

PULSE CHECK
X

U.S. AID DISRUPTIONS

How should Australia respond? 150+ Southeast Asian and Australian experts give their perspectives.



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Key messages.

The U.S. State Department has indicated a 92% cut to U.S. foreign assistance. How are these disruptions playing out in Southeast Asia and how should Australia respond?

We asked 150+ experts from across Southeast Asia, and some of the Australians most actively shaping foreign policy.

According to the experts, **the Australian Government should:**

1. Ensure stability in existing Australian development programs.
2. Strengthen local systems to reduce aid dependence.
3. Increase Australian Official Development Assistance (ODA).

According to the experts, these are the **implications for Australia** if it chooses to:

1. **Maintain the status quo:** Keeping aid steady signals reliability and preserves trust.
2. **Boost aid:** A targeted ODA boost could fill gaps, strengthen Australia's partnerships, and amplify Australia's development impact.
3. **Cut the aid budget:** A budget reduction risks undermining Australia's credibility and weakening development efforts.

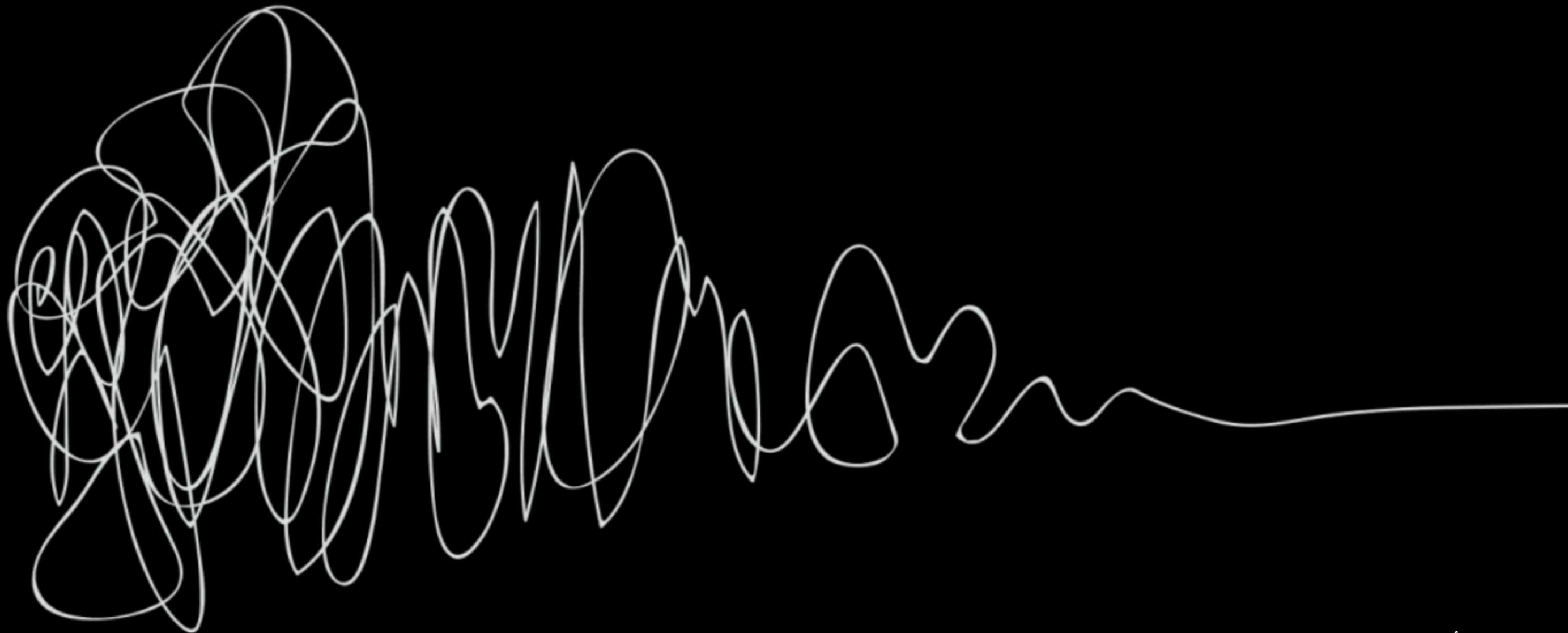
Our **Pulse Check x U.S. Aid Disruptions** report uncovers some of the biggest consequences, the missteps Australia should avoid, and how to navigate this shifting landscape. Read on for more...

