RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE SET UP TO REVIEW THE AUSTRALIAN OVERSEAS ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME, (THE JACKSON REPORT).

THE AFRICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC

1. INTRODUCTION

The African Studies Association of Australia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) welcomes the Report of the Committee set up to review Australia's overseas development assistance programme (the Jackson Report) as a basis for further discussions about the future of the programme and of the relationship between aid and development in the Third World. There is much in the Report with which we would agree, particularly in relation to proposed assistance for women in developing countries, for increased development education in Australia and on the role of the Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs) in development programmes. We welcome the recommendations, concerning Africa, for

a) Additional Head of Mission Discretionary Aid Funds
b) Continued Relief Assistance
c) Continued food aid
d) Emphasis on developmental objectives of food aid
e) Continuation of training, research and technical assistance
f) recognition of the contribution of NGOs to small scale grassroots development.

We are disappointed however with the proposals for restructuring the Australian aid programme with reference to Africa, as much for the assumptions underlying those recommendations as for the significance of the aid itself. Although small, Australian aid to Africa is symbolic, with long term implications. It is ironical, moreover, that it should be reduced at a time when the World Bank is urging donors to give more. The proposal to withdraw bilateral project aid no matter how small that aid, amounts to a reduction of assistance which raises doubts as to Australia's commitment to the eradication of poverty as the objective of overseas assistance. The narrowing of the geographical focus of Australia's overseas assistance ignores the world's poorest countries (in South Asia as well as Africa). We are also concerned that the proposals for restructuring will themselves make it more difficult to ensure that even the more modest assistance proposed for Africa is administered effectively.

2. THE RECOMMENDATIONS ON AFRICA IN THE JACKSON REPORT.

(i) The Jackson Committee's recommendations on Africa must be placed in the context of their Report as a whole, and the key recommendations for

(a) a shift in spending within the aid programme rather than any increase at this point in time in the total aid allocation. (Long term aspirations to the goal of 0.7% of national income. as aid but no commitment to a specific timetable) [E.S. 7.p.4-5]

(b) significant administrative and personnel changes within ADAB to improve aid delivery, including country analyses and aid strategy formulation as the core of aid programming. [E.S. 11.p5]

The recommendations that most directly affect the Australian programme in Africa are for

(c) a firmer geographic and sectoral definition which narrows the geographic focus for bilateral aid principally to Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and seeks to exploit Australia's relative sectoral strengths, and to concentrate on fewer, larger projects.

(d) a division of aid funds between four categories,

I. Papua New Guinea and the small island states of the Pacific and Indian Ocean.

II. Southeast Asia and the smaller states of South Asia (Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka).

III. China, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

IV. Other developing Countries, including Africa.

(ii) The Report is careful to point out that the proposals for restructuring do not mean that all Australian aid to Africa would be withdrawn. The position would be:

(a) African states would continue to be eligible for training, technical assistance, research, food aid, Head of Mission Discretionary Aid Funds, relief, development import finance, and official support for the activities of voluntary aid agencies.

(b) Australian assistance to Africa will overall be given through multilateral aid and the appropriate international agencies.

However:

(c) Australia's project aid activities in Africa should be progressively scaled down. No further ADAB - administered projects should be undertaken, although Australia may co-finance projects with the international finance agencies.

(d) African States would not be eligible for Development Import Grants.

(e) Country programming would not be undertaken.

(iii) The arguments advanced for the withdrawal of bilateral project aid to Africa turn on two assumptions:

(a) that Australia lacks the administrative capacity to carry out a major bilateral programme in Africa. Project aid in the region is simply beyond Australia's capacity.

(b) Australia's various interests, economic, strategic, and political, require a concentration of attention on the Southeast Asian and South Pacific regions.

We would like to comment on each of these arguments in turn.

3. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE AND THE CONSTRAINTS ON AID DELIVERY

(i) The constraints upon the Australian aid agencies in the effective administration of the Australian aid programme imposed by geographical diversity across vast physical distances are real and ought not to

be underestimated. The constraints of distance have not however applied only to Africa. They apply equally to the other regions in which Australia has been active in aid programmes, including the South Pacific (which in many respects is a good deal more difficult to service than East and Central Africa). The two most authoritative Reports to date on the Australian overseas assistance programme made this very clear. The Audit Report in 1981 made it clear that ADAB's administrative problems extended over the whole of the programme, in all regions. It pointed out, in addition (p. 71, 4.2.4) that ADAB had been unable generally to consider the likely macro-economic effects of Australian development assistance, particularly in the island countries of the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. The Evidence of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts also makes it clear that ineffective communication, ignorance of local conditions and the lack of administrative capacity are problems that have bedevilled ADAB in the administration of large scale projects in regions other than Africa; in the Zamboanga project in the Philippines, for example, as well as the Margarini project in Kenya. The Jackson Report itself acknowledges this fact. (e.g. pp. 220-221, 15.6). If the basis of geographical rationalisation of the Australian programme is to be that of distance, then Australia's involvement in regions other than Africa needs also to be considered further.

(ii) While we are agreed that rationalisation of the Australian programme is necessary in the interests of more effective aid delivery we do not agree that geography is necessarily the only or the correct basis for such rationalisation. Distance has not, we would argue, been the only, or indeed the primary constraint on the effective conduct of Australia's African programme. The more recent experience, for example, on the Magarini project in Kenya, has suggested also that those earlier difficulties are now better understood and able to be handled. (2) We are very pleased therefore to learn recently that it has been proposed the project continue.

4. AUSTRALIAN RELATIONS WITH AFRICA

(i) The Report also argues that Australia's interests require the proposed geographical concentration on Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, which they conclude are of central concern for Australia and her economic and commercial as well as her strategic and defence interests. This conclusion rests however on a very narrow perception of the Australian interest, and ignores, we would suggest, the full importance of the links that have grown up between Australia and

other regions around her, including the African region. We therefore find a number of difficulties with the analysis of Australia's relations with Africa advanced in the Report, which ignores or reduces the importance of the relationship between the two regions. We would refer to our original submission to the Jackson Committee which set out the main arguments for sustaining Australia's links with, and aid to the African continent. None of those arguments has been invalidated by the Report, so that it seems important that they should be restated.

(ii) Humanitarian Concern for the eradication of Poverty.

If Australia is serious about her commitment to humanitarian need she cannot ignore the African situation any more than she can ignore that of South Asia. At this specific point in time, mid 1984, when Africa as a continent faces the worst drought conditions of the century, it is particularly difficult to justify a decision to restrict rather than to increase assistance. This does not mean that questions concerning the most appropriate form of aid should be ignored. It must however challenge any decision to reduce the assistance itself. The present drought and resulting food crisis indeed highlights the crucial importance of agricultural research, in which Australia's expertise makes it possible for her to make a significant contribution, especially on a longer term basis. Whether we like it or not, Africa will continue to be needy and to require major assistance for the next twenty years. The test of Australia's commitment to global justice and development is at one level how we respond to the African need. (We would refer to the editorial in The Age of 21 July, 1984.)

(iii) Australia's Interests as an Indian Ocean State.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Bill Hayden, has made clear the importance he and the Federal Government place upon the Indian Ocean for Australia's national and economic security and well-being.(3) He has also made clear his awareness of the integral relationship of the African mainland states that border the Indian Ocean, from the Horn to the tip of South Africa, and the importance of their well-being for the peace and security of the region itself. Seen from this perspective the Report's recommendations do not make sense. The small Indian Ocean island states are placed in Category I, and the mainland states in Category IV. Thus the Report recommends major Australian assistance in almost any area for these small island states which almost certainly do not have the capacity to absorb large quantities of aid, but ignores the economic crisis that confronts

the Horn, and the Eastern, Central and Southern African countries that border the Indian Ocean. It ignores the growing links between the mainland states and the Indian Ocean island communities, which must undoubtedly affect the development of the latter and therefore any assistance programme. (e.g. the new Preferential Trade Area, [PTA], for Eastern and Central Africa, which came into operation at the beginning of July (1984) and which already includes Mauritius.) It further ignores the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, both of which are of major importance for the stability or otherwise of the Indian Ocean.(4)

From a political as well as a strategic and defence viewpoint the restriction of Australian assistance as proposed to the small island states is essentially ridiculous. If Australia is serious in her commitment to a stable and peaceful Indian Ocean region, then once again she cannot ignore the African states that border that ocean. We would also point out that in the case of the Indian Ocean Australia's national interests reinforce rather than run counter to her humanitarian concerns for the eradication of poverty in the two major "poverty" belts of the globe, Africa and South Asia.(5)

(iv) The Australian Stand Against Apartheid

Australia's commitment to the fight against apartheid, which has already won her considerable respect, also calls for a strengthened, rather than reduced, presence in Southern Africa.

