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Reshaping Development Aid:

Implications for Political and Economic Relationships

New Zealand's relationship with its Pacific Island neighbours stretches back centuries, being characterised by movements of people, ideas, commodities, services and finance. It has been a reciprocal and dynamic relationship. Aid from New Zealand to Pacific Island states has been but one of its elements and one that has existed by that name only in the last 50 years or so. Yet it has proved to be one of the most volatile in terms of changing policies and priorities and it is presently under another phase of review.

This article outlines the ways in which New Zealand aid has changed over recent decades and has both reflected and shaped the nature of New Zealand's official relationships with the Pacific region. It examines in some detail the poverty focus of aid in the past decade, and then analyses the possible implications of recent policy changes.

Table 1: Summary of New Zealand aid to the Pacific region

	Aid principles	Aid modality
pre-1960	colonial relationships	costs of administration
1960s	decolonisation	budget support
1970s	welfare, infrastructure and rural development	budget support and projects
1980s		more project aid
1990s	structural adjustment	project aid
2000s	poverty alleviation	move to SWAps
2010–	sustainable economic growth	??

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From colonies to 'aid partners'

In 1901 New Zealand became a colonial power in the Pacific region, when the authority and responsibility for governing the Cook Islands was transferred from Great Britain. Niue and the Tokelau Islands were added, and it then gained a League of Nations mandate over (then) Western Samoa from Germany following the First World War. The administration of these territories required support from New Zealand, although local sources of revenue were increasingly developed. Trade expanded. The territories were only a small market for a few New Zealand and Australian enterprises, and exports from the islands, mainly of tropical fruit products, began to appear in New Zealand. Much more significant Pacific Island exports to New Zealand came not from these dependent territories but from two sources: phosphate from Niue and sugar from Fiji. For many years these two products sustained a significant trade imbalance in favour of the Pacific Islands.

'Aid' did not feature as part of the colonial relationship. Rather, expenditure by New Zealand in the region to support its administration and, increasingly after 1945, to provide basic health, education and infrastructure was seen as a part of the country's responsibilities as a colonial power. But the territories began to move towards independence, starting with Samoa in 1965. Also, as the former territories of Great Britain (Fiji, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu, as well as the nominally independent Kingdom of Tonga) began to seek new sources of support, New Zealand and other metropolitan countries began to fashion aid policies for the region.

Early New Zealand aid policies in the Pacific, from the 1960s to the 1980s, were shaped by two main approaches. The former (Samoa and the Cook Islands) and continuing (Niue and Tokelau) territories received the largest share of aid and most went to general budget support, part of a transition which saw the everyday cost of government and development activities within it (schools, roads, health facilities) met in part by the departing colonial power. This included the cost of hiring New Zealand staff in certain departments where local staff were not available. There was a gradual swing from general budget support to specific projects, but the grant to the Tokelaus, for example, continued as a lump sum budget payment throughout the 1980s. Aid, then, was merely a continuation of a colonial responsibility. Elsewhere, aid to Fiji, Tonga and the Melanesian states of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, although dwarfed by the Australian and (initially) British contribution, focused on specific development projects. These were often in areas where New Zealand felt it had specific expertise to offer, such as the extensive pine plantation scheme in Fiji or a sheep management project in PNG. Both forms of aid began to increase. Particularly following the election of the Kirk Labour government in 1972, aid was seen as an important way in which New Zealand cemented its relationships with the Pacific (and a growing number of South-east Asian countries) and recognised its historical ties and responsibilities to the Pacific region. Aid in real terms tripled in the first half of the 1970s, though it then fell away, largely in response to economic shocks following the oil crises of the decade. Aid to the Pacific was maintained in real terms between 1975 and 1985, thereafter falling until a recovery in the late 1990s.

An annual survey of New Zealand aid in 1982–83 (New Zealand Bilateral Aid Programme, 1982 – see Table 2) reveals an interesting picture of New Zealand aid at the time. Of a total aid budget of around $76 million (in current dollars), 67.9% went to the Pacific region in various forms but nearly half of this (30.2% of the total aid budget) was support for dependent territories, much of it in the form of budget and other aid for core government services.