Within days of taking office, the Trump administration announced a 90-day pause in foreign assistance. Subsequent permanent cuts are expected.

“Nearly \$54 billion [has been] identified for elimination as part of the America First agenda – a 92 percent reduction.”*

*State Department spokesperson, as reported in Washington Post, 28 Feb 2025 .

As a close U.S. ally and a leading development partner in our region, **Australia must now consider its next steps.**



We went to **Australia's** top development and **foreign policy experts...***

Australia

Adam John McCarty | Mekong Economics Ltd

Amanda Robbins | Equity Economics

Bec Strating | La Trobe University

Beth Eggleston | Humanitarian Advisory Group

Cameron Hill | Development Policy Centre

Darren Lim | Australian National University

Emma Leslie | Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies

Gordon Flake | Perth USAsia Centre

Greg Raymond | Australian National University

Ian Kemish | Forridel

Jenny Gordon | Australian National University and Lowy Institute

Joanne Wallis | University of Adelaide

Justine Chambers | Danish Institute for International Studies

Lisa Denney | Centre for Human Security and Social Change

Mat Tinkler | Save the Children

Matthew Maury | The Australian Council for International Development

Melissa Conley Tyler | Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue

Michael Breen | University of Melbourne

Nathan Hansford | International Development Contractors Community

Peter Varghese AO | Care Australia

Robert Glasser | Australian Strategic Policy Institute

Rory Medcalf | National Security College

Rowan Callick | Griffith University Asia Institute

Robyn Alders | Development Policy Centre

William Stoltz | National Security College

*Many participated anonymously. These are the experts who were happy to be named.

...and leading experts from Southeast Asia...*

Cambodia

Hor Kim | Thrive Networks | East Meets West Foundation
Nop Vy | Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association
Phan Ratha
Sokhem Pech | Pech Climate System Consultancy and Research
Sophary Long | Agricultural Risk Innovative Solutions Enterprise
Sovannara Lim | Monash University

Indonesia

Anna Winoto | Abt Global
Anthea Haryoko | Center for Indonesian Policy Studies
Dio Ashar Wicaksana | Indonesia Judicial Research Society
Ihsan Ali-Fauzi | Pusat Studi Agama & Demokrasi Paramadina
Nurul Qoiriah | ASEAN Australia Counter Trafficking Program
Wita Krisanti | Indonesia Business Coalition for Women
Empowerment

Laos

Minavanh Pholsena | Namjai Community Association
Phone Lavai | The University of Queensland
Sila Phomsavanh | Phongsavanh Bank
Sisophone Southammavong

Souphon Sayavong | Promotion of Family Health Association
Thasphorn Butsaling | Oxfam
Viengkhone Souriyo | Community Health and Inclusion
Association

Malaysia

Adila Ali | Kemban Kolektif
Arief Hamizan | The Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism
Faribel Maglin | Pusat Komnas
Irene Xavier | Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor
Jason Wee | Architects of Diversity
Ong Kian Ming
Prishanth Linggaraj | Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism
Tham Jia Vern | HAYATWathshlah Naidu | Centre for Independent
Journalism
Thomas Daniel | Institute of Strategic & International Studies
Yeo Yan Yin | Pacific Research Center

Myanmar

Chamtha Kyaw | Pandita Development Institute
Htike Htike | Myanmar LGBT Rights Network
Khun Khit San | Taunggyi Youth Center
Lal Ram Muani | University of Queensland

*Many participated anonymously. These are the experts who were happy to be named.

...to get their advice.

Myanmar

Myat Lwin Lwin Aung
Samuel Hmung | Australian National University
Yadana Ni Ni | Australian National University

Philippines

Amina Bernardo | Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy
Calixto Chikiamco | Foundation for Economic Freedom
Elvin Ivan Uy | Philippine Business for Social Progress
Filomeno III Sta. Ana | Action for Economic Reforms
Guiamel Alim | Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society
Julia Andrea R Abad | Philippine Business Coalition for Women
Empowerment
Maribel A. Ardales | Hospicio De San Jose
Milwida M Guevara | Synergeia
Nepomuceno Malaluan | Action for Economic Reforms
Sarah Radam

Thailand

Chanita Rochananond | ASEAN Australia Counter Trafficking
Program
Pakamas Thinphanga | Thailand Environment Institute Foundation
Polwish Subsrinjai | Human Rights & Development Foundation
Sudarat Musikawong
Suriyan Vichitlekarn | Mekong Institute
Watcharas Leelawath | Bolliger & Company

