at the time of the cuts, long-term partners for the NZ Aid Programme.

⁴ The World Health Organisation and World Bank estimate that at any time, approximately fifteen percent of the population has a disability (WHO, 2011, p.7) – a significant number of people. This number does not include family members of a person with a disability who might rely upon that person economically or have to give-up employment to care for that person.

What underpinned these funding arrangements were two key factors. The first was the recognition that these organisations could support local country-level action that would otherwise require several different ‘activities’ to be managed by the aid programme. For example, PDF could support a local Disabled Persons Organisation in each of 15 Pacific Island countries, and give them the programme, management and organisational development support that they found indispensable to meet the needs of their communities. If the NZ Aid Programme had to do this itself, it would add to the number of activities the Aid Programme managed, probably as well as a parallel activity to provide capacity building support to each organisation.

Rather than have one organisation or programme like FSPI, RRRT or PDF in each country, there is one for the region, enabling country-level partners to get on with the job of responding to their communities. Meanwhile, the regional entity can provide support for their country partners, engage in regional-advocacy, facilitate meetings with donors, produce reports and ensure learning is distributed across the region. As Jennifer Wate of SIDT says,

“FSPI has experience, skills, knowledge. [They] know how we NGOs do our work. To pull support from them [cut FSPI’s funds], it does effect FSPI and SIDT. FSPI used to come for capacity development and training, and we miss their support... There are some of the affiliates [FSPI network partners] who are just coming through a transition phase of their own and now they are really struggling because FSPI is so weak to offer support, capacity building. Also, there is no annual convention where all the affiliates get together and share lessons learned, opportunity to talk with other potential donors. SIDT really valued this.”

Funding the work of PDF, FSPI, RRRT and others, helps the NZ Aid Programme to invest in bigger and fewer activities at the same time as boosting efficiency and reaching communities that the NZ Aid Programme could not reach alone.

The second key factor underpinning these funding relationships that have been cut was the recognition that organisations can get caught in a ‘project frenzy’. In order to function they need to get as many projects as they can and then eke out of each project’s allocated overhead budget enough money to run the whole organisation. This means that organisations lurch from project to project, expend significant time and energy searching and applying for funding, and are unable to plan further than one or two years ahead. This stretches their meagre resources and diverts their attention from carrying out the work that they are set-up to do. It also means that staff are employed for a specific project, gain training and institutional knowledge, but then have to leave at the end of the project, creating a significant loss for the wider organisation.

To address these factors, long-term arrangements were set-up to provide programmes and organisations such as RRRT, FSPI and PDF with some security in terms of funding and allow them to invest in their staff (building Pacific capacity), and focus on carrying out their various missions to work to provide a hand-up to their communities. This is good development practice – investing in the long-term progress of Pacific organisations, recognising the constraints in the Pacific in relation to human and organisational capacity⁵, and assisting organisations to overcome the challenges of not having a middle-class or philanthropic base

⁵ For a summary of Pacific capacity strengths and constraints, see Bolger, J., 2008, *Pacific Choice: Learning from Success*, Asian Development Bank: Mandaluyong City.

from which to gain funding from. This way of funding also conforms with the ‘longer’ component of the NZ Aid Programme approach and assists in achieving greater efficiencies for the NZ Aid Programme.

The ‘bigger, deeper, fewer, longer’ approach does not provide an explanation for the funding cuts.

Poor Performance

A third potential rationale for why these organisations got their funding cut is because they did not have any impact and were simply not doing a good job. Funds are precious and need to go where they have an effect. Yet again, exploring what actually happened shows that the rationale of poor performance cannot be used to justify the funding cuts to all these organisations. FSPI’s funding was actually cut at a time when an evaluation was due. By all accounts, the Minister refused to allow the evaluation to go ahead, instead preferring that the funding simply ceased. Worse than this, both RRRT and PDF recently received positive evaluations.

It is obvious that the Minister believes that there was an issue of performance. As the Minister shared in his May 2009 Speech to the NZ Institute of International Affairs, he believes that “throwing money at regional NGO bureaucracies for little apparent reward... is frankly absurd”. FSPI, RRRT and PDF all supported partners in countries across the Pacific: they functioned regionally, working at the regional level and to support local partners. Yet there are no examples provided in the Minister’s speech to substantiate the claim that money has been thrown around for little result. Global evidence on the impact of human rights activities and NGOs shows that a high percentage of NGO activities accomplish their desired results: the most comprehensive synthesis study done by the OECD in 1997 reported that 90% of NGO activities achieved their immediate objectives (Riddell, 2007, p. 269). If “little apparent reward” was shown in evaluations of Pacific human rights programmes and non-governmental organisations then it would be fair to question on-going funding for them. But, as stated above, evaluations were positive or the Minister himself prevented evaluations from taking place.

Poor performance cannot explain the funding cuts to these Pacific programmes and organisations.

Concluding Thoughts: So What Does This Mean?

