

August 2025

Foundations Papers: Prosperity and regional growth.

Development
Intelligence
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Development x **Australia's National Interests.**

August 2025



Foreword

Across successive governments, one fact has remained clear: development in the Indo-Pacific is firmly in Australia's national interest.

Yet "national interest" is a contested phrase – a mirror that reflects back what each observer wishes to see.

For some, it means outpacing rivals in strategic competition; for others, ensuring open markets, resilient states, human rights, or the integrity of the multilateral order. Too often, though, the debate stops there – reducing development cooperation to a contest for influence, or treating it as an afterthought on the margins of "serious" statecraft.

That is an impoverished view. National interests are not trophies to be claimed, nor is development assistance a charitable gift. Development cooperation is the patient, often difficult work of building more resilient societies and more capable states. When deployed with intelligence and intent, it is one of the most targeted and catalytic tools in Australia's diplomatic arsenal.

A more mature narrative of 'aid in the national interest' rejects the false choice between principle and pragmatism. It recognises that security, prosperity, and stability are interwoven – and that Australia advances its interests not through fleeting advantage, but by being a steady, high-impact, trusted partner in a contested region. This is especially true in Australia's near region, where so many of our closest partners are working to overcome challenges to their development.

This paper, and the three additional papers connected to it, set out the evidence for that narrative. They examine where development and strategic policy intersect, and explore the opportunities and limits of how cooperation advances Australia's national interests in multilateralism, regional growth and lasting peace.

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How development supports prosperity and regional growth.

Key messages

- The prosperity and economic growth of Southeast Asia and the Pacific is fundamental to Australia's national interests.
- A less prosperous region weakens Australia's trade and investment interests and can lead to increased political instability, transnational crime and migration.
- Development cooperation supports the foundations necessary for growth and prosperity: growing human capital, improving governance and investing in economic infrastructure.
- It also contributes to economic growth directly through supporting key economic sectors like agriculture and facilitating trade and investment opportunities.

One | A trading nation in a growing region.

As a trading nation, Australia's economic growth and resilience are directly linked to the prosperity of its neighbours. 32.5% of Australian exports went to China in 2023¹ and the United States is Australia's largest economic partner.² These relationships have been fruitful but there are incentives for Australia to find diversified markets and partners.

Southeast Asia is set to become the fourth-largest economic bloc in the world by 2040.³ If two-way trade increases just 0.8% above the long-term annual average, there is an additional AU\$69 billion in total trade value to be gained.⁴ This is not just about demand for Australian goods and services, it's about ensuring resilience by engaging with a broader set of regional partners.⁵

Australia's ambition should be to foster virtuous circles across Southeast Asia and the Pacific, where greater prosperity leads to stronger economies, more stable governments, and improved security. These conditions reinforce regional global growth and directly benefit Australia.⁶

Development cooperation is directly relevant to both the economic ambitions of Australia's partners and Australia's own economic strategy. The economic path taken by any country is ultimately a matter of sovereign choices and local political economies. But savvy development partnerships can shift the dial in significant ways: by building human capital, offering targeted technical assistance (TA), enabling trade and labour mobility, and supporting growth enabling sectors.

Two | Strong human capital in the region.

Improved human capital is "a central ingredient" driving economic growth and development.⁷ Countries with strong education and health systems experience faster development, increased productivity, and greater economic resilience. A range of development interventions can directly assist with improvements in this central ingredient.

How development cooperation supports strong human capital:

- **Education investments:** As a rule of thumb, an additional year of learning a child receives leads to a 10% increase in annual earnings.⁸ Australian-supported programs like the Vanuatu Skills Partnership,⁹ the Australia Pacific Training Coalition,¹⁰ and the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF)¹¹ play a critical role in closing education gaps across the region. The educational needs of partners across the portfolio – from Vietnam to Indonesia through to Papua New Guinea and Fiji – are of course diverse, and one size does not fit all.
- **Health interventions:** Health improvements directly boost economic growth, with mortality reductions contributing up to 24% in GDP growth in low- and middle-income countries.¹² Certain interventions, notably the suppression of malaria and other endemic or transmissible diseases, are especially evidence-based.¹³ The Fiji Health Sector Support Partnership¹⁴ and Partnerships for a Healthy Region¹⁵ are examples, and partner agencies like the CSIRO play key roles in this programming.¹⁶

Narrative: Australia's tertiary and vocational education sectors also play a non-Official Development Assistance (ODA) role, with thousands of students from the region studying in Australian institutions. The education of students from the region in Australia's well-regarded universities, including in campuses established through the region itself, has a difficult-to-measure but significant impact.¹⁷ And these education relationships have non-developmental value to Australia too: they "have been a source of

Australian access and influence in political, economic, and other institutions across" Southeast Asia.¹⁸ These connections both strengthen Australia's influence and build the next generation of leaders across our region.

