

New research shows Australians have wrong idea on foreign aid spending

Written by Jonathan Pryke, Research Fellow and Director of the PNG Network, Melanesia Program, Lowy Institute for International Policy; Centre Associate at the Development Policy Centre, Australian National University

Two months ago, the Australian minister for international development and the Pacific, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, [argued](#) that “80% of Australians do not support any further spending on foreign aid”.

This was reflected in the [2017 Lowy Institute Poll](#) where, when the Australian respondents were told exactly how much Australia invested in aid, \$3.8 billion, only 22% supported an increase.

But dollar amounts can be misleading, so the [2018 Lowy Institute Poll](#) took a different approach to the question of public support for Australian aid. Instead of asking Australians whether our current aid investment was right, we asked how much they thought we invested. The results, which back up other research into public opinions on foreign aid, are in striking contrast to reality, revealing how fraught polling of public perceptions on foreign aid can be.

Our 2018 results show that Australians have a highly inflated perception of the size of our aid program. The average Australian believes we invest about 14% of the federal budget on foreign aid and that we should actually invest about 10%. In reality, we invest 0.8%.

On average, Australians think we invest 17.5 times more than we actually do, and would like us to be 12.5 times more generous than we are. Only 6% of respondents guessed anywhere close to the actual number. If that’s how much they think we invest, it’s no wonder there is little support to increase it.

When told how much we actually invest, be it \$5 billion (1.2% of federal expenditure) in 2015 or, after significant cuts, \$3.8 billion (0.8% of federal expenditure) in 2017, the results are remarkably sticky. The majority thought it sounded reasonable, and only 21% in 2015 and 22% in 2017 supported an increase. When given no baseline, they think we invest more than we do, and think it should be less.

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How do we reconcile these results, which appear completely at odds with one another?

To me, this shows how little Australians think about foreign aid. We think of ourselves as a generous nation and expect that to be reflected in our aid program. We don't give any real thought to it, and in the end trust the government to do what's right.

Read more: [FactCheck: What are the facts on Australia's foreign aid spending?](#)

But the government is not doing what is right. Since the Coalition government came to power in 2013, Australian aid has been [cut by close to 25%](#) when adjusting for inflation.

Australian aid is now at its lowest point in our history, when measured as a proportion of national income. As peers like the United Kingdom and New Zealand are rapidly stepping up, we are slipping into the bottom third of rich country donors.

We are the [fifth-most-prosperous country](#) in the OECD but rank [21st in generosity](#) . By 2021, our donor peers down the bottom will be Spain, the United States, Portugal, Slovenia, Greece, Korea, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovak Republic and Hungary.

Why is this the case?

For me, the answer is that the Abbott and Turnbull Coalition governments do not see the efficacy and importance of aid. They don't see the critical national interest of our aid program in building goodwill and strong institutional linkages with our immediate neighbours, or the impact

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it has on improving people's lives.

They know it will only ever be a marginal election issue, and what few votes there are for it tend to sit on the other side of the aisle. If MPs don't believe in its importance and don't see any election implications or widespread public outcry at the cuts, it starts to make sense why the aid program has been such an easy target for this government.

Fierravanti-Wells instead argues forcefully that it is impossible to increase the aid budget when the public does not support it.

[Academic literature](#) points to this being a critical flaw of foreign aid. Normal feedback mechanisms of domestic government expenditure that promote effectiveness and support do not apply to foreign aid. Taxpayer money is collected in one country and spent in another, with taxpayers having little knowledge of, or interest in, how it is being spent.

Beneficiaries of aid, on the other hand, have a strong interest in aid, but no direct political influence or voice to advocate for it. These flaws result in a marginal constituency for foreign aid, reflecting its marginal place in government expenditure.

What's surprising about foreign aid is the public scrutiny it receives from our political class over other investments in Australia's national interest. Our diplomatic, defence and intelligence expenditure receive less public scrutiny despite far larger (and growing) sums.

The development community has in part allowed this to happen by failing to build and maintain a bipartisan political constituency for Australian aid by selling the importance of foreign aid as a critical investment in Australia's national interest. It is an important complement to our investments in diplomacy and defence, particularly because we are surrounded by developing nations that have significant financing challenges.

Read more: [***Savage budget cuts pull Australia down in foreign aid rankings***](#)

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Having just a few political champions can do more than any campaign to deepen public support for Australian aid. Our politicians have the loudest megaphone to support the aid program, but at the moment are choosing not to use it.

There are ways out of this. Aid advocacy efforts could be professionalised and targeted at members of parliament. There should be more study tours for politicians, like those run by Save the Children with the support of the Gates Foundation, to see Australian aid in action in supporting the unprecedented humanitarian and development needs in our region. More effort should be made to highlight the foreign policy and strategic imperative for Australian aid, particularly in response to the growing competition from China, which has finally captured the attention of Australian media in the Pacific.

The Australian aid program is at a disappointing low point, and our poll shows that there is expectation for us to be doing more. It's time for some political leadership to turn things around.

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