Reframing development narratives: a practical guide for government leaders

Indo-Pacific Managing Director, Amy Gildea, explores five strategic pathways for governments and donor-backed agencies to broker and implement high-impact development programs that will shape scalable, effective, and inclusive development in a changing world

Executive summary

The global development landscape is changing rapidly. The development ecosystem is facing unprecedented disruptions and de-funding, which is challenging traditional models and necessitating new approaches and new actors to step in and up.

Traditional aid models no longer meet the complexity of today's challenges—from climate resilience and gender equity to conflict recovery and economic transformation.

In parallel, governments are under increasing pressure to deliver measurable outcomes, balance diplomacy with delivery, and lead in ways that are adaptive, inclusive, relational and commercially sustainable.

Drawing from global advisory work with Tetra Tech International Development, this guide offers a blueprint for aligning vision, partnerships, and execution in development programs that work.

1. Development is a strategic function of national policy

Development is no longer a donor-driven exercise —it is a strategic function of national policy.

Governments today are expected to lead programs that:

- deliver outcomes across interconnected sectors (e.g., climate + gender + economic inclusion)
- navigate geopolitical sensitivities and competing donor interests
- respond in real-time to crisis and community shifts
- partner with private and for-profit implementers, not just traditional NGOs.

The OECD's Development Assistance Committee reports that in 2023, its 33 member countries provided a record USD 223.3 billion in Official Development Assistance (ODA), marking a 34 per cent increase from 2019 levels. ODA remained high but declined in real terms. This surge underscores the growing recognition of development as a core governmental responsibility.

However, recent donor announcements point toward an unprecedented strain in global aid, with estimates showing a nearly 20 per cent drop in ODA. A number of traditional donor countries have announced reductions in their aid budgets, as they struggle to cope with economic and geopolitical challenges and refocus public expenditure or embark on fiscal consolidation.

Emerging non-traditional donors are also playing a significant role. For instance, China allocated approximately USD 38 billion to development assistance, with 0.65 per cent of its Gross National Income (GNI) directed towards ODA. Similarly, the United Arab Emirates contributed USD 12.24 billion, equating to 0.55 per cent of its GNI.

Development leaders need to move beyond siloed planning and reactive implementation. The future belongs to those who **can integrate diplomacy through relationality, design, and delivery**.

2. Making it work: factors that fuel success

Across the dozens of development programs we've advised or delivered, we consistently see five key success factors:

1. Strong political mandate

Programs anchored in national strategy gain traction, resourcing, and legitimacy.

2. Aligned relationships and partnerships

Clear expectations and mutual benefit between donors, implementers, and governments.

3. Context-aware design

Programs that adapt to fragility, local systems, and power dynamics outperform standard templates.

4. Integrated delivery architecture

Multi-sector, multi-level teams working in unison—from capital city to community.

5. Real-time learning and adaptation

Rigorous monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks and feedback loops allow programs to strategise, evolve and scale.

Programs that lack even one of these often struggle with inefficiency, political pushback, or unintended harm. The Center for Global Development emphasises that agencies must consider how their structures and processes align with these factors to remain effective in a changing development landscape.

3. Set sights beyond transactional partnerships

Governments can no longer afford to treat development partnerships as transactional. Strategic partnerships require:

- **Bilateral alignment** on long-term goals, implementation models, and mutual accountability – and respect.
- **Co-created delivery plans,** where local priorities shape donor investment.
- **Clear governance and communication channels** across partners.

The United Nations underscores the importance of multi-stakeholder and multi-sector partnerships for co-creating solutions to address pressing sustainable development challenges.

Tetra Tech supports government partners in **brokering, structuring, and operationalising** these partnerships—ensuring that relationships and programs don't just launch but thrive.

4. Prioritise relationality and enable flexible and crisis-ready frameworks

Development success today is less about scale and more about **relationality, resilience and agility**. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction highlights the necessity of disaster risk reduction strategies in conflict contexts to build resilience and ensure sustainable development.

Programs must operate in:

- post-conflict or disaster environments
- politically sensitive, high-stakes regions
- under-resourced, decentralised systems.

This demands more than funding. It requires:

- **flexible implementation strategies** tailored to local realities
- **strategic leadership and inclusive governance** that reflect community needs
- **crisis-ready systems and decision-making frameworks.**

We've advised programs that launched mid-crisis, scaled during political transition, or pivoted after natural disaster. Strategic foresight and facilitation make the difference.

5. Shift focus from monetary resourcing to mutual respect

Governments don't always need more funding or more reports—they need **trusted strategic partners** who bring:

- a neutral, systems-level view of the development landscape grounded in cultural competency and credibility
- ability to navigate both political realities and delivery mechanics
- experience in turning around stalled or high-risk programs
- the credibility to build relationships across donor, government, and community lines.

At Tetra Tech, we help governments **diagnose, align, and execute**—protecting program impact, reputation, and long-term value.

Case study
Enhancing digital transformation in the Pacific

Project overview

Tetra Tech partnered with the Australian Government to deliver a training program focused on process analytics and enterprise architecture planning. The initiative aimed to equip government officials and development professionals in the Pacific with the skills necessary to drive digital transformation efforts within their organisations.

Key strategic pathways demonstrated

1. **Strong political mandate**

Through sustained diplomatic engagement and strategic partnerships, the training program helped secure high-level commitments that embedded digital skills training within broader socio-economic and digital transformation agendas. This aligned digital inclusion initiatives with national development goals, ensuring strong political support and local ownership.

2. **Aligned relationships and partnerships**

The collaboration between Tetra Tech and the Australian Government exemplified a partnership grounded in mutual respect and shared goals, ensuring that the training program was responsive to the needs of the Pacific region.

3. **Context-aware design**

Recognising the unique challenges faced by Pacific nations, the program was tailored to address local needs and capacities, ensuring relevance and effectiveness.

4. **Integrated delivery architecture**

The training program involved collaboration across various sectors, including information technology, governance, and public administration, to create a cohesive approach to digital transformation.

5. **Real-time learning and adaptation**

Participants engaged in interactive sessions that allowed for the exchange of experiences and insights, fostering a learning environment that encouraged adaptation of strategies based on real-world challenges.

Impact

The training program successfully enhanced the digital capabilities of government officials and development professionals in the Pacific, enabling them to lead and implement digital transformation initiatives that improve service delivery and governance.

Next steps

Governments are being called to lead development differently—with strategic clarity, diplomatic intelligence, and relational capacity that matches ambition and supports implementation.

We stand ready to support that leadership.

If you are a government or donor agency leader seeking strategic support for:

- designing or brokering bilateral development programs
- rescuing or re-aligning underperforming initiatives
- building adaptive, inclusive program architecture
- facilitating executive strategy alignment.

Let's connect

Contact:
Amy Gildea
Managing Director,
Tetra Tech International Development

Amy.Gildea@tetratech.com
Amy Gildea MAICD | LinkedIn

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