

# Submission to DFAT enquiry into Australia's new international development policy

By Dr Tony Fischer AM FTSE FAIA

Honorary Fellow, CSIRO and ACT Coordinator, The Crawford Fund

Jan 2020

I am a senior agricultural scientist who, since the early 1960s, has worked in crop research in Australia (NSW Agriculture, CSIRO and as a Director of the Grains Research and Development Corporation - [GRDC](#)) and in developing countries (Director of the Wheat Program of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre - [CIMMYT](#) with headquarters in Mexico - and at the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research – [ACIAR](#), and serving on the boards of the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas - [ICARDA](#) and the International Rice Research Institute – [IRRI](#)). I retired from ACIAR in 2005 but continue regular work as an Honorary Fellow at CSIRO Ag and Food. For 50 years I owned and managed in collaboration with my brother the Hon Tim Fischer AC, former Deputy Prime Minister of Australia, a wheat-sheep farm in southern NSW. I have stayed in touch with the agricultural development and aid debate, in particular through involvement with the [Crawford Fund](#), having been ACT Coordinator since 2007. My joint book on crop yield and global food security (Fischer *et al.*, 2014) is widely cited. My submission is made as a concerned citizen and in no way reflects an official CF or CSIRO view.

One doesn't have to have had my long experience in the field to be painfully aware that Australia's current total ODA expenditure as a percent of GDP is relatively low for a rich nation. For 2017 our total ODA amounted to 0.23% of GNI (OECD stats) putting us close to the bottom of rich nations (USA is worse, 0.18%, but most rich nations are > 0.5%, including the UK at 0.7% by law); the Australian number peaked in 1975 at 0.66%. DFAT stats for 2018-19 confirm our low ODA (0.23% of GDP). Added to this underinvestment, the DFAT numbers show that the portion of ODA going to agricultural research and development (about 6% of the total) is very low in the light of the well-documented track record of such aid. How can Australians stand proud in the world in the face of such undeniable statistics? Well partly they are uninformed. A recent survey (EPSOS 2017) found that more than 90% of Australian thought that Australia spent much more than 1% of the national budget on aid, with an average estimate of expenditure being around 6%; in contrast, the true numbers above are just less than 1% of the budget! What the survey also showed is that even more Australians have a very incorrect view of the achievements of development aid, one which is far below the actual achievements, an issue confirmed as very general around the world by Rosling *et al* (2018).

Clearly there is a tragic lack of information, which needs to be rectified. I believe that presented appropriately with the facts on relative expenditure and impact, every Australian, from whichever walk of life, would be prepared to move to rectify the situation, even without considering the undeniable benefits for Australia itself of ODA. Yet our leaders generally ignore the issue, or worse, denigrate aid for dubious political advantage. In contrast our farmers and their organizations have been strongly supportive when properly informed of the nature and consequences of our agricultural research aid. Tim Fischer upon leaving Parliament became himself a strong advocate for international agricultural research, chairing the Crawford Fund, and later serving on the Board of the Global Crop Diversity Trust ([Crop Trust](#)) until his sad death in August 2019.

As the World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development (World Bank 2007) argues convincingly, agriculture is still the major human activity in many developing countries, while it occupies more than half the work force in those with severest poverty, a group comprising about 1 billion people (Rosling *et al.*, 2019). No country has advanced to higher household welfare levels, beyond subsistence farming of the poorest, without an increase in agricultural productivity. Few nations have grown economically without an agricultural productivity revolution. Overseas agricultural R and D aid can only ever be a small part of the investment required in research, institutions, infrastructure and governance to make this happen, but it is one of the smartest uses of aid, and can play a catalytic role, as we have seen from Australia's and others past investments (e.g. through the [CGIAR](#)).

I am sure it is not necessary to remind you that despite Australia's small financial contribution, our track record and our professionals in agricultural aid are highly respected internationally (and could be a model for Australian health professionals). This has been helped by the way we trained agricultural scientists, by their deployment as partners in sensible agricultural aid projects of ACIAR, DFAT and non-Australian funders, and by the fact that we are the only rich country with many of the agricultural ecologies found in poorer nations. Achieving several of the various UN Sustainable Development Goals amounts to advancing agriculture through its impacts on poverty reduction (the poorest are always in the rural sector), on food and nutritional security, and on the environment, and through agriculture's adaptation to the challenge of climate change. Australian agricultural scientists were making exciting progress with conservation agriculture amongst rainfed farmers in Syria and Iraq before drought and ensuing sectarian violence blew the whole thing apart. Similar progress was happening in Tunisia and Morocco, another area where Australia's unique farming experience fits well, before political expedience saw the program ended. Agricultural progress in the region and the rest of Sub Saharan Africa is a necessary condition to eliminating the ongoing strife and out migration.

Do we expect our defence forces to be Australia's only protection against poverty and strife in countries which are not progressing rapidly enough out of severe poverty? That seems to be the short-sighted thinking which prevails. This is obviously the largest "selfish" reason to invest in aid, and in agricultural development aid in particular (World Bank 2007). The many other selfish reasons should be well known to DFAT and hardly need listing again here. Suffice to commend to those who are uncertain of them the brilliant book, "[Doing Well by Doing Good](#)", from my old professor, Dr Derek Tribe (Tribe 1991). More recently, The Crawford Fund's [Doing Well by Doing Good Task Force](#), chaired by The Hon Neil Andrew and ACIAR's Impact Assessment series updates this picture with many more recent achievements for Australia (as well as partner countries).

Of course things don't change overnight, and there would probably not be sufficient Australian capacity to handle a large relative increase in agricultural R and D aid, but we have successful mechanisms in place in particular within DFAT and ACIAR which would surely respond to modest funding increase while maintaining their proven effectiveness. In addition, there may be new, more efficient and effective ways of delivering such aid and recent experience of DFAT in "scaling out" agricultural technologies (for example in Indonesia) could be an example. Effective use of aid is itself a subject for research, but Australian institutions have not been strong in this area compared to some in the North; recent moves at the ANU to offer a higher degree in this general field should be applauded. Australia's own experience in developing from an economy based on agricultural to a modern diverse one, a century long process, reminds us that development is a long process, and we should plan to be more substantially involved international agricultural aid for the long term.

## References

Fischer T, Byerlee D and Edmeades G (2014) Crop yields and global food security: Will yield increase continue to feed the world?. ACIAR Monograph 158, 634 pp. <http://aciar.gov.au/publication/mn158>.

EPSOS (2017) <https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-perceptions-development-progress-perils-perceptions-research>

Rosling H, Rosling O and Rosling Rönnlund A (2018) Factfulness: Ten reasons why we are wrong about the world- and why things are better than you think.

Tribe D (1991) Doing Well by Doing Good. Pluto Press  
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/9718322?q&versionId=45782839>

World Bank, Agriculture for Development (2007)  
[https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2008/Resources/WDR\\_00\\_book.pdf](https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2008/Resources/WDR_00_book.pdf)