



Australian Regional Leadership Initiative Review

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Executive Summary

Supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the ARLI program has been an innovative intervention into Australia aid advocacy since 2015. Like other Australian advocacy efforts, the ARLI program aims ‘to build cross-party understanding of the value and impact of a strong Australian contribution to aid and development’. Yet the approach of taking parliamentarians, and key influencers, on learning visits - where they can be exposed in a first-hand way to Australian aid programs - has proven a transformative step in aid advocacy.

Over the 8 years of the initiative, seventy-six parliamentarians have been on learning visits to aid recipient countries. This review, conducted in October 2023, is based on interviews with 23 of these alumni as well as six additional aid sector representatives. It also draws on project documentation and informal discussions with various political and aid sector stakeholders. The review also builds on similar reviews of ARLI in 2017 and 2020, which were also conducted by the University of Melbourne.

Key intended outcomes of the ARLI program are related to the volumes of Australian aid, especially in allocations for child survival-related programs. Yet the period since the ARLI program began has been a challenging one for the sector, with levels of aid falling to historically low levels (as a proportion of Australia’s Gross National Income). Despite this, the change of government at the last election has contributed to a buoyancy in the aid sector concerning the broad prospects for the country’s aid program. (The extent to which this cautious optimism is warranted is addressed in the Review).

Within this context, the ARLI program approach is highly relevant. Foreign aid is a very centralised area of decision making, given its low salience amongst the public and politicians alike. The ARLI approach of engaging parliamentarians on learning visits (and particularly those who may, in the future, move into key decision-making roles) is crucial in achieving the program’s intended outcomes related to aid financing, accountability and policy. Indeed, there is no other approach that could engage parliamentarians in a more direct way. One parliamentarian summed up the desire for parliamentarians to *experience* policy issues rather than just *hearing* about it. ‘Don’t tell me, show me’, they said (Interview 26).

This review highlighted that the ARLI program is highly effective in increasing understanding of and support for the aid program amongst parliamentarians. It is considered by all participating stakeholders to be an efficient and effective deployment of advocacy resources. ARLI’s contribution to facilitating civil society engagement in aid accountability and in creating a more supportive aid policy environment were also evident throughout our discussions. Building on reviews in 2017 and 2020, there is now a very strong evidence base for the effectiveness of the program.

ARLI has had some targeted ‘wins’ in relation to aid financing, with the contributions of ARLI alumni after the Kenya trip being a notable example. There is also evidence that the networks created by ARLI are highly valued by the sector in impacting accountability related to aid policy. ARLI has also supported alumni in shifting the policy environment related to aid,

though some significant policy related outcomes were not immediately intended by the program, notably the ongoing work on Modern Slavery.

ARLI's impact takes place within a political dynamic where a 'cautious consensus' on aid has become embedded in Australia. This 'cautious consensus' entails broad agreement between major parties around five conditions: a recognition that aid spending should not drop below current levels (while leaving room to grow modestly into the future); incremental change; prioritising Australia's near-abroad; prioritising pragmatic policy action; and circumspection. While the formation of this consensus was apparent in the previous review, this Review found that all these conditions have become entrenched, to the point it is difficult to see the present status quo around Australia's aid policy settings being challenged in the near-to-medium term.

ARLI has been an innovative and effective intervention in Australian aid advocacy and its sustainability is crucial. Yet two key questions remain to ensure ARLI's long term future is secure. The first relates to diversifying the funding base for the program. The second relates to sustaining and expanding the strong relational capital amongst parliamentarians and the sector that the program has generated, potentially institutionalising it in some way.

This Review concludes by offering four recommendations for consideration, relating to: the potential expansion of the program to meet intended outcomes; potential adaptations to the learning visits; institutionalising relationships with alumni; and continuing to build ownership and networks with the sector.

Introduction

The Australia Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI) is a pivotal component of advocacy to Australian parliamentarians about the country's aid program. This study of ARLI is the third review of the program by University of Melbourne, the previous two coming in 2017 and 2020. The 2023 review again confirms that **ARLI is crucial in the sector's efforts at building strong financing, accountability and policy related to the aid program.**

The report is divided into seven sections:

- **Context of aid politics and advocacy in Australia**
- **Relevance of the program**
- **Effectiveness and Efficiency of ARLI**
- **Impact of ARLI**
- **The post-Covid policy settings related to aid (preview of sector learning paper)**
- **Sustainability**
- **Recommendations for the program.**

The ARLI program (known originally as the Australian Aid and Parliament project) began in 2015 with support from the BMGF. The core activity of the program, and what the program is primarily known for in the sector, is overseas learning visits for parliamentarians and influencers (in business, sport, media and faith) in Australia. Since the first learning visit to PNG in 2015, the ARLI program has taken 76 parliamentarians and a cohort of 8 influencers to a range of different countries in Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Of the 76 parliamentarians that have been on learning visits, 18 are no longer in parliament. But this still means that more than 20 percent of the Australian parliament are ARLI alumni, demonstrating the cumulative impact of consistent learning visits over time. Along with the learning visits, the program runs follow up activities for alumni and mobilization of the aid sector, seeking to maintain and foster further support for the Australian aid program.

The Australian ARLI program is supported by a broader multi country BMGF program led by Save the Children UK which aims to '**Close the gap on inequality indicators, in and between countries, for Child Survival SDGs by 2025**'. Under this global objective sit three primary outcomes related to

- a) **Financing:** Increased or maintained financing for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (RMNCH), Immunization, Primary Health Care (PHC) and Nutrition in target donor markets and selected developing countries
- b) **Accountability:** Improved global and national accountability mechanisms supporting civil society and private sector involvement in the delivery of integrated health and Nutrition interventions
- c) **Policy:** Improved institutional and strategic approach to delivering RMNCH continuum of care, Immunisation, PHC and Nutrition interventions to scale and contribute to preventing child deaths at global and national levels

Report Background & Methodology

Save the Children Australia commissioned this evaluation of ARLI in October 2023. The bulk of the review took place over three weeks in October 2023 and included the consultants' conducting interviews both online and in parliament in Canberra. The review draws on twenty-nine semi-structured interviews, review of ARLI documentation and informal discussions with ARLI staff, parliamentary office staff and other stakeholders in the sector during one week of field research in Canberra. The responses from all participants are anonymised in this report.

ARLI review data collection involved:

- 22 formal interviews with MPs who were ARLI alumni, and 7 formal interviews with other key informants from the sector (15 women and 14 men) Parliamentarians attended one (or two) of seven different ARLI trips. Parliamentarians comprised 7 senators and 15 from the House of Representatives. We interviewed 10 Labor, 10 Coalition and one crossbench parliamentarians. Our sample included MPs from every state and territory except the NT.
- MP interviews were supplemented with additional informal discussions with parliamentary staffers, ARLI staff and other sector stakeholders and document review of ARLI program reports and relevant media articles and speech transcripts.