Timor-Leste

Acacio Maia Barreto
Eurico Ediana Da Costa
Feliciano Da Costa Araujo | HAK Association
Jenito Santana | Kdadalak Sulimutuk Institute
Jose F De Sousa | Australian Volunteers International
Julia Maria Da Costa | The University of Sydney
Leonardo De Sousa Rosa | Partnership for Inclusive Prosperity
Maria Assuncao Barreto Gama
Roberto Martins
Silvino Teotonio Da Silva Alves

Vietnam

Bich Lien Nguyen | Childfund Australia Representative in Vietnam
Jessie Pham | International Development Enterprises
Khuat Thu Hong | Institute for Social Development Studies
Nguyen Thi Xuan Mai | The National Economics University
Nguyen Tri Khiem | Nam Can Tho University
Thanh Nguyen
Tran Thi Ngoc Diep | Mekong Economics
Trinh Quang Tuan | Mekong Economics



1.

We asked: What will be the **most significant impacts** of U.S. aid disruptions in your country?

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Cambodia: The erosion of organisations working on democracy and human rights
'Several NGOs dedicated to democracy and media freedom have been forced to close.'

Indonesia: Fundings gaps to critical health programs

'Tuberculosis and polio elimination programs may face setbacks, reversing years of progress in public health.'

Laos: Erosion of support to vulnerable populations

'Beneficiaries in various areas will be immediately impacted by U.S. aid cuts, especially vulnerable populations such as survivors of gender-based violence, trafficking in persons, people with disabilities, women, and children.'

Malaysia: Flow on impacts from reduction of U.S. support in the region

'Impacts on humanitarian efforts outside Malaysia, in Bangladesh or Myanmar, will have a flow on impact for Malaysia.'

Myanmar: Immediate and long-term deterioration of civil society support

'Displaced communities, women, and LGBTIQ+ individuals, will face worsening food insecurity, reduced access to healthcare, and increased hardship, particularly in conflict-affected areas.'



What will be the **most significant impacts** of U.S. aid disruptions in your country?

Philippines: Loss of soft power dividend for the U.S.

'The U.S. has strong ties across many sectors... but the aid program had the widest reach, and a very positive public perception, which is not the same for its military and security presence, or economic investments.'

Timor-Leste: Growing influence of other foreign actors

'Withdrawing U.S. aid creates an opportunity for China to increase its influence in Timor-Leste and the region, which could come with very different priorities and conditions.'

Thailand: Decreased support to civil society actors in service delivery

'The suspension of U.S. funding has directly affected ongoing legal cases for migrant workers... Without this support, we cannot assist additional migrant workers seeking legal aid.'

Vietnam: Diplomatic and developmental cost of disrupted funding to war legacy work

'The disruption of current U.S. aid efforts in assisting unexploded ordinance clearance in Quang Tri and other high-risk provinces is devastating.'