The colonial pattern of aid, strongly directed to present and former territories and with a high degree of budget aid, was but a part of a larger set of relationships that shaped these Pacific economies. Bertram and Watters (1985) in the mid-1980s coined the term MIRAB for Pacific Island economies characterised by migration, aid, remittances and bureaucracies. The importance of migration – the ability of Pacific Island people in former territories to enter New Zealand as New Zealand citizens or, as in the case of residents of Samoa, on favourable entry terms – is difficult to underestimate. Their access to the New Zealand (and, for some, the Australian) labour market meant that they could send savings home as remittances to relatives or take them back in their pockets when they returned. Migration and remittances contributed a great deal to these economies – often exceeding 30% of national income – and helped maintain relatively high material standards of living. Migration also allowed access to secondary and higher education for many in New Zealand. Although usually smaller as a contribution to national income, the aid part of the MIRAB model provided a critical element. It helped maintain, through support for government budgets, basic

Table 2: New Zealand aid in 1982-83

	NZ$000	%
Pacific bilateral – former & present territories		
Cook Islands	9,887	
Samoa	4,911	
Niue	5,922	
Tokelau	2,162	
Total territories	**22,882**	**30.2**
Other Pacific bilateral		
Tonga	3,623	
Fiji	4,995	
PNG	2,696	
Vanuatu	1,064	
Solomon Islands	904	
Other	1,097	
Total other Pacific bilateral	**14,379**	**19.0**
Pacific multilateral		
Pacific Island shipping	7,912	
Other	6,255	
Total Pacific multilateral	**14,167**	**18.7**
Total Pacific	**51,428**	**67.9**
Asia	11,768	15.5
Other bilateral	474	0.6
Misc and education	1,036	1.4
Other multilateral	10,982	14.5
TOTAL	**75,688**	**100**

Source: New Zealand Bilateral Aid Programme (1982) services and welfare and provided significant employment for many in the bureaucracy. Facing very high transport costs and small scale of operation, it had proved difficult for small Pacific Island states to develop viable export economies – the failure of citrus in the Cook Islands and bananas in Samoa bore testimony to this. The MIRAB model seemed to offer an alternative, tying the island states to New Zealand but opening different options for people to gain employment and skills yet enjoy reasonable welfare services.

The MIRAB model could be said to provide a development strategy. Critics might point to the way easy access to the metropolitan labour market or well-paying jobs in local government service led to a high shadow price of labour and a consequent disincentive to engage in local productive enterprises and investment. But, apart from tourism, there seemed little in the local economy that could compete on the global market. Instead, the long period of migration coupled with social investment in education, health and infrastructure (supported significantly by aid) helped create economies that provided a good material standard of living and gave access to reasonable education and health services. Economic growth rates might not have been high, but human development indicators – adult literacy, infant mortality, life expectancy – were very good by developing world standards and poverty rates were low. Food shortages were rare and average incomes sufficient to provide for basic needs. Furthermore, the model also had some benefits for New Zealand. With a reasonable standard of living at home, many people chose to stay there rather than migrate to New Zealand and thus access government services. Aid in some respects, then, was a way of shifting the costs of social reproduction from the education, health and social welfare budgets in New Zealand to the aid budgets of Pacific countries.

Following a period of severe public sector and economic restructuring in New Zealand in the later 1980s, the aid budget soon came under scrutiny. Not only was there pressure to cut aid budgets ... but also there was a significant change in the type of aid.

However, the model was soon under threat, at least the aid and bureaucracy elements. Following a period of severe public sector and economic restructuring in New Zealand in the later 1980s, the aid budget soon came under scrutiny. Not only was there pressure to cut aid budgets – which occurred in real, if not absolute, dollar terms – but also there was a significant change in the type of aid. The National government of the early 1990s was opposed to the idea of maintaining what it saw as the large inefficient bureaucracies of its aid recipients. Having supported a major reform of the public sector within New Zealand, it was unlikely to leave its neo-colonial recipients unscathed. In this it was in agreement with the other major aid donors to the region such as Australia, the United States and France, as well as with important multilateral donors such as the Asian Development Bank. In concert, the donors began a sharp programme of aid reform. Structural adjustment in the Pacific was enforced through aid. Aid budgets, especially those involving budget support, were slashed. In 1996 – 97 New Zealand allocated $11.6 million to the Cook Islands (already a cut from the peak of $14.3 million in 1991 – 92). A year later it allocated just $6 million. The local bureaucracy was hit hard, with two-thirds of civil servants made redundant and the rest enduring a 65% pay cut (Stanley, 2004, p.324). Local unemployment rose and many chose to book a flight to Auckland or elsewhere to seek work there. The resident population of the Cook Islands fell from 19,103 recorded in the 1996 census to 18,027 in the 2001 census (Cook Islands, 2008), although some reports recorded that nearly 4,000 Cook islanders left the country between 1996 and 1999 (Stanley, 2004, p.324).