Importantly, this research also draws on the two previous reviews of ARLI conducted by University of Melbourne in 2017 and 2020. This allows for important longitudinal comparisons in the review of the program. Like those previous reviews, this review focusses particularly on the learning visit activities – as these absorbed by far the greatest investment of ARLI staff time and program budget during the previous period. Other activities related to sector engagement and alumni follow up are also covered but with less detail. Further, whilst child survival related outcomes are strongly foregrounded in program documentation, this review steps back to consider the broader dynamics of aid politics and decision making in Australia across all sectors, not just related to, for example, RMNCH.

Section 1: Context of aid politics and advocacy in Australia

A key intended outcome of the ARLI program is increasing the total volume of Australian aid. At present, Australia is currently devoting a record-low proportion of its GNI to development assistance. By this measure, Australia was the 27th most generous donor in the OECD in 2022. Furthermore, current budget settings have this ratio of Australia's ODA to GNI falling even further in the medium term.

This ratio, of course, does not fully capture the political dynamics of aid in Australia. Indeed, at present, there is a marked difference between the situation suggested by the headline budget figures and the relatively buoyant mood within the aid sector. Having endured the 'retrenchment years' under the Coalition government, most notably for the drastic cuts

inflicted in 2013, there is a sense of relief within this community that the new Labor government represents a more receptive and engaging partner.

This review was undertaken soon after the release of Australia's new International Development Policy, which was published in August 2023, after some delay. Overall, the policy was received positively, although some commentators called out the document for its lack of ambition. This speaks to a debate emerging in the sector between those who believe that incremental change is appropriate versus those who argue that only radical change can decisively shift the Australian aid program from its languor. (We address these ideas in more detail in Section 5, which contemplates the emerging political dynamics in Australian aid.)

Beyond the aid policy context, much of our engagement with interlocutors inevitably revolved around broader political dynamics. More specifically, three factors formed the backdrop to these conversations. First, it was clear that a hinge-point had been reached in the Albanese Government's first term. There was general acknowledgement that the political climate had turned, with political attention now focused on the run-in to the next election. The second, closely related, factor pertained to the failure of the Voice to parliament referendum. Indeed, the referendum was held on the Saturday prior to the week when most of the interviews for this Review were undertaken. Already, many respondents were speculating that the politics around the referendum formed a precursor, of sorts, to how the next election campaign might play out. Finally, the 'cost of living crisis' was at the forefront of the minds of politicians. As we spell out in more detail in Section 5, these factors all function to collectively reinforce the current status quo in Australia's aid policy settings.

Section 2: Relevance of the program

Is the ARLI program doing the right things to reach the intended outcomes?

Across all the reviews of the ARLI program - in 2017, 2020 and then 2023 - there has been a strong consensus that a program centring around parliamentary learning visits is a **highly relevant approach** to reach the intended outcomes related to aid financing, accountability and policy.

Literature on aid politics and policymaking recognises the elite nature of decision making (Corbett 2017, Day 2016, Lancaster 2007, Wells 2019). Aid is not a prominent policy issue for the Australian public and therefore features little within party room agendas. One parliamentarian speaking frankly said that in their party room they had *never* discussed the issue of foreign aid. Similarly, a cross bench MP described their regular cross bench meetings to talk about key issues. 'Foreign aid hasn't come up once.', she said (Interview 29). As aid rarely features on the agendas of most parliamentarians, it therefore becomes a decision-making domain for political and policy elites. In terms of aid volumes, decision making centres around the Expenditure Review Committee which comprises of the Prime Minister, Treasurer and the Minister for Finance, along with three or four other senior Ministers. Aid policy more broadly is developed by foreign policy elites and parliamentarians who may specialise in this area through their committee roles.

Aid advocacy is therefore challenging as it is a low policy priority for both the public and parliamentarians, and decision making ultimately rests with elites. This review revealed that the ARLI approach of engaging parliamentarians on learning visits (and particularly those who may move in the future into key decision-making roles) is highly relevant in achieving the program's intended outcomes related to financing, accountability and policy. Indeed, there is no other approach that could engage parliamentarians in a more direct way.

Sector representatives participating in this research were also extremely positive about the relevance of the ARLI program. When asked about whether learning visits were valuable in the goal of building parliamentary support for aid one cross bench participant said, 'Absolutely. Look, I think it's the only way to do it.' (Interview 14). Similarly, a Liberal senator responded by saying, 'Oh absolutely. Without a doubt. Without a doubt.' (Interview 15). A sector representative meanwhile said, 'I think it is wonderful. It's really, from what I can see, it's really transformative' (Interview 7). The relevance of the approach was seen to lie in its ability to give parliamentarians direct experiences of aid programs in action. The sector representatives went on to say:

when people see what's actually happening on the ground... it builds a real sense of connection to the development programme and excites people - that start asking questions about how it works, how can be improved, how can be strengthened. So I think building a cadre or grouping of parliamentarians who have that experience is a great thing.' (Interview 7)

A Labor parliamentarian summed up this desire for parliamentarians to *experience* policy issues rather than just *hearing* about it – he said, 'don't tell me, show me' (Interview 26).

Parliamentarian enthusiasm for the program was also related to the support they received from program staff. A Coalition MP suggested that 'the void that this programme is filling is...to understand that [parliamentarians]...are time poor...Most of us probably won't organise a trip like this. But it was organised for you. All you have got to do is turn up with your passport and your visa and your bags.' (Interview 5). The option of bringing family members was also appreciated by several ARLI alumni. One Coalition MP said, 'it's a credit to them, they're willing to let you pay extra to bring a family member, which actually adds to the experience for the MPs' (Interview 5). In this sense, from both sector representatives and parliamentarians the ARLI learning visits were strongly considered to be the right intervention for the aid sector to be doing.

Amidst this broad support for the relevance of the program, some questions were raised by participants about the program. One cross bench MP reflected on the learning visit and its relevance to her own electorate. She concluded that, 'it doesn't have a direct line of relevance to my electorate. So if I was strictly going by the rules that I set myself, I wouldn't do it [the learning visit]' (Interview 29). A Liberal MP also recognised that while parliamentarians may see the value of the program, their constituents may not. She said, 'Should we be travelling anywhere? Because our constituents will say, 'why are you going and doing something?'' (Interview 4)

A Labor parliamentarian meanwhile reflected on the way that the learning visits portrayed aid activities. She said:

‘I think there's a level of performance that goes on, in the sense that the people representing the programmes that we saw...read the play of what it was about. Not sugarcoating any problems ... but more we were treated with a level of really high respect. I think there was a level of deference to us that was somewhat...uncomfortable.’ (Interview 6)

She went on to recognise that there is no way for learning visits to be managed so that parliamentarians can engage with aid programs in a completely unfiltered way. Yet she did highlight that the nature of the program inevitably contained some ‘performance’.