I have briefly explored potential rationale for the cutting of NZ Aid Programme funding to regional human rights activities and non-governmental organisations. What does this exploration tell us?

The overarching conclusion that can be drawn is that there is no clear rationale for the funding cuts: neither the change in aid policy; the bigger, fewer, deeper, longer approach; nor poor performance can satisfactorily explain the decisions that were made.

One begins to wonder if the decisions to cut funding were based merely on the Minister’s whims, led by his assessment of the absurdity of “throwing money at regional NGO bureaucracies for little apparent reward”. The Minister has publically commented that “he

places his own rule”⁶ over the activities of the Aid Programme, has awarded contracts to his mates (Parliamentary Questions, 2010), placed his cronies on panels to oversee NGO funding (NZPA, April 2011) and advise on education spending (Parliamentary Questions, 2010) and publically disparaged his public servants (McCully, 2009). These factors, combined with his unsubstantiated concerns about “NGO bureaucracies” indicate that the NZ Aid Programme is being driven by the Minister’s own personal agenda. This is being done in a manner that ignores several factors of good development practice. These include: what activities fit with the Government’s own policy settings, evidence of what works, legal obligations, long-standing partnerships, and most likely the advice of his experienced staff. Put together with what has occurred to NZ NGO funding schemes⁷, it appears there is no coherent policy direction when it comes to funding non-governmental and human rights activities.

The consequences of this situation are becoming evident as time goes on. The NZ Aid Programme’s International Development Policy articulates a desire to work in partnership with civil society and regional organisations. Yet the fact that some human rights programmes and non-governmental organisations had their funding cut, although they were in a position to assist the NZ Aid Programme to achieve both its high-level policy settings and primary focus of economic development, highlights that NZ Aid Programme policy is not the key test of what will be funded. For current and future NZ Aid Programme partners this creates uncertainty, unpredictability and a lack of clarity.

Combined with this, the way that the cuts were made has led to an erosion of trust in the NZ Aid Programme. As Horoi of FSPI asks, “if NZAID, what was the region’s best donor, could do this to us what would the others do?” The Pacific is a vast region geographically but its people are closely tied. The manner in which Pacific organisations lost their NZ Aid Programme funding support – without warning and for no apparent reason – has contributed to growing concern that the NZ Aid Programme is no longer a donor agency that can be relied upon to work in genuine partnership with Pacific organisations. Horoi points out that it is recognised that the NZ Aid Programme has many “very professional and key staff who want to make a difference” and this is echoed by others interviewed for this Commentary. But the fact is that, in the words of Horoi, “the public-private-civil society organisation partnership cannot be realised through the development spirit that McCully [the Minister] embodies”.

Another consequence of the decisions to cease funding NGOs and human rights programmes is a denial of the immense capabilities of Pacific people in contributing to their own development efforts, including in sustainable tourism, agriculture, fisheries and economic development. Rather than suddenly cut funding, there was the potential for the NZ Aid Programme to develop a coherent policy and programme approach whereby Pacific organisations could work in a meaningful partnership with the NZ Government to contribute to sustainable economic development. Alternatively, or simultaneously, the NZ Aid Programme could have devised an approach whereby Pacific organisations ‘filled the gap’ in the NZ Aid Programme’s primary focus on economic development by funding Pacific

⁶ This comment was made at the Institute of Policy Studies Conference ‘Resilience in the Pacific: Addressing the Critical Issues, February 2011

⁷ For further information see the NZADDS Working Paper, *The Changing Landscape of International Development in Aotearoa/New Zealand* by Ed Challies, Andrew McGregor and Lee Sentes at www.nzadds.org.nz; and Development Action’s reports on the *Evolution and Management of the Sustainable Development Fund*, and on the *Selection of Projects in the Sustainable Development Fund* at www.developmentaction.co.nz

organisations to carry-out core health, education and other social programmes, while the NZ Aid Programme invested the bulk of its energies on thematic areas such as infrastructure, tourism, fisheries and agriculture. This would have both harnessed Pacific capabilities and strengthened them, in a manner that maximised the benefits of strengths of key development partners.

A silencing of voices that struggle to be heard is a further consequence of these funding cuts. Building hotels in Niue and supporting pearl farming in the Cook Islands may create some employment opportunities for some people in a few years' time. But in the meantime, there are people across the Pacific who will not benefit from these opportunities. These are the people that human rights and non-governmental programmes exist to work alongside and create opportunities for. These are the people who do not enjoy the benefits of being able to read or write well, people who have impairments or endure poor health, women who are hit by their husbands, those who are impacted upon by disasters and those with mental illness. These are the people who need help and who also have a great deal to contribute to their families, their communities, to public life and the productive sector. Yet without support, the talents and skills of these people – a significant amount of the Pacific's population - will remain untapped. Minister McCully has talked a great deal about providing a "hand-up not a hand-out" but what he is really doing is cutting the hand off.

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