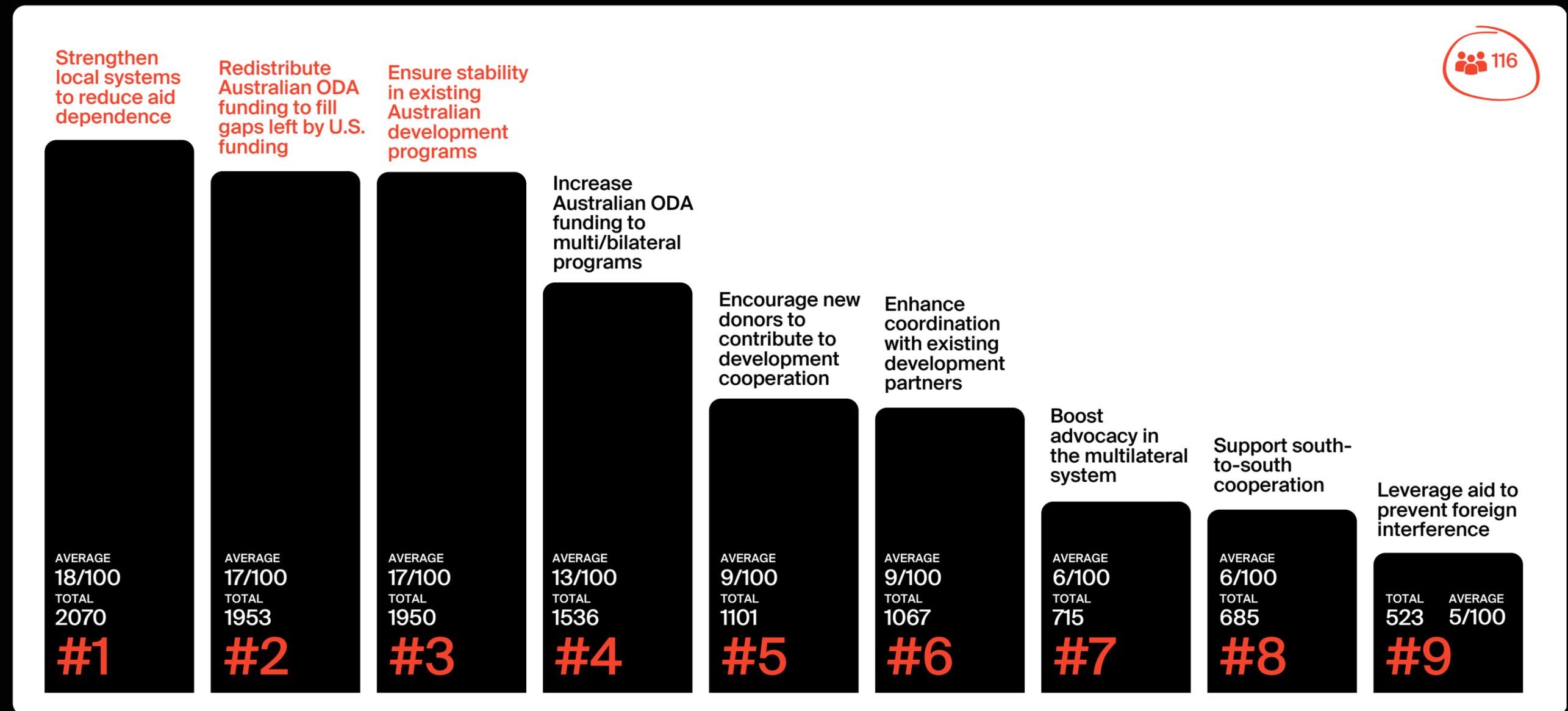


2.

We asked: Where should **Australia** focus to mitigate impacts of U.S. aid disruptions?

Where should Australia focus to mitigate impacts of U.S. aid disruptions?

Southeast Asian experts said...



"Instructions: Imagine you have 100 points. Allocate those according to where you think Australia should focus to mitigate impacts of U.S. aid disruptions."

The top 3 messages from Southeast Asian experts are:

1. **Strengthen local systems** to reduce aid dependence.
2. **Redistribute Australian ODA** funding to fill gaps left by U.S. funding.
3. **Ensure stability** in existing Australian development programs.

“

‘Stability in continuing programs is vital for avoiding disruptions in critical services including health, education, and governance.’

- Southeast Asian expert.

”

‘There is fear that the withdrawal of USAID will affect other donors such as DFAT and the EU. Therefore, security of DFAT support is critical.’