More broadly, the relevance of the program needs to be assessed along the lines of the program’s intended outcomes. There has been a hardening of a cautious consensus on aid policy across the major parties (as described in the previous section) which makes any impact on aid financing challenging for aid advocates. The ARLI approach may be a highly relevant one in garnering support for and knowledge of the aid program, but changes to the established consensus will require a seismic shift in the politics of aid.

Overall, there is strong evidence that the ARLI program is a highly relevant approach in reaching the intended outcomes. Yet there needs to be recognition that the program operates in a challenging policy environment where aid is rarely high on any parliamentarian’s agenda.

Section 3: Effectiveness & Efficiency

Is the ARLI program achieving its intended outcomes? And are the resources being well used?

This section reflects on the effectiveness and efficiency of the program in relation to the intended outcomes. Overall, this research finds that the program is highly effective in increasing understanding of and support for the aid program amongst parliamentarians and considered by all stakeholders to be an efficient use of advocacy resources. Despite some small wins in relation to financing, aid commitments have broadly stayed at historic lows in the eight years of the project (an issue addressed in the Impact section below). In relation to building the sector’s role in *accountability* and shifting aid relevant *policy*, there is evidence that the program is also effective and efficient.

Is the ARLI program achieving its intended outcomes related to financing, accountability and policy?

Financing

Intermediate Outcome 1.1: Protecting Aid: Increase understanding of, and support for, Australia’s aid program by taking delegations of parliamentarians, journalists, and influential Australians to experience first-hand the impact of Australian Aid programs. Through the delivery of the delegations, we will continue to build cross-party support for aid. We will focus on building understanding of the fundamental importance of funding transformative PHC and Immunisation, RMNCH, nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive, food security and

social protection programmes. We aim to increase both the overall aid budget and the percentage of it that is spent on these program areas as well as through targeted investments in multi-lateral finance mechanisms such as N4G and Gavi.

The ARLI theory of change in relation to the learning visit is that ‘Australian parliamentarians will have participated in a high level, immersive, cross-party learning tour. As a result of their participation, they will become advocates for Australia's aid program and will be responsive when called upon to support our asks of Government’ (ARLI 2022). The ARLI program staff seek to ‘select ‘rising stars’ and ‘heavy hitters’ from across political parties’ (2023 plan) to maximise impact.

This strategy was strongly supported by parliamentarians and sector representatives. A Labor senator suggested this long-term approach is important as ‘it's a good idea to get people who are backbenchers who may find themselves later as Assistant Ministers or Assistant Shadow Minister’ (Interview 6). A sector representative echoed this saying, ‘there's a lot of care and attention paid to who they select and they work very hard to find a good cross section of parliamentarians... you could see how impactful it had been’ (Interview 1).

General praise for the ARLI program

‘The programme I thought was extremely comprehensive.’ (Interview 21)

‘I thought from the aspect of giving us a very tangible experience... the trip was extremely insightful and I think it'd be hard for any MP that went on that trip to say that they didn't come away somewhat changed.’ (Interview 27)

‘I thought it was fantastic. Really got a lot out of the programme. Keen to do another one.’ (Interview 27)

‘It ran very smoothly... I didn't have any kind of reflection on anything, which tells me that it all went very, very, smoothly.’ (Interview 28)

‘.. the great thing about things like ARLI is just, it's a way of demonstrating it and often it's a way of demystifying the way NGOs work on the ground, how they work together, how they work with government and the likes.’ (Interview 12)

‘Sarah Carter was just amazing...I thought they did a sensational job.’ (Interview 12)

‘I came away impressed and look the thing is three-to-four-day programmes are actually good programmes. They fit in with our demands and often on our times.’ (Interview 12)

‘I've known quite a few of my colleagues have done it and everybody comes back I think very impressed with what you see.’ (Interview 13)

‘I've been on a few delegations and it was easily one of the best I've been on. It was really well organised. I personally felt very safe the whole time we were there... They gave us a really good balance of meeting with government and NGOs and also real people out in the community’ (Interview 15)

Parliamentarians were commonly effusive in their praise of the organisation of the learning visits (See box). ‘The programme is just brilliantly run’, said one Labor MP (Interview 2). A Coalition MP meanwhile said ‘[the learning visits] are very well coordinated, well organised’

(interview 5). A sector representative also said, 'I just want to reinforce what a great job Save the Children do. They really do a fantastic job. It's a well-oiled machine now. They handle the whole thing from start to finish with such skill and professionalism' (Interview 1).

COVID-19 travel restrictions have understandably slowed the implementation of the program in the past three years. This means that the program target of reaching 100 ARLI alumni by 2024 is unlikely to be met.

The value of first-hand experiences

Our research supported the findings of previous reviews in 2017 and 2020 - that the learning visits are highly effective in supporting understanding of, and support for, the aid program. 'It was just so important', a Liberal Senator said, 'because it just does give you a completely different perspective on everything' (Interview 29). Another Liberal Senator similarly spoke about the personal impact seeing the program first-hand had on her perspectives and the benefits this conveyed :

Going somewhere like Kenya and seeing the level of suffering that we did by the end of the trip. I balled my eyes out that last night I was there just because you feel so... guilty for going back to your wonderful first world country (Interview 15).

'I thought it was incredible', said a Labor MP, 'close to 10 times that I've been overseas in the seven years that I've been a parliamentarian, that particular trip is right up at the top of the list' (Interview 8). He went on to describe the value of firsthand experiences:

being in a one room house where the main item of furniture for a family with a single mum was a double bed and under the double bed was the storage for the micro enterprise in the form of the sewing machine and all of the bits and pieces and the business operator herself and two of her children, you are there and you are seeing all of that. So that part of it was really impressive (Interview 8)

A sector stakeholder similarly reflected that the experience element of the program was crucial. 'Unless you are really there', he said, 'it's probably difficult to get a good picture' (Interview 6). Another sector stakeholder who had experience with the program affirmed the importance of visits in changing attitudes:

we all fail to remember that politicians are people too, and they need a face in their minds. They need someone that they've met on one of those trips, they need to have seen an effective Australian aid programme in action (interview 3)

As in the anecdotes above, parliamentarians often described deeply affecting interactions that they had with aid program staff and beneficiaries that they met on the trips. These individual connections were often the main point of recollection as parliamentarians reflected on their experiences. These direct relational connections could perhaps be harnessed further in advocacy efforts – a point discussed further in the recommendations.

