

We must make foreign aid a priority

By Audette Exel

Sixteen years ago, in a small health clinic in the middle of the Ugandan bush, I watched helplessly as a tiny baby girl slowly died from neonatal jaundice. Without basic equipment, like phototherapy lights, the nurses at the clinic could only rely on the sunlight to treat her. Each day, the nurses took the baby outside and held her up to the sun in the hope that they could save her. But it was cloudy; rainy season was upon us, and this little girl died.

Since that time, the world has made remarkable progress in the fight to end child mortality and prevent more senseless deaths like that of this baby girl. Since 1990, we have almost halved the number of children who die every year before the age of five – from 12.6 million to 6.6 million, largely thanks to investments in foreign aid. But there is much more to be done.

The announcement that the Abbott government is making further cuts to Australia's foreign aid budget is a disappointing one. Not only does it hinder progress being made to alleviate poverty across the globe, but also fails to grasp the huge potential that smart investments in foreign aid can have for Australia's long-term security and economic growth.

Australia is a nation dependant on trade, with one in five Australian jobs directly linked to it. Resource rich with a small population, we rely on trade as the major driver of our economy. In order to unlock potential for Australian trade across the globe, investments in aid are vital. As people are released from poverty they are better able to contribute to their economies, and opportunities for trade and commerce increase.

Investment in aid is also critical for the stability of our world. Extreme poverty brings an increased likelihood of conflict and disease outbreak, which, despite being an island nation, we are not immune from. We have seen many examples of this - a swine flu outbreak in Mexico in 2009 led to schools in Australia closing the following week. Australia benefits when nations across the globe have improved standards of development. Their stability is our stability.

However, the imperative for aid does not exist purely within the framework of national interest. I firmly believe that if you are a person who is awake in the world, you cannot help but be totally impacted by the incredible social injustice that we live with. We are living in a nation of great wealth, and we owe it to our own humanity to act. For less than 60 cents per person, in 2013 Australian aid saw 2.8 million children receive vaccinations against life-threatening diseases and enrolled over a million children in school. We have the power to make a profound difference to the lives of people across the globe that do not have our good fortune.

Australia has international obligations under the Millennium Development Goals to spend 0.7% of GDP on effective aid by 2020. With these recent cuts, we will only be contributing 0.29% of GDP by 2017. It is time to make aid a priority. Many other nations that sit far below Australia on measures of wealth and wellbeing have made foreign aid a critical part of their economic strategy. Even the UK, with a much higher debt ratio than Australia, has kept their commitment to spending 0.7% of GDP on aid.

I have seen firsthand the incredible impact that smart investments in international development can make through the work of my organisation, The ISIS Foundation. Over sixteen years, ISIS has witnessed entire communities transformed through the provision of education, healthcare and infrastructure projects. Fast forward to today and that small clinic in the Ugandan bush is now a model hospital in East Africa, providing expert care in maternal infant and child health, with one of the best-equipped neonatal intensive care units in the region. Tens of thousands of mothers and babies who otherwise might have died have been saved.

Aid is not charity. It is not just a nice thing to do. It is imperative for our economy, for the stability of our world and for our own humanity. We must let no more infants die because they lack something as basic as light.