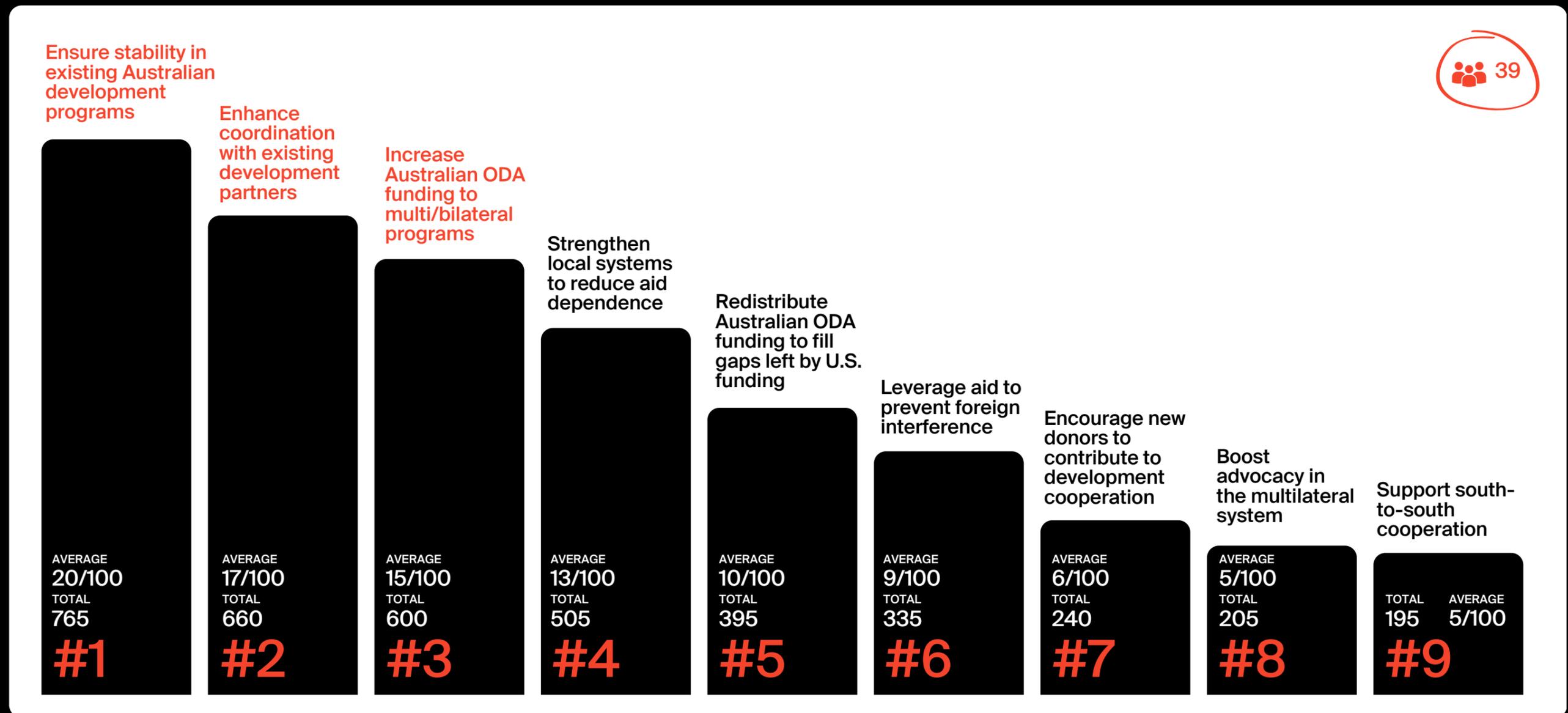
- Southeast Asian expert.

‘Investing in local systems will enable actors to foster long-term sustainability and reduce aid dependency while mitigating fragmentation in the sector.’

- Southeast Asian expert.

Quotes have been edited for clarity and brevity.

And here's what **Australian experts** prioritised to mitigate impacts of U.S. aid disruptions...



"Instructions: Imagine you have 100 points. Allocate those according to where you think Australia should focus to mitigate impacts of U.S. aid disruptions."

The top 3 messages from Australian experts are:

1. **Ensure stability** in existing Australian development programs.
2. **Enhance coordination** with existing development partners.
3. **Increase Australian ODA** funding to multi/bilateral programs.



‘Australia cannot replace U.S. aid, but we can strengthen ties with like minded partners in the region.’
- Australian expert.

‘Australia is perceived as joined at the hip with U.S. interests (and their interests often do align). Staying the course on existing programs is doubly important.’
- Australian expert.

‘I’m loathe to ever tell the government to spend more money, but if there is a time to advocate for that it is now.’
- Australian expert.



Quotes have been edited for clarity and brevity.

3.

So, what are the **clearest messages**
from Southeast Asian and Australian
experts **combined?**

150+ experts are advising Australia to...

1. **Ensure stability** in existing Australian development programs.
2. **Strengthen local systems** to reduce aid dependence.
3. **Increase** Australian Official Development Assistance.

...and, recognising the trade-offs, they see less value in

1. **Boosting advocacy** in the multilateral system.
2. **Leveraging aid** to prevent foreign interference.
3. **Supporting south-to-south** cooperation.



These are the implications for Australian policy, **according to the experts:**

If Australia **maintains the status quo.** ✓

Keeping aid steady signals reliability and preserves trust with Southeast Asian partners. Experts agree—stability means influence and impact where it matters most.

If Australia **boosts the development program.** ✓ ✓

A targeted ODA boost—focused on health, governance, and resilience—could fill gaps, amplify Australia's influence and development impact, and enhance regional coordination.

