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Who We Are

The Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University is pleased to make a submission to this *Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade* inquiry. This submission draws on our experience working with Australia's international development program in the Pacific and Southeast Asia, as well as our global expertise in governance, security and justice and social inclusion.[1] Working at the intersection of human security and social change, the Centre is well-positioned to reflect on broad contemporary conceptions of security, as well as how these intersect with human development and wellbeing.

This submission was produced in consultation with the La Trobe Centre for Global Security. The Centre undertakes rigorous multidisciplinary research to rethink how societies understand and respond to the complex and interrelated security challenges of our time and turns this understanding into practical, evidence-based action.

The following sets out key points for consideration by the Joint Standing Committee, alongside targeted recommendations.

Response to Inquiry

1. **The role of Australia's international development program in building resilience in fragile states, including by strengthening community and civic participation, governance, security reform and human capital**

Preventing conflict is a complex task that requires states to be able to deploy a range of levers of change. These levers can include security and defence initiatives, development assistance, and diplomatic engagement. Currently, the Australian Government's response to conflict prevention underplays the existing and potential contribution of development assistance in preventing conflict.

Australia's official development assistance (ODA) investments in conflict prevention are low. According to the OECD, in 2023 Australia spent less than one per cent of gross bilateral ODA on conflict prevention and invests less than other OECD donors. There is considerably more that the Australian Government and DFAT could do to balance its approach to conflict prevention and make use of its multiple levers of change.

A more balanced approach to conflict prevention would strengthen Australia's position as a middle power. With a robust history of international leadership in disarmament and peacebuilding, this would position Australia to take on more proactive international roles, for instance in the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission and Security Council, enabling Australia to contribute to shaping the international agenda and reducing conflict in the region.

[1] For more detail on this work see https://www.latrobe.edu.au/socialchange/projects

Recommendation 1: Australia should better balance its investments across defence, development and diplomacy to prevent conflict.

DFAT has most recently approached conflict prevention as pertaining to interstate conflict between major powers – both in its departmental structure and in comments by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and other representatives of the Department. While clearly a primary concern in the current geopolitical context, it neglects intrastate conflicts that have been more prevalent in Australia's region and are not necessarily disconnected from interstate conflict.

Intrastate conflicts have been far more present in the Indo-Pacific in recent years (Bougainville, Myanmar, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and West Papua). Currently, regional fragmentation in Papua New Guinea, ongoing fighting in Myanmar and Southern Thailand, civil unrest in New Caledonia and the persistent risk posed by the conflict-climate nexus in the Pacific as the climate crisis worsens, are live sites of potential intrastate conflict that require attention.

Intrastate conflicts are also not disconnected from interstate conflict and can be instrumentalised by foreign powers to sow division and gain influence. Intrastate conflicts are also viewed as being of significant importance amongst Australia's neighbours in the Indo-Pacific region, suggesting the need for Australia to develop a shared understanding of conflict prevention that is consistent with our neighbours. Without recognising both forms of conflict, DFAT will be limited in responding effectively to the breadth and complexity of conflict potential in the region.

Recommendation 2: DFAT should broaden its understanding of conflict prevention to include both intrastate and interstate conflict and the links between them.

The potential for conflict in the Indo-Pacific is not primarily driven by international competition but by local drivers such as inequality and grievances related to poverty, competition over resources and a breakdown of social safety nets, livelihoods and service delivery. This can include breakdowns of secure livelihoods – the means by which people provide for themselves and their families – and social protection systems (both delivered by the state and those relied on informally, such as wantok networks). It also includes failure of health systems, education systems and justice systems, which provide recourse for the peaceful resolution of disputes and grievances. These public goods and services are core elements of the social contract that people rely on the state for. Where these systems are absent or no longer work, the mechanisms that keep peace in place are broken and the likelihood of conflict increases. This was a key finding of the seminal 2011 World Bank World Development Report, which emphasised the role of legitimate governance institutions, jobs and justice in preventing conflict.