Changes in knowledge

The learning visits clearly impact the knowledge and attitudes of parliamentarians about aid. This impact however, is not uniform, nor is it always predictable. Parliamentarians who went on the ARLI trips had very different baseline levels of knowledge about aid. One ARLI alumni had never left Australia before the learning visit. While on the other extreme, other parliamentarians had travelled widely and worked themselves in the aid sector. This meant that the learnings from the trips were varied depending on previous levels of knowledge. A Labor MP reflected that [the trips] can be 'quite transformative' especially for conservative politicians who may have had limited exposure to aid programs (Interview 2). 'I've heard some of those conservative MPs speak about how it's shaped their view', he said of the experience of visiting a refugee camp. In particular, the trips were seen to have 'taking the sharp edge off aid cuts and making it more difficult for people to demonise foreign aid provides a more nuanced perspective on what aid delivers' (Interview 2).

The variation in previous experiences also mean that it is difficult to pitch the learning visits for everyone. Another Labor MP described this challenge:

the nature of those programmes is that you're trying to help people who are already relatively knowledgeable and established as sort of advocates in the space. I put myself in that category. And you're also trying to draw in people who've never really thought about all that much and don't understand what development assistance is in all its forms and maybe have some stereotypes that colour their sense of it. You want both.' (Interview 8)

Along with the previous levels of experience and exposure of parliamentarians to aid programs, the differences in the learning visits themselves also shaped the outcomes. Some learning visits were more naturally oriented toward people who had little previous experience with aid. For example, seeing a humanitarian program in Kenya or Bangladesh was a tangible and powerful example of Australian aid in action, where the significance could be grasped easily by people with little prior experience.

Other learning visits exposed more of the complexity of aid programming - for example in visits to PNG or to the Solomon Islands where entrenched political constraints were more obviously influential on aid. Such visits may be valuable for those parliamentarians who have a strong baseline understanding of aid and are well placed to engage with important and vexing dilemmas in aid. For example, one issue that was raised several times was related to an eye hospital in the Solomon Islands for which Fred Hollows Foundation had provided funding. The hospital was seen as a 'state-of-the-art' facility. But then next door to the eye hospital was a government funded general hospital which alumni described as run down and underequipped. Such experiences raise complex questions about modes of aid funding to recipient countries to which there are no simple answers. Such experiences can raise helpful debates for parliamentarians who are experienced with issues related to aid but can be confusing for parliamentarians who may have little experience. This was reflected in a comment by a Coalition MP who reflected on the limitations of Australia's aid program in the challenging context of the Solomon Islands saying, 'it was a warts and all view of the aid programme. So did it make me want to ensure that we were providing support? Absolutely. Did it make me question how that support was being provided though? Yes.' (Interview 17)

An alternative could be to separate out parliamentarians and run separate learning visits for those who are already experienced and knowledgeable, and a separate visit for those who

may have limited previous knowledge. A Labor MP suggested however that the interaction between parliamentarians with different levels of knowledge was important for the dynamics of the trips:

I think that the mix has some value... There's always going to be a bit of a culture shock or a sort of 'from ignorance to experience transition' and when that happens with a sort of a blend, because there's a dynamic in the group, and it's obviously always good to have part of the interfaces between the parliamentary group and people we meet. (Interview 8)

Group dynamics on learning visits are important, though also varied. Some parliamentarians formed new close friendships because of the visits, even across party lines. Meanwhile however, another MP described her experience negatively since the learning visit saying there has been 'no follow up with each other about doing anything more about this. So I guess if that was the aim of the programme, then it probably didn't succeed without our group' (Interview 29).

Key lessons from learning visits are varied

The ARLI program intended outcomes are related to changes in knowledge and attitudes about aid, but more specifically about child survival. Learning visits attempt to showcase these sectoral areas and some parliamentarians were clearly influenced by child survival programs, for example, through seeing child nutrition programs in Kenya.

The core aid related learnings for parliamentarians were diverse however, and not always connected to child survival. For example, several parliamentarians pointed to the tangible example of seeing the adult eye surgery work of the Fred Hollows Foundation. A sector representative reflected on the Kenya trip and seeing one parliamentarian's experience – 'he was seeing someone who was blind having their site restored and he thought it was a cracking example of foreign aid, Australian aid making a difference.' (interview 1). A Labor senator meanwhile said that what stood out to her was 'the role of women in Fiji and the challenges that women face...about economic empowerment and development' (Interview 6). A Coalition MP talked about his own learning from the trip and how 'it reinforced...the value of localism...listening to the local communities and hearing what their priorities are and then funding them from the ground up rather than Canberra saying these are our priorities.' (Interview 5).

In this sense, it is challenging for ARLI to channel the key learnings toward child survival related outcomes specifically. Nor should the program seek to focus narrowly on just those sectors. The variety of experiences gained on the visits mean that individual parliamentarians gain a rounded perspective on the role of aid. More explicitly narrowing the experiences toward child survival related programs could undermine both the broader intended outcomes and undermine ownership by the broader sector, which is crucial for the long term aims of ARLI.

Accountability

Intermediate Outcome 2.1: Strengthen and Protect Civil Society Engagement: A coalition of INGO organisations, the sector peak body (ACFID) and experts in health and nutrition are mobilised and supported to advocate directly to parliamentarians about the impact of Australian aid and the value of increased investment in child survival including nutrition, PHC, immunization and RMNCH.

The ARLI program seeks to create a 'conduit that connects thought leaders and policy experts with parliamentarians and influential Australians' (ARLI 2022). One limitation of this research is that interviews were targeted primarily toward parliamentarians rather than stakeholders in the sector. But even with limited coverage of the sector, there is strong evidence that the networks created by ARLI are valued widely by NGO representatives.

Learning visits provide a platform not only for the ARLI program's advocacy but also for creating synergies with the advocacy of Australian NGOs. A sector representative said, 'I do think that generating that broader knowledge in the parliament and that momentum is a significant thing and has helped campaigns in general' (Interview 7). In implementing the program, ARLI staff collaborate closely with other international organisations including World Vision, Care, WFP, Oxfam, Plan, and CBM. For example, there were joint advocacy efforts related to Gavi replenishment and the 'End COVID-19 for All' advocacy.

The example of a joint letter written by the delegation of parliamentarians after the Kenya trip is valuable in illustrating the synergies created between ARLI and the wider sector. A sector stakeholder said:

from an advocacy point of view, the most effective thing in recent times was when the group of parliamentarians went to Kenya at the end of last year, it fell right in the middle of our 'Help Fight Famine' campaign...we mobilised supporting media around them, full page ads of support from all the sector in the newspapers, to all coincide and make noise around them putting out this open letter....we just leveraged that.' (Interview 3)

Another example is the way in which an Australian NGO was able to stay connected to an ARLI alumni and facilitate a separate program visit while the MP was on another parliamentary trip. The MP subsequently offered to invite his parliamentary colleagues and host an event in his office to showcase the work of the NGO. This demonstrated that the networks facilitated by ARLI can be harnessed and progressed by other actors in the sector.

