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Australia a good global citizen

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AUSTRALIA is the world's fourth-best global citizen, boosted by its commitment to remove trade barriers, according to index figures published today.

The Commitment to Development Index (CDI) ranks Australia fourth out of 21 nations in its study of policies by the world's richest countries aimed at helping their poorer neighbours.

The index compiled by the US-based Centre for Global Development and Foreign Policy (CGD) magazine gives Australia top marks for its commitment to free trade and its efforts to bring peace and security to the region.

But it fared poorly in the areas of foreign aid spending and the environment.

"Australia's high total score is driven by its leading role in recent peacekeeping efforts in East Timor and by its low trade barriers against developing country exports," the CGD said on its website.

"But on the negative side, Australia gives only a small share of its income in foreign aid, has the highest greenhouse gas emission rate per person, and, along with the US, is one of only two CDI countries that (have) not ratified the Kyoto Protocol."

Australia's open market for agriculture contributed to its favourable trade ranking, while high levels of greenhouse gas emissions and few penalties for polluting industries marked it down on the environment.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said praise for Australia's trade approach backed the stand it had taken on liberalisation.

"Australia has repeatedly stressed that trade liberalisation has the potential to lift millions out of poverty," he said.

"If developing countries increased their share of world trade by just five per cent this would generate financial flows worth about \$500 billion – seven times as much as they receive in aid."

Australia's peacekeeping mission to East Timor and law and order initiatives in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands helped the nation boost its security rating.

On aid, Australia scored poorly, mainly due to the relatively small amount of assistance it gives as a proportion of its total income.

The dismal showing on relief efforts comes as non-government organisations push for Australia to do more to meet its Millennium Development Goals on aid.

The goals, aimed at stemming world poverty, would have Australia and other rich nations contributing 0.7 per cent of their gross national income to aid by 2015.

At present, Australia spends 0.28 per cent of its gross national income on aid, lagging behind peer nations.

Aid organisations are ramping up efforts for Australia to meet the commitment ahead of the UN World Summit next month, where poverty will be a major agenda item.

Paul O'Callaghan, executive director of the Australian Council for International Development, said Australia had to set a time frame for reaching the target.

"One of the main things we're trying to encourage Australia to do in this UN summit is to at least use this as an opportunity to indicate a full agenda for moving with the other OECD countries," he said.

"The vast majority of them have committed to trying to reach 0.5 per cent of gross national income. We're currently at 0.28 (per cent)."

While supportive of the government's push to focus on governance as part of its aid efforts, Mr O'Callaghan said there was scope for Australia to do more on poverty reduction.

"That is a legitimate aspect," he said.

"But the Australian program could develop a stronger focus on poverty reduction."