Such conflict drivers are apparent in the Indo-Pacific region. The Tensions in Solomon Islands related to regional inequality, political marginalisation and distrust of the central government, manifesting in land disputes and calls for provincial autonomy. The conflict in Bougainville stemmed from calls for self-determination, land disputes and environmental damage and inequities related to mining. Ongoing conflict in West Papua in Indonesia relate to political and economic marginalisation and human rights abuses against the Indigenous

population, including by state security forces. Preventing conflict requires a primary focus on addressing these local drivers, and the ways in which these may be instrumentalised by international actors.

Where the aid program is focused on delivering social goods that aim to strengthen the social contract and ensure resilience in the face of climate-related threats, the aid program is playing a conflict prevention role. If people have secure livelihoods and access to basic goods and services, the costs to them of engaging in conflict are higher and therefore less likely. If these social goods are absent, conflict becomes more possible. This speaks to a deeper understanding of security that recognises that it is not solely achieved by 'doing security' or investing in defence initiatives. A more sustainable and far-reaching level of security is achieved by also addressing social, economic, and individual wellbeing—areas where the aid program is well placed to contribute.

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government's response to conflict prevention should recognise and invest in the aid program's contribution to service delivery and secure livelihoods.

2. **The strategic use of Australia's international development program to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific**

There are strong strategic reasons to make better use of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict. The UN Pathways to Peace Report estimates that for every US$1 spent on conflict prevention, up to US$16 is saved in conflict response and reconstruction. When there is conflict in Australia's region, Australia responds by deploying military, police and humanitarian assistance (as has occurred in Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville). This post-conflict response is hugely expensive. RAMSI cost the Australia aid budget around USD $3billion over 15 years. It is therefore economically strategic to invest more ODA in conflict prevention.

Being a proactive development partner on conflict prevention is also strategic as it positions Australia as a trusted and valued first choice partner in the region. Conflict in neighbouring countries destroys lives and economies and countries affected will look to their neighbours for assistance. Conflict can also create regional security concerns and openings for external powers to gain influence. While Australia has been actively seeking to avoid this via security and defence agreements across the Pacific, the role of the aid program has thus far been overlooked and offers a way of supporting countries in our region in their moment of greatest need.

Recommendation 4: DFAT should make a stronger case for the economic, diplomatic and humanitarian rationales for investing in conflict prevention through the aid program.

3. **Options for effective support through Australia's aid program in pre-conflict and/or post-conflict zones**

There are important investments under the Australian aid program that are already playing an under-recognised conflict prevention role. This includes programs that are addressing issues of exclusion and marginalisation, service delivery and social cohesion. These programs are mostly implemented by managing contractors.

Where conflict risks exist, these investments could be strengthened to deliver a stronger conflict prevention dividend by integrating an explicit conflict sensitivity lens so that the links between service delivery and conflict prevention are intentionally targeted. Programs would remain focused principally on delivering on sector priorities, with conflict prevention links made clear. Do no harm principles would be essential and implementing partners would require additional expertise in conflict prevention/peacebuilding to ensure sound investments.

The aid program cannot do everything, and mainstreaming multiple objectives adds complexity and demands that can distract from the primary goal of an investment. DFAT programs already mainstream a range of other priorities related to gender equality, disability and social inclusion and climate change. A conflict prevention lens will not be appropriate everywhere and integrating this focus should be cognisant of where conflict potential presents a real risk – where adding a conflict lens will add value – and where it is not appropriate. This is likely to be principally in Melanesia, where Australia is also the largest development partner. In other regions where Australia has a smaller footprint, conflict prevention work is likely best pursued through multilateral or regional institutions.

Recommendation 5: DFAT should integrate a conflict prevention lens in thematic programming where conflict risks are real, and Australia is well-placed to act (principally in Melanesia). Outside of these parameters, conflict prevention efforts should largely be through multilateral or regional bodies.

Alongside efforts to connect the dots between existing programming and conflict prevention, the aid program could also specifically target conflict prevention through standalone programs or pillars of existing programs (for instance in law and justice or governance programs). These programs/pillars would target conflict drivers and amplifiers and are likely to be most appropriate where concerns about potential conflict are greater (such as in the Highlands of Papua New Guinean or the Autonomous Region of Bougainville). This approach would require more dedicated expertise on conflict prevention and peacebuilding (see recommendation 7).