These interventions are especially important because such support is seen by many partners as an Australian comparative advantage: non-government experts across Indonesia, Philippines, Timor-Leste and Vietnam all view human capital as among the most important drivers of development, and Australia's assistance in education and health as crucial matching priorities.¹⁹

Three | A region of well-managed, resilient economies.

Strong governance and well-functioning economic institutions are essential for sustainable growth. Development cooperation strengthens the core governance capabilities of Australia's partners, including public financial management, market engagement, and infrastructure development.²⁰ Technical assistance partnerships can help build the capacity of partner governments in these critical policy areas. Such support can be bilateral but is often delivered through or alongside international organisations.

How development cooperation supports resilient economies:

- **Strengthening fiscal capacity:** A 10% increase in technical assistance has been shown to increase tax revenues in low-income countries by 1.2%,²¹ and can strengthen tax systems and reform more generally.²² TA was key, for example, in establishing financial institutions in fledgling Timor-Leste.²³
- **Building monetary institutions and capacity:** International support has played a key role in improving banking sector supervision in the Philippines,²⁴ for instance, and in introducing inflation-targeting in Indonesia by its monetary authorities.²⁵

Narrative: Technical assistance can enable the policy conditions for growth. It is difficult but important, because it can create impact at scale. Design, politics and incentives are key: "aid cannot 'buy' effective and lasting reforms that are not aligned with domestic political incentives".²⁶

An astute understanding of prevailing political economies is therefore crucial. Current or recent Australian programs that include TA include Prospera in Indonesia,²⁷ Governance for Growth in Vanuatu,²⁸ and the Nepal Subnational Governance Program.²⁹

Australia has a long history of working with ASEAN and individual partner governments to strengthen governance. Its past engagement with Southeast Asia provides a strong historical foundation – in a fluid institutional environment that has often been challenging³⁰ – for such assistance and this legacy should not be undermined. Australia has supported ASEAN with various forms of technical assistance since 1974, first under multiple phases of the ASEAN-Australia Economic Cooperation Program (AECPP), and latterly the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program (ADCP).³¹

Four | Trade and labour mobility.

Well-designed trade arrangements help drive economic growth. Flows of goods and services drive growth by allowing specialisation, aiding the diffusion of knowledge and technologies.³² Development cooperation can directly support market access for developing countries, and work in conjunction with mutually beneficial trade agreements. Labour mobility programs, which involve complementary non-ODA

mechanisms like supportive visa regulations as well as various ODA forms of support, are an increasingly prominent part of Australian policy.

How development cooperation supports trade and labour mobility:

- **Market access programs:** These initiatives – like the Market Development Facility which works across 7 regional countries³³ – help businesses in partner countries access global markets, improving firm revenue and profitability. They include activities like training managers in marketing skills, linking firms with each other, and providing the digital and physical infrastructure required to access specific markets. They have been shown to improve the revenue and profitability of the firms involved.³⁴
- **Labour mobility programs:** The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme³⁵ and the Falepili Union,³⁶ facilitate a direct remittance of cash to workers' households. In Pacific schemes, workers have historically earned up to 5.6 times their income at home and remit large amounts of this increased wage.³⁷ This directly benefits their economies while filling critical workforce gaps in Australia.

Narrative: A wide range of programs, many facilitated by international bodies like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), support deeper trade ties. Specific forms of technical assistance,³⁸ support for relevant infrastructure, support for specific productive capacities, and assistance with the costs of adjustment when trade rules are changed are some of the mechanisms here.

A wide span of these programs are grouped under the Aid for Trade (AfT) banner – a global WTO program in which Australia participates – and in aggregate have had a positive impact on the trade performance of recipient countries, including export value and diversification.³⁹

In an era in which all countries are cognisant that deep levels of trade integration come with risks that need to be managed, the integration of various ODA and non-ODA forms of support alongside traditional trade agreements with low- and middle-income partners is more important than ever.