While valued by the sector there is potential for ARLI to increase its synergy with the broader community of NGOs in relation to building accountability. One sector stakeholder supported the idea of deepening the inclusion of the sector in more systematic ways. 'I wonder if maybe they could do a bit more in the sector in terms of raising the visibility and having some kind of process in place that, so that it's not just mates calling up mates' (Interview 1).

Another sector representative talked about sector's advocacy efforts with parliamentarians and suggested that ARLI could help to facilitate those connections and perhaps 'institutionalise' the networks more:

There's the big lobbying rounds and we go and meet MPs across the Lower House and Upper House MPs and that's really good, but there's no awareness of ARLI in that, for instance, it

would be nice maybe to have an ARLI briefing as part of that or a way that we could engage with the alumni there... having a bit of a dialogue... Say to us, 'oh look, you guys are approaching this the wrong way. Here are the key people that we really need to talk to'. (Interview 7).

Reference group

In the last two years of the ALRI program a key development has been the formation of the ARLI advisory group. The ARLI reference group established in the last two years has broadened input into the program. The program's membership includes representatives from INGO program partners, the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). ARLI documentation says that 'the reference group will be convened and managed by SCA and will have direct input into the annual engagement program, identify research and policy priorities to effectively advocate for health and nutrition investments, and in doing so ensure greater alignment in our advocacy efforts.' Members of this group reported that ARLI had been broadly responsive to their input in the reference group.

While the advisory group has broadened input into decision making in ALRI there was still a sense amongst most stakeholders that ARLI was a 'Save' program. The program team were seen by sector representatives to be responsive to input and suggestions, and inclusive of bringing Australian NGO programs into the ARLI itinerary. However, this was seen by some participants to require active reaching out by these NGOs. Two participants suggested that more could be done to inform the sector of upcoming learning visit plans and allowing other NGOs to make suggestions.

Policy

Intermediate Outcome 3.1: Creating Supportive Policy Environment: Leveraging the expertise of SCA and the ARLI Advisory Group members we will collaborate with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to coordinate targeted learning tours, and virtual field trips in the event of continued travel restrictions, and an annual parliamentary engagement program of high level briefings to create a policy environment in which transformative investments in Primary Health Care and immunisations, RMNCH, nutrition specific and nutrition sensitive interventions, are supported and prioritised.

Along with supporting wider engagement between sector representatives and parliamentarians, the ARLI program is also effective in creating a supportive policy environment. In particular, the learning visits motivate ARLI alumni to engage with policy issues after they returned. As one sector representative described how 'when the politicians have been given this experience, they feel a level of responsibility to do something with it. So the high investment made in them actually kind of extracts a responsibility to engage in conversations like this in the years that follow' (Interview 3).

In the last three years the program has run 26 events for ARLI alumni - including pre-departure briefings alongside alumni and sector events.

There were several actions taken by ARLI alumni to shift the policy environment. Most notable was the joint open letter to the Foreign Minister by parliamentarians following the Kenya trip. The joint letter was actively facilitated by ARLI and Save the Children leaders on the trip and was an example of seizing an opportunity to demonstrate bipartisan support for the aid program. Following that trip, Shadow Minister Michael McCormack also wrote an opinion piece in the Daily Telegraph about the importance of aid. After one visit, another Coalition MP wrote a letter to the Foreign Minister with several suggestions about changes to the aid program. One specific suggestion was about an annual Ministerial Statement related to the aid program. He described the potential benefits of this change:

I was also suggesting to Wong that she does an annual ministerial statement to the federal parliament on our national work overseas.... there's a Closing the Gap statement. There's a Veteran statement...The interesting part of it is the members then can respond to it. So you get the ministers and government justifying the aid programme. Then you end up with a bunch of members saying, well I went on the ARLI programme to and this...and so members will participate and lay their cards on the table. I support aid.'

An annual ministerial statement could be one aid related institutional change that ARLI could consider. Though it could also have potential risks given the current bipartisan desire for aid to be a low-profile policy arena.

Along with these tangible examples of actions taken by alumni after trips, alumni also drew on their learning visit experiences in parliamentary committees that they served on. A Labor senator explained how the trip has influenced her thinking in relation to other committees that she is on. This particularly connected to how she saw engagement in the Pacific more broadly. She said:

...understanding how important the Pacific is to us in terms of regional stability in general and how important it is to take a much more partnership-based approach than we are... just providing you with aid now and again when urgent.... there was a broader scene setting and context setting, which was focused much more on the need for a partnership-based approach to have a genuine sense of being in a family' (Interview 6)

In this sense, the impact of the ARLI program on policy is potentially broader than it has been possible to track in this review. As noted earlier in this review however, most of these policy related actions taken by ARLI alumni did not relate directly to the child survival (PHC, immunisation, RMNCH, nutrition) related areas specified in the intended outcomes. Rather they were more generically directed toward aid commitments and broader foreign policy.

Interviews with both parliamentarians and sector representatives also revealed the challenges in engaging parliamentarians in creating a supportive policy environment. With many issues competing for their attention it was difficult for parliamentarians to engage in a sustained way with policy issues. One Labor ARLI alumni that 'you perform the roles that you perform... I haven't had much time to delve back into these issues...' (Interview 6). A Liberal senator meanwhile said 'a lot of politicians on both sides really don't talk about it [aid] much in their own constituency' (Interview 4). As a sector representative reflected, 'you've got to have that really clear journey in mind for what happens post-ARLI to really to

get the effectiveness out of it. And we all say that, but it can be hard to implement' (Interview 3).

Efficiency of the program

The ARLI program is widely perceived to be an efficient use of advocacy resources. As described earlier, amongst parliamentarians there is a strong desire for learning through experience – and an attitude of 'don't tell me, show me'. This means that the travel expenses for parliamentarians are a justifiable investment to bring about changes in knowledge and attitudes. As one sector representative described, 'I think it provides a really unique experience [which] you can't get just through going to forums...that real engagement and talking to people on the ground and seeing the community is really powerful' (Interview 7).

In terms of the learning visits, there is little that could be changed to make them more cost efficient. The length of the learning visits was perceived to be appropriate by most ARLI alumni – any shorter and it would be difficult to engage in a meaningful way in the country. To gain efficiency in reach of the program, several ARLI alumni suggested that the program should focus on reaching new parliamentarians rather than having alumni do additional visits. Similarly, given the significance of the detailed 'curation' of the trips, it is unlikely that there could be any further efficiency in support staffing.