This neo-liberal reform of aid in the 1990s was also accompanied by a change in justification for aid. Mention of poverty alleviation was largely absent and there was an explicit recognition that aid could boost the New Zealand economy by promoting economic growth and trade as well as providing opportunities for New Zealand consultants and education providers. New Zealand was 'doing well out of our doing good', as the Foreign Affairs Minister Don McKinnon put it in 1995 (Scheyvens and Overton, 1995). Yet whilst the New Zealand aid programme adopted the contemporary concerns for gender and sustainable development that were being promoted by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD, it was slow in recognising the trend towards adopting poverty alleviation as the principal goal of development aid. This goal was widely adopted by agencies such as the World Bank and by aid agencies in the United Kingdom and Australia (Storey et al., 2005). Poverty alleviation was widely adopted for several reasons. Firstly, widespread poverty was regarded as a cause of both political and social instability. Secondly, it was believed that by alleviating poverty and engaging the poor more in economic activity, overall economic growth and trade would be encouraged. Lastly, domestic political pressures in developed countries, through campaigns such as 'Live Aid' and 'Make Poverty History', have likely influenced not only increases in aid budgets but also the more explicit concern for poverty.

In the late 1990s New Zealand began to catch up with these international trends. Following strong submissions by the NGO community (Davenport and Low, 1999), a review of the aid programme led to a major shift, principally involving the creation of a semi-autonomous aid agency (NZAID) and the adoption of the poverty focus as the agency's mission statement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001). The move was seen as a way of clearly separating the diplomatic and trade goals of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade from the poverty alleviation goals of NZAID, and as a way of building expertise in aid and development rather than using non-specialist diplomatic staff to run the aid programme. It marked a shift also from the heavy-handed use of aid to enforce economic reform evident in the 1990s to the adoption of the rhetoric (at least) of joint actions of donors and recipients to address issues of poverty through the notion of 'partnerships' in aid.

New Zealand aid and poverty in the Pacific Islands

The new poverty focus soon had implications for the direction and nature of New Zealand aid in the Pacific. Firstly, it led to a recognition that New Zealand's former major recipients (countries such as Samoa and the Cook Islands) did not rank highly in indicators of poverty. Thanks to the long-term support for the government sector and investment in education and health, human development indicators for these countries and others such as Tonga and Fiji that had high aid levels and reasonably high migration rates (Tonga) or a viable export economy (Fiji, with sugar) were respectable by international standards (Table 3). By contrast, those larger Pacific Island countries that had enjoyed only low per capita aid and, critically, did not face ready migration options (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu) fared badly with indicators of poverty and underdevelopment. In addition, the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals by the region's donors and recipients also highlighted the great differences in poverty indicators across the region, and revealed the pressing need for serious and immediate action to address issues such as the extremely high rates of maternal and infant mortality and the very low rates of primary school attendance and adult literacy in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Furthermore, following the 9/11 attacks and the terrorist bombings in Bali in 2002, these same countries seemed to pose a threat, to Australia in particular, because their governments appeared fragile, being threatened by high levels of corruption, internal separatist movements, general disorder and a weak revenue base. There was a fear that these potential failed states in Melanesia could become a base for terrorism or that their collapse could result in high numbers of refugees to Australia and New Zealand.

For New Zealand, there were immediate consequences. There was substantial support for the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) when that state threatened to disintegrate in 2003. And as NZAID reviewed its priorities, shifts began to occur. Aid levels in absolute if not real dollar terms were maintained to the Cook Islands, Samoa, the Tokelaus and Niue, but substantial increases were recorded to Papua New Guinea and the Solomons. Between 2000 and 2006 aid to the Solomon Islands increased from $5.8 million to $22.1 million and to Papua New Guinea from $11 million to $17.6 million. In 1995 the top three recipients of New Zealand's bilateral aid had been (in order) the Cook Islands, Niue and Samoa. In 2006 these were replaced by Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Explicitly, the poverty agenda had brought about this shift, but implicitly security concerns also weighed heavily.

As well as changes to the quantity and direction of aid, the early 2000s began to see a significant shift in the type of aid. Project-based aid with fixed cycles, objectives and outputs suited some forms of development, such as the building of infrastructure, but not others, where long-term outcomes such as improvements in health and education indicators were desired. Also, concerns were expressed after audit reports revealed the difficulty of maintaining tight financial management over a large number of projects in many locations with a range of partners, from both government and civil society. More globally, concern about aid effectiveness led to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, to which New Zealand was a signatory. This strengthened the partnership principle by promoting the concept of recipient 'ownership' of development. This, in effect, gave a much more prominent role to recipient governments for it was they who had to articulate poverty reduction strategies. It also became apparent that they had to put in place financial management systems that donors could work with and so be more confident that their aid cheques were not being siphoned off by corrupt officials.