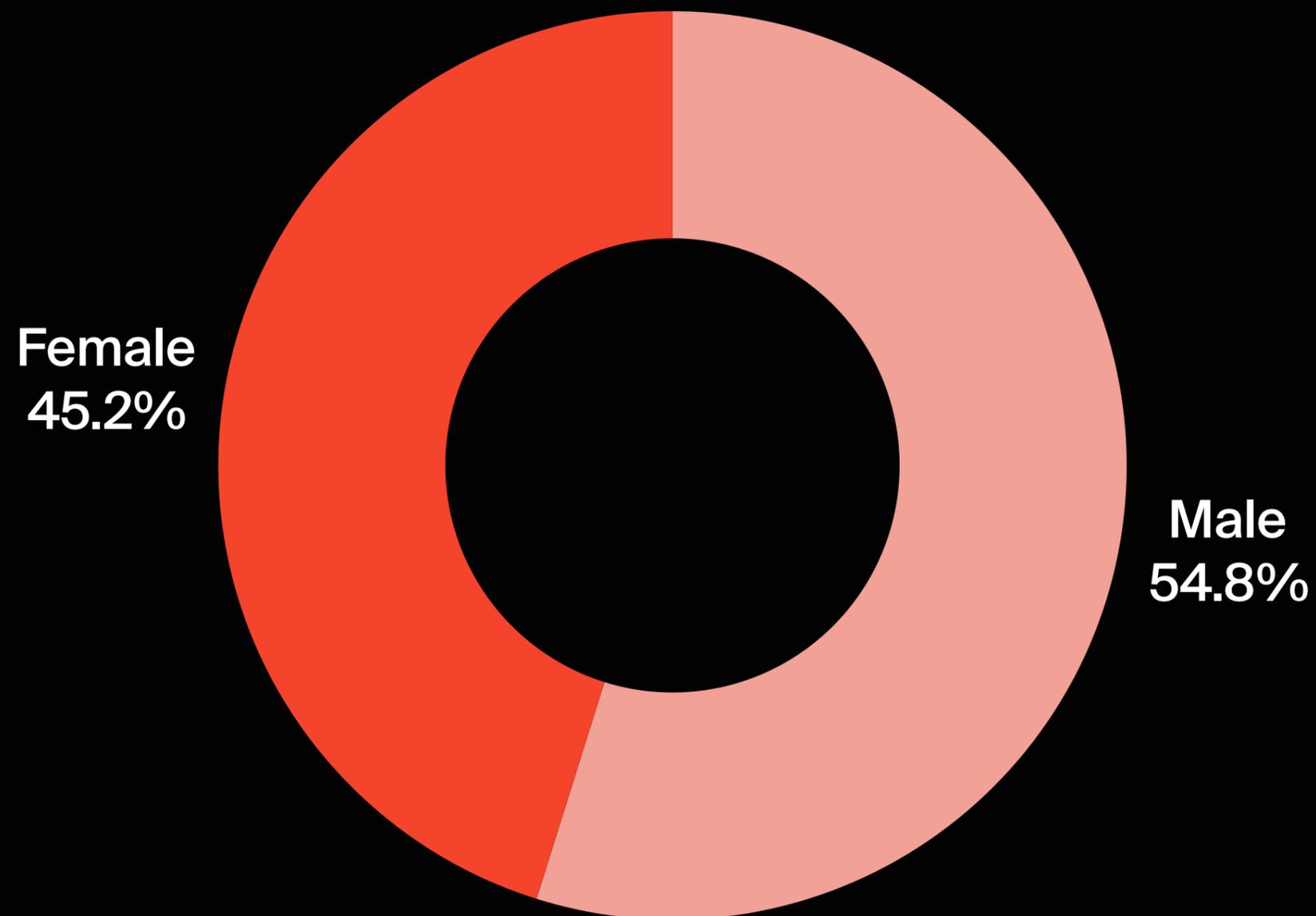
X If Australia **cuts its aid budget.**

Scaling back aid would save on budget but—according to these experts—undermine Australia's credibility, weaken development efforts, and reinforce perceptions of Western unreliability.