Labour mobility allows workers to access higher incomes and learn skills while at the same time providing a needed source of labour to the host country. When it comes to Australian labour needs, there will be continued demand in the Australian economy for this integration: one model suggests Australia will need at least another 1.6m workers at the mid-skill level between now and 2050.⁴⁰ So long as associated effects like brain drain and social disruption are appropriately managed,⁴¹ these schemes are a clear win-win. Moreover, beyond their immediate benefits, they also facilitate knowledge exchange on key sectors like agriculture.⁴²

Scaling back support for trade and labour mobility would limit economic growth, reduce remittances, and weaken Australia's economic integration with the region. Labour shortages in key Australian sectors could also intensify without a well-structured migration partnership.

Five | Thriving key sectors for growth: agriculture and infrastructure.

Australia's economic strategy prioritises sectors such as agriculture and infrastructure, both of which are critical to its regional partners, and Australia's own long-term economic stability.⁴³

Productivity improvements in agriculture can both directly drive growth as well as unlock labour to other sectors of a growing economy. And as a major agriculture player itself, Australia has a strong offering in terms of assistance in this area.

Infrastructure is another key sector for driving broader growth – as well as one in which national security considerations are prominent – and development partnerships can support the provision of quality projects here, too.

How development cooperation supports this interest:

- **Agriculture and fisheries:** There is extensive agriculture programming in Australia's development program, often led by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF). Examples include PRISMA⁴⁴ and Red Meat and Cattle Partnership⁴⁵ in Indonesia and the Cambodia-Australia Partnership for Resilient Economic Development.⁴⁶
- **Infrastructure investments:** Australian support via Partnerships for Infrastructure,⁴⁷ as well as the Southeast Asia Infrastructure Financing Facility (SEAIFF)⁴⁸ and Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP),⁴⁹ is significant.

Narrative: As an economic activity, source of livelihoods, and provider of environmental services, agriculture is a unique instrument for development.⁵⁰ Agriculture remains especially important for Australia's partners: nearly a third of Indonesia's workforce is employed in this sector, for example.⁵¹ Agriculture is also a key sector under threat from climate change, increasing the need to support productivity and resilience improvements.

Australian supported research is important for agriculture and this research is also an important climate resilience investment. There are large numbers of research projects delivered by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (there are 27 in Vietnam and 22 in Papua New Guinea, for example).⁵² Elsewhere, assistance to build international-standard bio-security systems promises to facilitate more exports by partners and also let more Australian goods in.⁵³

Just as climate change pressures are likely to make efforts in agriculture more important, they are also deepening needs for high-quality, climate-resilient infrastructure.⁵⁴ This infrastructure is required not just to unlock continued growth but avoid potential losses as a result of climate impacts.⁵⁵ The OECD describes infrastructure as a 'backbone' of productivity,⁵⁶ and it's an important channel for attracting further investment,⁵⁷ but it's also the case that "infrastructure has always been difficult to get right."⁵⁸

Not all infrastructure projects are created equal, and ODA doesn't always improve a recipient's infrastructure endowment.⁵⁹ The Australian-supported introduction of telecommunications throughout Vanuatu is a good example of the potential economy-wide impacts of such projects,⁶⁰ as well as their potential as a vehicle for broader institutional and governance improvements.⁶¹

Six | A Swiss Army Knife to economic prosperity.

The global economic landscape is evolving, and consensus on the global trading order is frayed.⁶²

Australia cannot afford to be a passive player. Development cooperation is a Swiss Army Knife to economic prosperity and growth. A raft of tools is available to policymakers from human capital investments in education and health, to labour mobility, to supporting agriculture, which can all deliver returns to partner country growth and, ultimately, Australia. These are strategic tools which:

- strengthen trade relationships and mutual economic resilience
- bolster regional stability and governance, and
- ensure a prosperous, secure, and self-reliant Indo-Pacific—in Australia's direct national interest.

Finally: Australia's international development policy, foreign policy, and trade ambitions are mutually reinforcing. This is about the imperative for a region that is *more developed*, both wealthier and more peaceful, such that Australia can enjoy those same fruits.

Want more analysis?

The Lab is a think tank working on development cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. We're convinced that great development cooperation comes from unusual collaborations, inspired leadership, good natured debate, and cracking analysis.

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