Table 3: Human development indicators in the Pacific, 2007

	HDI ranking (of 179)*	Population (2007)	Life expectancy at birth (2006)	Adult** literacy rate (2006)	Education enrolment ratio*** (2006)	GDP per capita PPP (2006)
PNG	149	6320,000	57.0	57.3	40.7	US$1950
Solomon Islands	134	500,000	63.2	76.6	49.7	1586
Vanuatu	123	230,000	69.6	77.3	62.3	3481
Fiji	103	840,000	68.5	71.5	71.5	4548
Samoa	96	190,000	71.1	98.7	74.1	3828
Tonga	85	100,000	73.0	99.2	78.0	3677

* where 179 is the lowest ** age 15+ *** combined gross primary, secondary and tertiary enrolments

In practice, the Paris Declaration, embraced by most major aid agencies, has signalled a shift from project to programme aid, meaning longer-term commitments and a focus on larger-scale development outcomes, basically defined by the Millennium Development Goals. Larger aid donations, the poverty focus and a concern for rigorous audit trails have also reshaped aid channels so that, in a reversal of 1990s neo-liberal policy, aid has aimed to strengthen and support recipient state institutions as the key development agents. Governments can be assisted to improve their financial management systems, they can work with very large-scale and long-term programmes and they can be held accountable. Furthermore, these efficiency-based arguments for reconstructing recipient states has neatly corresponded with a post-9/11 concern to strengthen states and have them support efforts to prevent or curb terrorism.

New Zealand again has followed this trend. As it has moved more to Melanesia as a priority region, it has started to develop Sector Wide Approaches (SWAps), negotiating with governments so that they devise a strategy for, for example, primary education or rural health services, which are then agreed to and largely financed by New Zealand aid. SWAps are generally seen as the first step to developing mature and strong donor-recipient relationships so that, in time, donors can consider General Budget Support (GBS), in effect writing very large cheques to support the general costs of government services. It is a long process to develop such relationships, which require rigorous and transparent financial disbursement systems and close agreement over the long-term development strategies and policies. Once in place, there are clear advantages for both sides. There is a reduction in the transaction costs of aid and large sums can be committed on a long-term basis with lower overheads (compared to very large numbers of discrete projects), all in the hoped-for knowledge that the strategies are contributing significantly and measurably towards poverty alleviation.

For New Zealand, the move towards SWAps has begun and, although GBS may be some distance away, there are signs of an ironic return to the old system, whereby New Zealand aid was given mainly to a small number of Pacific countries to develop and support their government-provided services and provide good standards of living for their populations. And, given the evident success of this approach over several decades, as seen above in the favourable human development indicators in Samoa and the Cook Islands (albeit alongside the critical element of relatively open migration), it might be expected that similar good development outcomes might be seen in future decades in Vanuatu, PNG or Solomon Islands.

Another change?

Just as this new aid landscape for the region was being put in place, a change of government in New Zealand in late 2008 signalled yet another shift. The incoming government was quick to indicate that it wanted changes in NZAID. The most immediate was the decision to end the agency's 'semi-autonomous' status within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and re-integrate the agency more closely within the ministry. Although seemingly just a structural matter, apparently to achieve efficiencies and save administrative costs, it signalled that the new government wanted aid to be closely aligned to the country's wider foreign policy priorities (regional security and trade amongst them) rather than guided by a separate poverty alleviation objective.

Indeed, the strongest new direction given to the agency has been to replace its poverty focus (which was described by Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully as 'nebulous') with one concerned with 'sustainable economic development' (McCully, 2009). 'Sustainable' in this sense seems to be more about economic growth that can be sustained than about any fundamental adoption of environmentally sustainable growth models (if such models are indeed conceptually possible) as the core guiding principle for aid. This objective, it seems, will be tracked by a new set of indicators, including a reversal of the trade imbalance with the Pacific and tourism numbers. These indicators will be critical for determining the type of aid that results. If it is to be 'economic growth that is sustained', with indicators such as GNI growth rates, trade volumes or tourist arrivals, then it may involve in practice growth strategies that depend on natural resource exploitation (increased logging, mining and fisheries as well as the building of more tourist resorts). On the other hand, if it is to be 'environmentally sustainable development', the indicators should involve longer time frames and strategies should focus more on the protection of biodiversity and careful natural resource management.

