Why not cut aid? Let us count the ethical reasons, just for a start

Keith Horton

University of Wollongong, khorton@uow.edu.au
Why not cut aid? Let us count the ethical reasons, just for a start

Abstract
Major changes have been made recently to Australia’s official aid program. Funding has been cut sharply. Australia’s aid agency AusAID has been absorbed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and no longer exists as a separate entity, reducing the autonomy of the aid program.

New statements of the main objectives of the aid program have removed the clear primacy formerly given to poverty reduction and put more emphasis on Australia’s national interests and economic growth.

In this context, it is important to remind ourselves that overseas aid is an ethical issue, not just a matter of politics or policy. There are a number of strong ethical reasons to support international aid, and in particular aid focused directly on poverty reduction

Keywords
cut, not, why, let, aid, reasons, count, ethical, start, just, us

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
Why not cut aid? Let us count the ethical reasons, just for a start

Author

1. Keith Horton

Lecturer in Philosophy at University of Wollongong

Disclosure Statement

Keith Horton previously received funding from the Australian Research Council. He is affiliated with Academics Stand Against Poverty, an international network helping scholars, teachers and students enhance their impact on global poverty.

uow.edu.au

Provides funding as a Member of The Conversation.
Three in four Australians see aid to help the world’s most vulnerable poor as a simple human priority. Their government has a different view of the aid program. Julien Harneis/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Major changes have been made recently to Australia’s official aid program. Funding has been cut sharply. Australia’s aid agency AusAID has been absorbed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and no longer exists as a separate entity, reducing the autonomy of the aid program.

New statements of the main objectives of the aid program have removed the clear primacy formerly given to poverty reduction and put more emphasis on Australia’s national interests and economic growth.

In this context, it is important to remind ourselves that overseas aid is an ethical issue, not just a matter of politics or policy. There are a number of strong ethical reasons to support international aid, and in particular aid focused directly on poverty reduction.

**Humanitarian reasons**

Around 1.2 billion people still live on less than US$1.25 a day. Such extreme poverty has predictable and terrible effects. For example, according to UNICEF, around 18,000 children under five still die each day from preventable causes.

Facts like these give anyone who is in a position to assist humanitarian reasons to do so – that is, reasons to help others based simply on our shared humanity.
That Australians are now so affluent – in terms of median wealth the most affluent people in the world, according to a report by Credit Suisse – strengthens those reasons considerably. It means that we can contribute substantially without having to make major sacrifices ourselves.

**Associative reasons**

Because they are based simply on our shared humanity, one can have humanitarian reasons to assist people one has no prior association with. Australians do have various forms of association with poor people in developing countries, though, through tourism, trade, sport, education and so on. These associations can give us further reasons to assist, associative reasons.

Doctor and surfer Dave Jenkins provides a good example. On “a regular surf trip” to Indonesia, he writes:

I saw women and children dying from malaria, malnutrition and inadequate living standards, things that I knew were treatable and, better still, preventable.

It didn’t seem right to him to go on enjoying such places as surfing destinations without contributing actively to improvements in the local inhabitants’ living conditions. And so he founded Surfaid in 2000.

**Reparative reasons**

One can have associative reasons to assist people one has not harmed or wronged. If one has harmed or wronged people, though, a third type of reason comes into play. These are reparative reasons – reasons to repair the harm or wrong done.

One such example concerns Australia’s negotiations with East Timor over the development of rich oil and gas resources lying between the two countries. This issue could have been settled using the Law of the Sea, the convention that determines sea boundaries based on international law.

Australia withdrew from this convention, though, a step that it is difficult to interpret as anything other than an attempt to use its superior bargaining position to negotiate an agreement giving itself an unfairly large share of the resources. And this is indeed what happened.
Southeast Asia’s poorest nation, East Timor, is also entitled to aid for reparative reasons. PA/Antonio Dasiparu

To make matters worse, it now appears that Australian officials got a further advantage, and did so in a particularly morally repellent way. In an apparent act of generosity, Australia built government buildings for East Timor, but it appears that in doing so Australian officials planted microphones in the Timorese cabinet room so that they could spy on East Timorese discussions.

No reasonable code of ethics would condone such actions. Looking forward, Australia should negotiate a fairer division of the resources in question. Australia should also take steps to repair the harm already done, and one appropriate way of doing so is by giving more poverty-focused aid to East Timor.

Australia also shows little sign of being willing to do its fair share of climate change mitigation. It has the highest greenhouse gas emissions per capita in the western world; its emissions reduction target of 5% by 2020 is one of the lowest in the developed world; and it is seeking to repeal its carbon price legislation.

Australia is also acting as a brake on international efforts to tackle climate change. It refused to commit to any new climate finance for developing countries at the UN climate change meetings in Warsaw last November, for example, and is attempting to keep climate change off the agenda for the G20 meetings in Australia this year, much to the consternation of its US and European allies.

There are a lot of wrongs to set right here. A full response would include a major revision of Australia’s climate change policies. Again, though, Australia also has reasons to repair the harm already done, and this should include giving more aid to poor countries that have few resources to adapt to climate change.

**Counting the reasons**
So Australia has ethical reasons of at least three different kinds – humanitarian, associative and reparative – to provide international aid focused on poverty reduction.

Associative reasons are widely taken to be stronger than humanitarian reasons, and reparative reasons to be an especially strong type of reason. The overall case for poverty-focused Australian aid is therefore much stronger when we take account of all three of these kinds of reasons.

A complete case for Australian aid would of course include not only ethical reasons but also reasons related to Australia’s national interests. Some of these reasons also favour focusing on poverty reduction, because poverty among our neighbours may lead to health or security risks for Australia, for example.

Others point to different priorities, though, and so it is important for those who want Australia’s development assistance to be focused mainly on poverty reduction to employ the full range of ethical reasons too.