Importantly, these points are only reflections on the margins, where the overwhelming evidence is that the ARLI program is highly efficient. As a sector representative concluded, 'it is unimaginable that we wouldn't invest the money to do this' (Interview 3).

Section 4: Impact

What benefits has the ARLI program had?

ARLI's primary intended outcomes are related to:

- Financing
- Accountability; and
- Policy.

As described earlier in this report, the period of the ARLI program implementation since 2015 has been one where the political tide has been against the growth of the aid program and there have been political challenges to building accountability and supportive policy. Notably, there has been no significant change to aid commitments which remain at historic lows.

This is not to say however that the ARLI program has not contributed to significant individual aid financing decisions. During the COVID period ARLI alumni advocacy was likely linked to key decisions about new allocations of aid. The Australian Government committed over \$300 million to aid in the context of COVID and there was a payment of more than \$120 million for the purchase of over 25,000,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines, and a further AUD80M in a commitment to support vaccine access for up to 94 lower-income countries.

Following the joint letter from MPs after Kenya trip (described above) the government ultimately made a commitment of around \$70 million. A sector representative described this decision-making process, saying ‘that 70 million in the last financial year was definitely something that you could say was connected [to the advocacy of the sector and the ARLI program in particular]’ (Interview 7). Another sector stakeholder reflected that:

causation is always a mix of a number of things in politics, as you know. But that was definitely very effective in terms of not only were they moved, they advocated and it fitted in with advocacy work that we were doing at the same time as well (Interview 3)

Further, while not an intended outcome from the program, the ongoing work of Coalition Senator Linda Reynolds on Modern Slavery (see box below) continues to have an impact on global policy influencing the lives of children. There is strong evidence that ARLI has contributed to these key decisions.

While not translating directly into funding changes, parliamentarians spoke about the trips impacting understandings of aid in a bipartisan way. A Labor MP reflected how the program is ‘very bipartisan’. He said that the trip participants had ‘benefited from building relationships we didn’t have and...we probably ended up with unexpected allies in having conversations around improving aid budgets” (Interview 12). Examples of such cross-party conversations on the learning visits are encouraging for ARLI in its goals of developing a critical mass of pro-aid parliamentarians.

However, gaining broader and more lasting aid commitments from key decision makers remains a challenge. During previous periods of ARLI (2015-2022) during the Coalition government, there had been significant efforts at lobbying the Australian Labor Party in opposition, to develop a strong plan for the aid program. There is a sense from some in the sector however, that the Labor government’s aid commitments have been underwhelming since the last election (a point returned to in the next section). A crossbench MP reflected on the limited traction of aid in politics – saying, ‘would I proactively go really hard on this [aid policy]? No, I wouldn’t’ (interview 29).

ARLI alumni have also not been in positions where they have been able to directly influence Expenditure Review Committee decisions. As one sector stakeholder described, ‘often [the alumni] are on the fringes of decision making and influencing’ (Interview 3). Or as another sector representative said about the alumni, most of whom do not have ministerial portfolios, ‘realistically...their ability to influence change can feel limited or they can feel kind of shy to do so within the party room if it’s not the flavour of the time’ (Interview 7).

Further, impact of ARLI in the policy arena is limited by an overall low bar of knowledge about development amongst parliamentarians. As mentioned earlier in this report, at the time of the research DFAT had recently released a new International Development Policy. Yet, this policy was not raised by *any* of the parliamentarians interviewed and most seemed to be unaware of the new policy. This anecdote offers an important reminder that, ultimately, the politics of aid is a remarkably niche issue for parliamentarians and for the general public. As one interviewee relayed to us, very frankly, while she would personally like to invest time and

attention in aid policy, the demands of her constituency simply don't allow her to do so (Interview 29).

Box 2. Impact - Linda Reynolds' work on Orphan Trafficking

Following her visit to Cambodia in 2016 with ARLI, Linda Reynolds became involved in supporting the efforts of *Lumos* to ensure children are “raised in a safe, loving, family home.” Here, discussions with aid agencies and Cambodian officials saw the issue of ‘orphanage trafficking’ first brought to her attention. She was moved by the realisation ‘voluntourism’ schemes patronised by Australians inadvertently support the exploitation of children who are taken from their homes and used as living props. Upon returning to Australia, Reynolds became active in campaigning on the issue and raised it at the Australian High Commission in London during her visit. This led her into contact with the work done by organisations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, and Lumos. Following this trip, Reynolds became active in pushing for a review of how Australia’s existing legislation dealt with modern slavery. It resulted in the ‘Hidden in Plain Sight’ report put forward by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in 2017 whose advice led to the Modern Slavery Act 2018 which explicitly incorporated ‘orphan trafficking’ as a form of slavery. As the Assistant Minister for Home Affairs at the time, Reynolds was directly involved in final negotiations over the legislation. Today, she continues campaigning on this issue in her role as a parliamentarian including putting forward a resolution at the Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference in Bahrain this year calling on governments across the world to recognise ‘orphan trafficking’ as modern slavery.

Section 5: The Politics of Aid

Contemplating the post-COVID 19 policy settings of Australian Aid

The primary focus of this review is to evaluate the effectiveness of the ARLI program. Yet the opportunity to interview ARLI alumni and key informants about their ARLI-related experience simultaneously provides the opportunity to develop a uniquely multifaceted snapshot of the political dynamics driving Australia aid program at a moment in time. These insights become even more useful given we are now able to compare them with data collected from the previous ARLI review, generating a longitudinal perspective on how Australia's aid ecosystem is changing, from the perspective of political elites.

In this section, we offer a brief sketch of how we see the current political dynamics driving aid policy decision making in Australia, informed primarily by the conversations the ARLI review afforded, but supplemented by additional related conversations (including with Save the Children Australia government relations staff), participation and attendance at various recent events and forums related to the recent release of the new development policy¹, and through commentary and analysis related to the same. This section is perhaps best understood as a sketch of a report that will be released to the sector based on the data gathered in the review. It is also an early sequel to the academic article that was published in 2021 following on from the 2020 ARLI review, titled 'What parliamentarians think about Australia's post-COVID-19 aid program: The emerging 'cautious consensus' in Australian aid' (Day and Wells, 2020). As per the last review, we intend to also publish a new academic article that captures elite views on the currently policy settings in Australian aid.

As the title of our 2021 article suggests, we coined the term the 'cautious consensus' to describe what we detected as a nascent 'fourth era' of Australian aid. We believed that the 'cautious consensus' entailed broad agreement around five conditions;

- a recognition that aid spending should not drop below current levels, while leaving room to grow modestly into the future;
- incremental, under-the-radar change;
- prioritising Australia's near-abroad;
- prioritising pragmatic policy action; and
- circumspection.

