

**Speech given by the Hon. Pat Conroy to the Micah Australian Women Leaders Network, Parliament House
Canberra, 07 September 2022**

I want to begin by acknowledging that we meet today on the country of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and pay my respects to elders – past, present and emerging – and also acknowledge the First Nations people of Australia and the Pacific who are in the room today.

Thank you for the invitation and thank you for the moving experience. I'm not sure how I follow that, but that just compounds the urgency of what we must do. So thank you for sharing the very personal experience of your family. Can I acknowledge the Micah Australia leadership here – Tim Costello, Matt Darvas, Eliza Palmer and Carly Smith. Can I acknowledge all the fabulous powerful women leaders, the delegates, who are here today – around 40 women including senior leaders of faith-based NGOs, who are stomping the halls of Parliament today, fighting the good fight. It's a real pleasure to have you here and I can honestly say that this is the most exciting thing I have today, if not for the whole week!

[Laughter and applause.]

I want to thank you for the invitation to speak and I want to acknowledge the work that Micah does in advocating for international development and foreign aid. This is important work. This is vital work. And it contributes to the cause of tackling poverty around the world, and it contributes to a better understanding in the community of the need for foreign aid. As political leaders, we cannot maintain policies like Australia's Overseas Development Assistance program without public support. That's why your advocacy for foreign aid in your churches, in your communities and in this very building is so important. It builds understanding and it builds support. That understanding and support is essential if the Australian Government is to play its part in helping the most vulnerable people in the world.

I want to take this opportunity to talk about why the Australian Government supports international development and why we are increasing Australia's Official Development Assistance budget. There are many ways for making the case for foreign aid. There is a security case for aid. The grinding poverty we see in many parts of the world can contribute to social tensions, instability and radicalisation. And by tackling poverty and supporting development we support a more stable and secure region which is in Australia's strategic interests.

There is the economic case for aid. Supporting economic prosperity abroad supports economic prosperity at home. Two generations ago, Asia's developing countries were amongst the poorest in the world. Today, there are around 1.5 billion middle class consumers in Asia and Australia exports goods and services worth more than \$350 billion a year to Asian countries. Ten of Australia's top 15 export markets today are countries where we once provided foreign aid. Just think about that for a second – ten of our 15 biggest markets were countries that we provided aid to previously.

And there is the international relations case for aid. Development assistance is a key component in Australia's foreign policy toolkit. Australia's aid contributes to growth, social development, better governance and stronger institutions in developing countries. That will support the prosperity and stability in our neighbourhood. It will boost our bilateral and multilateral relationships, and it will support the international rules-based order that is so important at this time.

The security, economic and international relations cases demonstrate that providing foreign aid advances Australia's national interest. But there is another important reason to help the world's poorest people – and that's because it is the right thing to do. And without having great insight into what motivates everyone in this room, I suspect that's why you're here today, because supporting fellow human beings is the right thing to do. I'm convinced that the moral argument is the most compelling of the cases for foreign aid. Tackling poverty must be an urgent imperative for all people of conscience, especially for a generous nation committed to the fair go.

More than one billion people around the world have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 – a remarkable achievement. Yet today there are still 700 million people surviving below the World Bank's extreme poverty line of US\$1.90 a day. In today's Australian dollars that equates to less than A\$20 a week. And nearly half of the world's population is living on less than US\$5.50 a day. Poverty is a serious problem in Australia, and we need to help disadvantaged Australians. But poverty is more extreme, more widespread and more entrenched in many developing countries. Australia's per capita national income stood at US\$57,000 in 2021. By contrast, the per capita income in the world's 30 lowest income countries was only US\$722 a year. On average, Australians' incomes are almost 80 times the incomes of people in the world's poorest countries. Consider what those levels of extreme poverty mean for our fellow human beings: people go hungry every day, as we heard previously; diseases stamped

out in which countries remain prevalent; children don't have access to quality education; people don't have decent shelter, electricity or access to clean water and sanitation; and hope for a better future can be as scarce a commodity as anything else.

As the former UK International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell has said, “[There are] deep discrepancies of opportunity and wealth which disfigure our world and which mean that some people live in grinding misery, fear and poverty, but they know because of globalisation that there are other parts of the world where people live in great luxury and wealth and success.”

Just think of this for a moment, ladies and gentlemen. Poverty condemns parents around the world to watch their children die from diseases that have been eradicated in our very own country. That is something that we must fight to change.

There is a clear moral basis for helping people who are suffering. That's true for people who draw their moral framework from secular ethical principles. It's also true for those who take their guidance from religious faith. As World Vision has pointed out, the Bible is rich in wisdom about God's love to the poor and about our responsibility to help. The Bible tells us to feed the hungry and welcome the stranger; to love our neighbours as we love ourselves; and the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that everyone is our neighbour, even a stranger on the side of the road. There are similar teachings in all of the world's major religions. In Judaism, generosity towards the poor is a sign of the God-fearing person. In Islam, giving alms is one of the faith's Five Pillars. In Hinduism, giving to those in need is one of the characteristics of a good person. And in Buddhism, giving is motivated by compassion and recognition of the interdependence of all beings. It's very clear that I'm not a comparative religious studies expert. But I do believe that so many of the world's faiths share these teaching is significant.

I say to the people of faith who act on these tenets, thank you. Thank you to everyone in this room for acting on this faith. To our churches and congregations, to our faith-based paid NGOs and to those who donate to these groups, thank you. You are doing it because of your values and because of your concerns for your fellow human beings. You are living out the moral case for aid.

More than one million Australians donate an estimate \$1 billion a year to aid organisations carrying out development and humanitarian work. But individuals, charities and non-government organisations can't do it all alone. We need a strong and effective government foreign aid program to tackle global poverty and support development. That's why this Government has committed to increase Australia's Official Development Assistance budget by just over \$1 billion over the next four years. This will be the largest four-year increase in the aid budget announced since the 2011-12 Budget. And it's why the Government has decided to provide support worth more than \$2.4 billion to the International Monetary Fund's Poverty Reduction and Growth Trust; and a further \$2.2 billion to the IMF's Resilience and Sustainability Trust. These Trusts provide financial support to the world's lowest income countries. And it's why we're conducting a review into new forms of development finance to look at how we can encourage investment in development from the philanthropic and private sectors.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Government has a range of reasons for rebuilding Australia's aid program. As I mentioned, they include the strategic, economic, security and foreign policy benefits that flow to Australia from supporting developing countries. But they also include the simple fact that it is the right thing to do. Just as our Government supports lifting people out of poverty at home, so we support this imperative abroad. As we rebuild Australia's development program in the coming period, we want churches and faith-based groups like Micah and the groups that you represent to work with us: by explaining the case for aid to this Parliament and to the wider community; through practical partnerships between Government and aid NGOs like Uniting World, Caritas Australia, Anglican Aid and ADRA; and through dialogue with the developing country churches and religious communities through initiatives like the Pacific Church Partnership.

As Minister for International Development and the Pacific, it's my job to be a champion to the aid program, to explain that it's in Australia's national interests to be a generous and responsive partner. But I need your help in this endeavour. All of you here today have a crucial role to play. I wish you all the very best of success today. What you are doing today is critical – not to place pressure on you – but it is very important that we create the space to increase our aid program. To make the case that it is moral to help people at home and abroad, it is moral to do the right thing by our fellow human beings. So, I look forward to continuing to work with you and with all of Australia's religious and faith-based communities in support of this important cause.

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