(v) The Commonwealth Connection

It is equally difficult for Australia to avoid recognition of the importance of the Commonwealth connection. Whether Australia likes it or not, fifteen of the member states of the Commonwealth are African states. We share institutions, interests and concerns, which have been shown on numerous occasions to be an important asset in our common search for global peace and development. Australia's membership of the Commonwealth has enabled her to make an important contribution, on successive occasions, to the search for justice and political stability in Southern Africa. Her commitment to the goals of the countries of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) has been important in the evolution of that body. The proposed restrictions on Australian aid must adversely affect relations with those countries.

(vi) Need to Balance Regional Involvement

The emphasis on Southeast Asia which lies at the heart of the Report's proposals ignores the difficulties and the disadvantages

for Australia of being drawn so overwhelmingly into the Asian region. The Southeast Asian/East Asian region is a difficult one, in terms of both trade and commerce, and a turbulent one. Australia's expansion into Asia is not without its difficulties, which suggest it is essential that such Asian involvement be balanced by other broader interests, including some diversification into Africa.(6)

5. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE REPORT'S PROPOSALS FOR AUSTRALIAN ASSISTANCE TO AFRICA

(i) The Withdrawal of Bi-Lateral Project Aid

Australian bilateral project aid to Africa has always been minimal so that its withdrawal may seem of no particular significance either to African development or to Australia's relations with Africa. African states also receive a great deal of overseas assistance from a large number of countries, including major donors like the EEC and the USA. Hence Australia's contribution it may be argued is unlikely to be important in the struggle for development.

Against this argument the following factors need to be borne in mind:

(a) Australian aid to Africa is indeed so small that to reduce it further brings into question her commitment to the international consensus that the human needs of Africa must be seen as of paramount concern for the international aid effort.

(b) The Report itself points out the crucial difference that aid provided "at the margins" in small agrarian-based economies may make to the success or otherwise of local development efforts. This is indeed one of the arguments advanced for assistance to Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. (p. 190. 12.7)

(c) The Report recognises and supports the need to move to an increased developmental focus for food aid and to tackle the long term and underlying problems of the African food crisis. In this respect Australia is recognised as having a direct and important contribution to make, on the basis of her own experience and expertise in agriculture and agricultural research. Bilateral project research may be of considerable importance in this respect, in conjunction with Australian involvement in the work of the multi-lateral agencies.

A similar call for a small-scale, bilateral project aid may well emerge out of Australia's commitment to refugee relief, and not least the possible developments that may flow from the recent conference on refugee assistance in Geneva, ICARA II, and its proposals for durable

solutions to the problems of refugees in Africa.(7) Such projects may or may not be appropriate for the voluntary agencies.(8) It may further be noted here that Australia is a member of the United Nations Council for Nambia, and thereby has (or should have) a direct involvement in the Nambian refugee problem.

(d) The consequences for Australia of the reduction of assistance, regardless of the amount involved, may well include the loss of important goodwill, in countries where Australia is known and with whom she is closely associated within the Commonwealth. Australian bilateral project aid is as the Report points out the most highly visible part of the Australian aid programme. Even Australian NGO assistance has a "made in Australia" identity tag.(9) It is greatly appreciated at all levels, and brings Australia a good deal of warm regard and goodwill, the withdrawal of which undoubtedly has political implications. It would be a pity if Australia's reputation were affected in this way, and that she should become seen (and not only in Africa) as concerned above all with her own, narrow interests.

(e) To withdraw project assistance, or the possibility of such assistance, at this particular stage in the Australian African aid programme when it seems that it has just begun to achieve a sense of direction, is a retrograde step, and a waste of investment already made and experience gained.

(ii) Training and Education

The proposals for training and education as part of the Australian overseas assistance programme have implications that go far beyond Africa and which are relevant for any evaluation of the impact of such assistance on all recipient countries. We would point out here that the emphasis upon the Australian tertiary sector, and the proposals made in that regard, raise some fundamental questions about the kind of training assistance that is considered appropriate to the needs of all Third World states, including Africa. This is far more than an academic question, since it is proposed to sustain Australian assistance in the training and education for Africa.