The data we collected during the 2023 ARLI review confirmed, indisputably, that a new post-COVID era in Australian aid is underway. The data also confirmed that we were correct to label the then-emerging consensus as 'cautious'. From a 'politics of aid' perspective, the key finding from this round of interviews is that a 'cautious consensus' has settled and solidified to the point of now becoming entrenched. To read the new development policy, and to then listen to MPs speak about current policy settings, confirmed that each of the conditions outlined above not only remain in play, but have deepened. In all respects, the 'cautious consensus' has

¹ More specifically, these events include 'The Development Policy Forum' hosted by the Australian National University Crawford School's Development Policy Centre, the Australian Council for International Development and the International Development Contractors Community, in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, on 12 September and 'Situation Room 10: A New Development Consensus', hosted by the Development Intelligence Lab, on 12 October 2023.

been consolidated. Consequently, at this juncture, there seems little prospect for serious policy change.

This finding took us somewhat by surprise. Our decision to describe the emerging consensus during COVID-19 as ‘cautious’ was in part an attempt to capture something of the indecision that surrounded the potential future direction of Australia’s aid program at that time. Covid-19 generated a hiatus of sorts in policy development, understandably requiring a more reactive set of policy settings than might otherwise have been desirable. Yet despite the ever-present ‘charity begins at home’ rationale generating fear amongst MPs of a public backlash to any substantial increases in aid, there was nonetheless a feeling that there was scope to rebuild the aid program in the future, especially given the bipartisan understanding that aid was an important and growing means of responding to intensifying international competition in the region.

Yet, in another way, our use of the descriptor ‘cautious’ was designed to capture the notion that, once the COVID-19 interregnum had been navigated, there was latent potential to take the Australian aid program in a new, more coherent direction after the ‘retrenchment’ era of Australian aid beginning in 2013 had run its course. The Morrison Government’s COVID-19 policy was, rightly, a placeholder. *Partnerships for Recovery: Australia’s COVID-19 Development Response*, published in May 2020, was explicitly framed as a response, one that would be time limited (DFAT 2020). As the pandemic eased, and a new Labor government was voted into power, the long-awaited ‘new development policy’ *appeared* to have the potential to function as a catalyst for significantly changing the policy settings surrounding Australian aid.² And yet the underlying political conditions ensured that, however much the new development policy is being sold and/or viewed as ushering in a fundamentally new moment, there was never really much scope for deviating substantially from the status quo.

This round of ARLI interviews and research has convinced us that our use of ‘cautious’ to label the political consensus on aid in the current policy environment remains apt, yet for slightly different reasons. While previously the adjective ‘cautious’ carried overtones of ‘cautious optimism’, the caution that now surrounds the policy settings of aid relate more to concern and fear. It is apparent that individuals suggesting or promoting substantial deviation from existing policy settings now face significant pushback. The more sophisticated players and observers clearly counsel that efforts to move aid policy outside of the narrowly formed band are counterproductive, given the current political settings.

In practical terms, the feasible range of policy settings for Australian aid has grown noticeably tighter, to the point where any serious efforts to alter them, especially aid volume, are likely to be viewed as risking the consensus itself. Essentially, a remarkably stable equilibrium has been reached around maintaining a narrow band of policy settings. This equilibrium is held steady by an array of forces, acting in different directions, and deriving from different political viewpoints, in a way that is self-reinforcing. In short, the prospects for moving beyond the status quo in the near-to-medium term appear very unlikely.

² The Coalition government had promised a new international development policy in a press release on 10 December 2019, only for these plans to be upended by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While there is little appetite to rapidly increase aid spending, there is strong agreement that aid spending must not decrease. In other words, current spending levels constitute an agreed floor for aid volume. The conservative side of politics accepts spending should not go lower, given the role of the aid program in the geopolitical contest with China in the Pacific. Similarly, there is also overwhelming agreement that the geographical focus of the program needs to be in the region, especially in the Pacific. The other-regarding drivers of aid spending, focused on improving livelihoods and improving development outcomes, were noticeably reduced in this round of interviews. Yet the desire to ‘do good’, and to be seen to be ‘doing good’ still acts as a buoy to aid expenditure, although not to the extent it did just a few years ago, during the pandemic. This connects with another strong finding from this round of interviews; MPs were extremely interested in making aid (and its results) tangible to their constituents. Even the notion of aid as a geopolitical tool was felt to be too conceptually difficult for constituents to engage with for some respondents. Where possible, MPs would be eager to ‘ground’ their aid experiences for their constituents, such as by connecting labour mobility with the need, in Australian communities, for nurses to staff hospitals, or workers to pick fruit. In short, there was heightened awareness in demonstrating how aid was benefitting Australians, not just the direct recipients of Australian aid.

This can be traced, in large part, to the political heat currently being generated around cost-of-living challenges. As per the last ARLI review, MPs are still cognisant of preventing a domestic backlash against aid spending. Yet rather than being concerned to demonstrate that Australians are being cared for during COVID-19, the focus now has shifted to ensuring that Australian voters believe their cost-of-living pain is being addressed. This concern largely explains the hard ceiling in place on aid spending. And it also feeds directly into electoral politics calculations for Labor.

Labor faces – or at least believes it faces - a political imperative to demonstrate its economic management credentials if the Albanese government is to fulfil its ambitions to be a multi-term government. Part of the political strategy of demonstrating this was to deliver a balanced budget, which Labor managed to do in 2023. This ensured that any significant increases in real aid spending would be difficult to achieve in short to medium term. Even those MPs who acknowledge they would be open to increasing aid spending, would then acknowledge that this was almost impossible, given the politics of the budget and the politics of cost-of-living pressures.

Where this leaves us, in terms of the politics of aid in Australia, is in a place of relative ossification, with strong expectations that the current policy settings will stay. With very little prospect for enacting change, prospective change agents (of which there are few in the first place) will tend to vacate the field. Yes, the new development policy seeks to make inroads in localisation, makes the right noises concerning climate change, and genuinely appears to want to shift perceptions on Australia being a ‘partner of choice’. And yet, substantive changes in policy direction are not readily apparent. Nor do they appear likely in the near term. Moreover, for all Labor’s talk about deploying ‘all tools of statecraft’ in reshaping Australia’s engagement in the world, there is remarkably little concrete action on new ‘beyond aid’ measures involving whole of government approaches.³

3 Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, ‘What does it look like for Australia to use all tools of statecraft in practice’ (Canberra 2023): www.asiapacific4d.com

This, in turn, speaks to a strange contradiction we observed. While there is no discernible change in policy settings, many MPs seemed to suggest that, somehow, aid policy settings *had* changed. For example, substantial numbers of the MPs we spoke to conveyed how now, under Labor, the aid program was now much more Pacific-orientated (despite this policy change being the centrepiece of Julie Bishop's 2014 White Paper), or how aid spending had increased (despite Australia's aid contribution, as a proportion of GNI, projected to *decrease* to record low levels). In part, this simply reconfirms how, beyond a handful of niche experts, aid policy settings are not closely followed, nor especially well understood. However, it is notable that, during our entire round of interviews, the new development policy was not directly raised once by any interlocuter. This conveys just how little the new aid policy has cut through within the corridors of Parliament. But perhaps the real lesson here is that a broad level of acquiescence with the status quo is evident. There is no agitation for substantial change, largely because the political realities – at least as they are seen by the actors themselves – don't allow it.