Other elements of the emerging new policy include concerns that too much aid is directed at bloated and

> The aid budget will continue to increase, though not at the rate declared by the previous government. There will be close co-operation with Australia; there will be particular attention focused on the Pacific region; there is likely to be support for air and shipping services; and there will still be commitment to the Millennium Development Goals

'unproductive' bureaucracies in the region (McCully, 2009), that financial management and accountability need to be improved and overheads are too high. This may, in fact, indicate less support for regional NGOs as much as, if not more than, less support for recipient governments. Other signals are a little less ambiguous. The aid budget will continue to increase, though not at the rate declared by the previous government. There will be close co-operation with Australia; there will be particular attention focused on the Pacific region; there is likely to be support for air and shipping services; and there will still be commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (McCully, 2009; Venter, 2009).

These latter statements give some grounds for believing that the changes may not radically alter the trend towards long-term commitment to development programmes in Melanesia through the mechanism of SWAps and the agencies of recipient states. It would surely be unwise, given the government's stated concerns regarding regional security, to abandon efforts to build the capacity and accountability of state institutions in countries such as Solomon Islands and PNG. And this requires long-term involvement.

However, other aspects of the new policies give rise for concern, not just because they may undermine the poverty alleviation goals but also because they may be contradictory and unworkable in practice. Firstly, the rhetoric regarding inefficient bureaucracies on one hand and the need to lower overheads and improve accountability on the other may pull aid delivery in different directions. Working with civil society agencies or governments, inevitably with a project-based approach, may help deliver aid to needy groups in recipient countries but it will involve increased attention and cost to ensure contracts are in place and monitored and that recipient agencies have the capability to work with stringent donor financial systems. After all, with the Paris Declaration and the move to SWAps with government agencies, it was recognised that it was this route that was more likely to deliver efficiencies and greater transparency and accountability.

Secondly, the desire to promote sustainable economic growth raises questions about the ability to identify and measure connections between aid inputs and desired economic outputs. It is one thing to develop programmes that might reasonably link investment in school buildings, equipment and teacher training with improvements in children's school attendance and literacy. It is quite another to identify and measure the impact of aid expenditure on, say, the construction of a remote airstrip on the economic growth rate of a country or its trade deficit or tourism arrivals, given that these are the product of a large and complex set of variables.

Finally, there is a real possibility that a change in the focus of New Zealand's aid may actually run counter to the very national-level foreign policy objectives it seeks to align with. Having the poverty focus subordinate to sustainable economic growth may divert attention from the very real concerns that exist in recipient countries relating to the marked social inequalities in welfare, income and economic opportunities and the way these contribute to political instability. Economic growth might be promoted but if it only involves – as it has in the past – a narrow élite who can use their wealth to capture political power, then long-term political stability and regional security will be threatened again. Pro-poor growth, which addresses the needs of the poor, protects their assets, builds human capital through access to adequate education and health facilities and encourages broad participation of all in economic activity, builds a much stronger and more resilient foundation for future prosperity and security. Poverty alleviation and economic development are not separate but linked in complex ways. However, a reliance on economic growth, assisted by aid, as a means of alleviating poverty is a contentious strategy that would fly in the face of both international agreements, such as the Millennium Development Goal accord and the Paris Declaration, and even the work of international agencies such as the World Bank. Given the new government's intention to work closely with their Australian counterparts, though, it is unlikely that it will move far to distance itself too openly from such agreements and practices. Thus, although sustainable economic growth will be the visible guiding objective of NZAID, the Millennium Development Goals and the Paris Declaration will remain important operational elements of the agency's work. Furthermore, New Zealand needs to work in concert with other like-minded aid donors, for the increasing influence and largesse of donors such as China and Taiwan who have commercial and diplomatic ambitions in the region may work to undermine the principles and modes of aid delivery employed by most of the international aid community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a short-term focus on a narrow and contestable range of economic growth indicators is not a good way to measure the success of an aid programme. Instead, the history of New Zealand's aid in the Pacific has demonstrated that it is long-term commitment to building social and human – as well as economic – capital that produces durable, measurable and beneficial development outcomes. Also, it requires concern for supporting both state institutions and civil society and developing relationships that are seen as reciprocal and respectful. Finally, it must be recognised that aid is only one strand of such relationships and that it may not be the most important one in terms of good development outcomes. If New Zealand is to continue to play a constructive role in enhancing development in the Pacific, it must be acknowledged that aid needs to be accompanied by policies for immigration and trade in particular that need to consider the development impacts of such policies in the Pacific as well as in New Zealand.

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