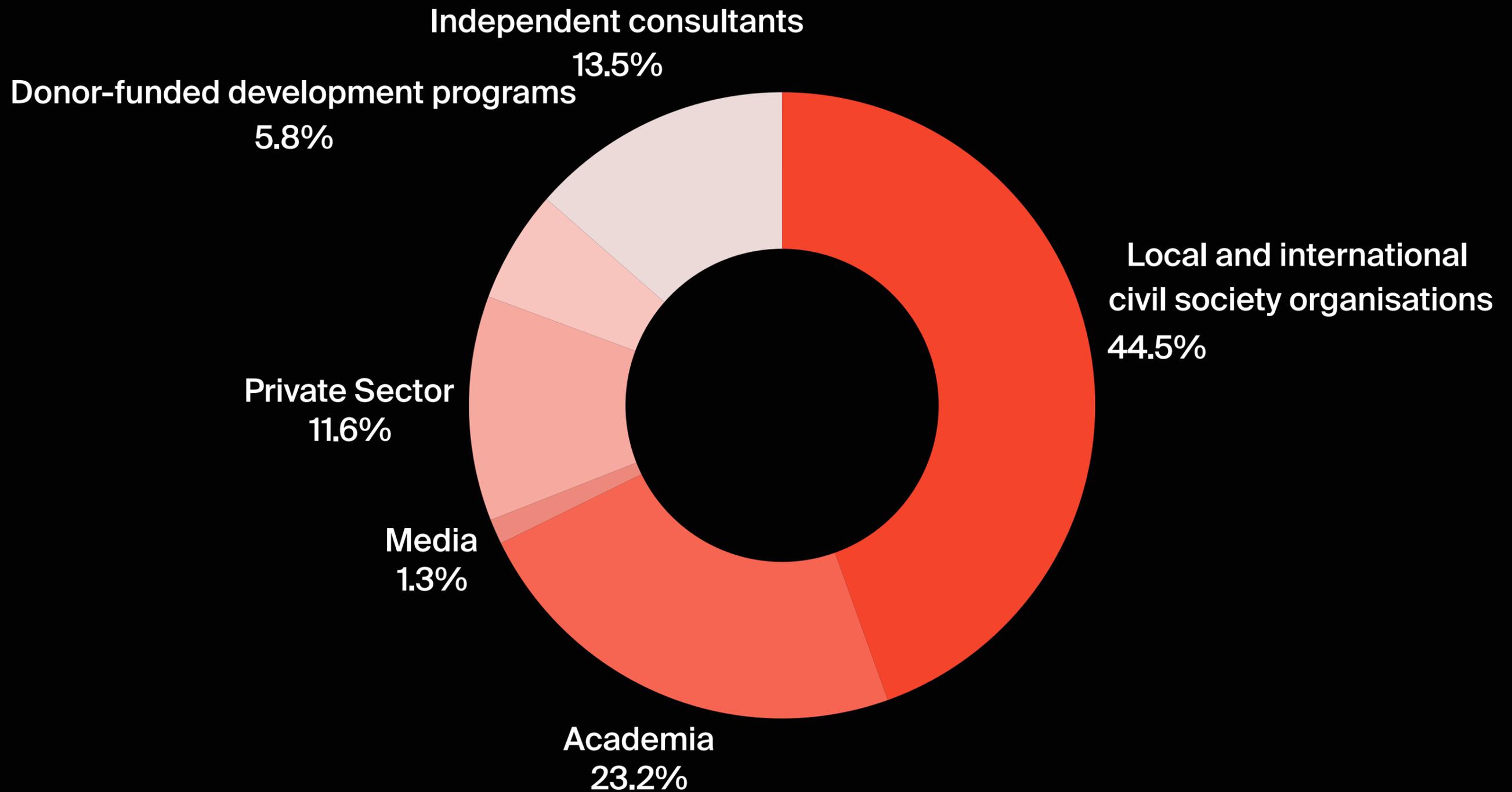
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About the **Pulse Check**.

Here's a snapshot of participant **demography**...



And the **type of work** they are engaged in...



A final note on the methodology.

A note on the survey

A Pulse Check is a survey that delivers data designed to inform key policy and reform processes. It collects this data by placing top local, non-government experts in the shoes of policymakers and challenging them to grapple with difficult trade-offs facing the Australian development program.

A note on the methodology

Participants were asked to allocate 100 points across the categories provided for each question, and their allocations had to add up to 100. In addition, participants were asked why they allocated their points in the way that they did. Participants who chose to be named are listed, though their specific answers remain anonymised.

Acknowledgements

The Lab's work would not be possible without the time, generosity, and deep insight of the 150+ experts who participated in the Pulse Check. We thank you wholeheartedly.

The Pulse Check team

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