Whether these political realities are as real as MPs believe them to be is another matter. For example, it is clear that MPs, especially those on the Labor side, are hesitant to suggest that Foreign Minister Penny Wong has not done enough to increase aid spending. Indeed, there were numerous reports that Wong was particularly prickly concerning suggestions that she hadn't used enough political capital to protect, or even advance, the aid program. From this perspective, it strikes us that the aid sector is reluctant to criticize the lack of ambition in the new development policy, making the calculation that it is better to retain access to a broadly aid-friendly regime, rather than take the risk of being frozen out, just as the long-awaited post 'retrenchment era' thaw beckons.

All of this points to something of a gordian knot existing in Australian aid at present. All the forces at play are functioning to keep the policy settings suboptimal, devoid of ambition or clear direction. At the time of the last ARLI review, it seemed possible to imagine a window of opportunity opening, with the prospect of Australian aid policy finding a new trajectory. This opportunity has now been passed by, replaced by the likelihood of the status quo persisting for a considerable period. The failure of the Voice referendum reinforces this. As some respondents suggested to us, the politics of the referendum meant it was even less likely that Labor would consider deploying political capital on an issue that is at risk of being weaponised by the conservative side of politics.

In some ways, the emerging status quo in aid policy settings may not be an entirely bad thing. For one, incremental change is typical of how aid policy proceeds. And, given the limited level of development expertise currently in DFAT, the 'slow build' model theoretically offers the opportunity to invest in the institution's intellectual capital stock. (On the other hand, one might argue that there is little incentive for ambitious, talented public servants to focus on a policy areas with little prospect of receiving high level political attention, or opportunities for promotion). In summary, for those with any remaining desire to recapture the 'golden consensus' in Australian aid in the 2000s, the return of aid policy to conditions remarkably like the first era of Australian aid – 'aid as backwater' – is difficult to come to grips with.

Section 6: Sustainability

Will the benefits of ARLI continue?

As noted earlier, the efforts of the ARLI program in the last eight years mean that more than 25 percent of the parliament are ARLI alumni. It is very difficult to predict parliamentary turnover - 12 of the 70 ARLI alumni have already left parliament – yet the benefits of the program in facilitating shifts in knowledge and attitudes will likely continue in the coming years. ARLI has successfully facilitated a network of parliamentarians with raised awareness of the importance of aid.

However, the political context described above makes any significant movement in policy extremely unlikely in the short term. With downward pressures on aid commitments and rising geopolitical pressures to use aid as a tool for national interest, it is crucial to continue investment in ARLI. The program clearly builds a foundation of support for aid, and at the very least it can take away the hard edge of opposition to aid. An end to the ARLI program would mean gradual decline both in support for aid and access that the sector has to decision makers.

Moving forward there are two sustainability questions that the ARLI program needs to grapple with.

1. Long term funding

The review shows the immense value of ARLI to building support for Australian aid. In order to sustain this value, the program needs to develop long term sources of funding. This could be a combination of philanthropic funding, sector funding and DFAT funding. This funding mix could be trialled in the next phase.

2. Centralisation of relational capital

The success of the ARLI program relies heavily on the relational networks of key ARLI and Save program staff. In this sense the established relational capital of the program is quite centralised around these key staff. In the next phase, the program should seek to find sustainable ways of managing this relational capital.

Section 7: Recommendations

How should the ARLI program adapt into its next phase?

The ‘recommendations’ collective here are not so much recommendations as ideas for consideration. They are offered in full acknowledgement that the ARLI team has already contemplated many of them, at various time, and already demonstrates a remarkable degree of continuous improvement in its ongoing program of work. By capturing these various suggestions in one place, we hope to facilitate further discussions around how best to improve and continue ARLI.

1. Consider an expansion to ARLI.

Since the previous evaluation in 2020 the percentage of parliamentarians who are ARLI alumni has risen from 20 to more than 25 percent. The rate of learning visits understandably decreased through the COVID period. However, given attrition of parliamentarians, at the current rate of learning visits it will be challenging to raise the percentage of parliamentary alumni beyond thirty percent. Increasing the number of visits would allow the program to build a larger cohort of alumni and in the long term more sustainably influence aid financing, accountability, and policy.

2. Learning visits

As noted earlier, there may be some scope for having different streams of learning visits. Some contexts are more suited as an *introduction* to foreign aid e.g. humanitarian responses in Kenya or Bangladesh. Meanwhile other contexts are valuable in showing the long-term challenges and nuances of aid program implementation (e.g. Solomon Islands, PNG). For parliamentarians who have had no previous exposure to aid programs it can potentially be confusing to see complex contexts. For other more experienced and knowledgeable parliamentarians it is important to engage with more challenging settings. Such a change would create additional planning challenges and may not be feasible. But based on feedback from alumni this may be worth considering.

3. Consider how best to further institutionalise ARLI’s relationship with its alumni

There was quite widespread reflection from participants about how best to capitalise on the relationships they built during ARLI trips and the extent that it is possible and/or desirable to further institutionalise ARLI alumni events. Various ideas for how this might be done include:

- Focussed event such as an ARLI alumni Annual Dinner
- Establishing an ARLI alumni association
- Aligning an alumni event with the Australasian Aid Conference

A further possibility in engagement with ARLI alumni could be to proactively continue direct connections between alumni and individual program staff or beneficiaries that parliamentarians met on their learning visit. As noted earlier, these personal connections were particularly motivating for many alumni and could be harnessed in future advocacy.

4. Continue to build advocacy connections for the sector

ARLI has had a transformative impact on the advocacy of the aid sector and opened considerable new pathways for advocacy. Sector representatives are appreciative of ARLI's role in facilitating these new links. There is however a strong centralisation of the relational capital that has been established with parliamentarians – around ALRI and Save the Children senior staff. This is undoubtedly a strength of Save the Children and the leadership of ARLI. But with this strength there is a responsibility and opportunity to draw sector representatives into these relational networks.

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