

State doesn't reflect our generosity

Wren Green

KIWIS are global chart toppers for giving, but Government aid policy is nowhere near so generous.

In 2011 the New Zealand public ranked in the top five out of 120 countries as "givers", while our Government's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) levels languish near the bottom amongst OECD countries.

This year's Budget figures show little actual increase in ODA spending this year and none for the two years after that. Proposed increases have been delayed. After inflation this represents a declining aid budget when significant increases are needed now.

Successive Labour and National-led governments have not done enough to move us up the OECD rankings in recent decades.

Aid levels are usually measured as a proportion of Gross National Income (GNI) and therefore take into account population and wealth. The agreed United Nations target is 0.7 per cent of GNI going to aid, a target which New Zealand has supported in principle, but has never set a specific goal to achieve.

Preliminary OECD figures for 2011 put New Zealand at only 0.28 per cent of GNI going to development assistance activities. That's just 28 cents out of every \$100 of New Zealand's Gross National Income spent on aid. A far cry from the 0.5 per cent we achieved in the mid-1970s.

We lag well behind most European countries where Sweden, Norway, Luxembourg, Denmark and the Netherlands are already over the 0.7 per cent target. Australia is more generous than we are at 0.35 per cent and just increased its aid budget by A\$315 million to A\$5.2 billion for the next year.

New Zealand is stuck at NZ\$550 million per annum for at least three



Case for aid: Port Vila, Vanuatu . . . fulfilling rights and needs. Photo: PEDRAM PIRNIA

years on current Treasury forecasts. Despite our own economic difficulties there are strong arguments for increasing aid levels, globally and in the Pacific, where New Zealand concentrates its aid spend.

Poverty and growing inequalities have led to social unrest and economic downturn in some Pacific neighbours. Well-targeted aid helps lift people out of poverty by reducing unemployment and corruption and improving health, thereby contributing to stability.

With stability come better conditions for achieving development targets and increased social and economic welfare.

The average age in Pacific Island countries is 21. Many face population pressures, especially low-lying atoll countries that have additional stresses from rising sea levels, which require increased government expenditures to meet people's basic needs.

Study after study has shown improving the status and opportunities for women and girls is strongly linked to a country's overall economic development and poverty reduction. In 2012, the World Bank argued gender equality is not only a human right and development objective but also smart economics.

If one woman is helped out of poverty

she will bring four others with her, have fewer children, and be better able to contribute to family income.

The primary education statistics have improved throughout Polynesia, as have reductions in child mortality rates. However, the Pacific's largest country, Papua New Guinea, is off track to meet any of its targets under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), according to the 2010 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report. It also reports all Pacific Island countries are off track to halve the proportion of people suffering from hunger.

Some might argue that aid begins at home and no more so than in Christchurch.

Kiwis are generous people and we have a strong sense of fairness. It was heartening to learn that Christchurch-based agencies sustained their income levels from local supporters last year. They recognised that other people still needed help and they were willing to assist despite, and perhaps because of, their own traumas.

Non-governmental organisations continue to be well-supported by the New Zealand public with direct contributions of over \$110 million last year for their overseas work in 50 countries. From their experience they know that good development is about fulfilling the rights and needs of people. Just like here. That means setting social and economic development priorities to improve equity and equality for all people.

Our ODA budget can contribute to reducing poverty and meeting development priorities but until the amount is significantly increased we are not pulling our weight in the world.

Dr Wren Green is director, Council for International Development, the umbrella agency for New Zealand's international, non-governmental development organisations.