We would therefore point out that

(a) the crucial needs for the African states so far as training is concerned, may not be met by some of the educational assistance now proposed.

(b) Assistance to training and educational institutions within Africa is as important as scholarships for tertiary education in Australia.

(iii) The Country Programme Structure within ADAB

The proposals for country programming are sensible and to be supported. The omission of Africa or any part of Africa from the proposed arrangements must however be criticised for the way in which it must further reduce ADAB's capacity to effectively carry out even a modest African programme. No provision is made, so far as can be seen, (Box 9.2, p.141) for the provision and maintenance of any specialist expertise for the African states. The result must be the reduction of the professional expertise and knowledge available to the department. Such expertise remains, however, essential.

It is proposed that assistance to Africa should be primarily through the Multilateral agencies, and the Head of Mission Discretionary Aid Fund (which it is proposed should be increased). It is also proposed to maintain training and technical assistance. Effective decisions, and use of Australian skills, in all these areas require an increase rather than a decrease in the African specialist focus within ADAB. The Report's strictures on multilateral agencies suggests also that if Australian aid through these agencies is to be fully effective more detailed and specialist monitoring of the programmes will be necessary. Placement of students in Australian training institutions, provision of effective technical assistance, expert advice and support for Australian research contributions to Africa (e.g. ACIAR) all call for increased knowledge. So does the need to respond effectively and appropriately to emergency situations. The proposal to withdraw bilateral project aid does not remove the need. At the very least, some country programme support remains essential, to ensure the expertise required for an effective contribution of any aid to Africa at all.

6. CONCLUSION

(i) There are therefore strong arguments for questioning the recommendations made for future assistance to Africa, and the assumptions on which the proposal to reduce such assistance are based. First, Africa has a strong case, vis a vis the other developing regions, for support, in terms of need. It contains more than half of all the developing countries in the word and 21 of the 33 poorest LLDCs. Its development problems are at this stage of history more acute than those of the other regions of the Third World. Australia as a rich state has good reason to support the international aid effort to overcome the African economic and development crisis. Second, Australia's external relations, as a small, rich state, located in the middle of the Third World, cannot be restricted to one only of her neighbouring regions. The Indian Ocean region is potentially, if not already, as critical to Australia's well-being as the South Pacific. She requires a much deeper understanding of the region, and the nation states

that border that ocean, including those of Africa. She requires a presence on the African mainland and especially (at this stage) in Southern Africa).

(ii) For all these reasons we would urge further consideration of the proposals to restrict Australian assistance to Africa. We would urge the need to consider the importance, to Australia, of a small but effective assistance programme, based on Australia's demonstrated special skills, to a small number of African States. We find it difficult to single out specific states, but would point out that the Australian connection with East and Central/Southern Africa offers the basis on which to draw up an effective programme of benefit to the State concerned as well as to Australia. While past associations suggest a concentration on this part of the continent, in addition, either S.A.D.C.C. or the P.T.A. would both appear to offer a very natural and sensible focus for such a programme.

Cherry Gertzel,
President,
for the Executive Committee.

FOOTNOTES

1. Report of the Auditor-General on an Efficiency Audit, Administration of Australia's Bilateral Overseas Aid Programme by the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (1981) and the Joint Committee of Public Accounts, Efficiency Audit Administration of Bilateral Overseas Aid (201 Report) (1984) Minutes of Evidence

2. See Dr. Goldsworthy's reflections on the Magarini project after his visit there in 1983 in the AFSAAP Newsletter for March 1984.

3. See especially his speech to the Western Australian branch of the Australian Institute of International Affairs in Perth, 20 June, 1984 and printed in full in Backgrounder No. 436, 27 June, 1984.

4. See, e.g., two recent and excellent Reports of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on The Provision of Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid to the Horn of Africa (December 1983) and Regional Conflict and Superpower Rivalry in the Horn of Africa (1984)

5. See North-South. The Report of the Brandt Committee. Pan Books, 1980

6. On which see the Minister's speech cited above.

7. See United Nations, General Assembly, A/Conf. 125/2. 23 March 1984. Second International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (Geneva 9 - 11 July 1984)

8. See, e.g., the Report on the Provision of Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid to the Horn of Africa, cited above.

9. See Freedom from Hunger, Report on Kenya Water Project, "I saw Australian Rain in Kenya" Lesley Norris, 11 May 1984.