Addressing the underlying grievances that drive conflict is difficult, sensitive, long-term work that requires the aid program to work in politically savvy ways. Here, it is the ways of working of the aid program that are as important as the work that it does. Working in conflict sensitive and politically savvy ways requires taking partnership seriously and avoiding transactional approaches that are likely to do harm and damage Australia's reputation. Australia's commitment to locally led development is key in ensuring that Australia is not seen to be pushing its own interests and norms but rather is supporting neighbours to navigate difficult political transitions in locally appropriate ways. Such standalone conflict prevention programs (or program components) should be delivered through local partners, as they have the understanding, networks and legitimacy to act in sensitive environments.

Flexible programming that allows responsiveness to often rapidly evolving contexts, and encourages experimental approaches is likely to be more effective than rigid delivery mechanisms that prioritise fealty to design and compliance. Conflict prevention work cannot be over-engineered or controlled in a top-down manner – which requires DFAT to shift some ways of working to create space for effective conflict prevention programming.

Recommendation 6: DFAT's work in conflict prevention should be locally led, flexible, adaptive and politically savvy to support meaningful change.

If Australia's aid program is to realise this stronger role in conflict prevention, it is also important to focus on rebuilding capability in conflict analysis and prevention within DFAT – in Canberra and at relevant Posts, including amongst locally-engaged staff. The skills gap in this area was identified in the OECD DAC 2025 Peer Review of Australia which noted the need to 'better structure the department's conflict prevention and analysis to maximise the contributions of development investments to building stability and security.' Thematic expertise in these areas remain but are dispersed unevenly across DFAT. Rebuilding capability could be undertaken through identifying and bringing together this existing expertise, as well as integrating conflict sensitivity, early warning and conflict analysis, and human rights monitoring into professional development and career progression pathways. It should also include an investment in building high quality evidence and learning about conflict prevention programming, picking up on earlier work undertaken by now-dismantled Office of Development Effectiveness.

Rebuilding capability is a long-term endeavour, requiring senior leadership commitment and funding.

Recommendation 7: To leverage its role in conflict prevention, DFAT should invest in rebuilding and strengthening the capability of its staff and partners in conflict analysis and prevention.

4. **The impact of international development in the maintenance of peace and prevention of conflict, including for early identification and mitigation of conflict**

Research plays a central role in assessing how international development contributes to peacebuilding and conflict prevention. In early warning systems, the capacity to analyse and synthesise data is essential to ensuring that decision-makers receive timely, relevant, and actionable information. The early warning system established by Belun in Timor-Leste, alongside The Asia Foundation's security and justice surveys in the same context, demonstrates how rigorous research can be effectively embedded in conflict-prevention efforts across our region.

Investing in forward-looking research to anticipate potential conflicts is equally critical. DFAT should maintain a systematic watching brief on emerging risks and subnational hotspots where tensions may be escalating. This could be strengthened by drawing on existing local dispute-resolution mechanisms—such as those led by churches or community organisations—which are deeply embedded in local conflict dynamics. There are also opportunities to share Indigenous Australian approaches to conflict prevention across the region as a meaningful articulation of First Nations foreign policy. Together, these mechanisms enable more proactive and cost-effective engagement, reducing reliance on reactive responses once conflict has already escalated.

Recommendation 8: DFAT should invest in conflict-related research and support early warning systems and mechanisms of locally grounded conflict prevention.

5. Related matters

Existing Australian government investments in policing and justice demonstrate the need for significant improvements in whole of government coordination. Challenges around mandates, relationships with counterparts and ways of working obstruct effective delivery and limit Australia's results. There is significant room for more joint analysis, strategy and (where appropriate) delivery. Elements of the architecture that supported such coordination has been lost through DFAT restructures. For instance, there was formerly a DFAT-Australian Federal Police liaison sitting within DFAT's Law and Justice section that built and maintained relationships to support coordination. Architecture of this kind is important to making commitments to whole of government coordination meaningful. The cross-government work that conflict prevention requires will need to ensure such coordination is in place not only on paper, but in practice.

Recommendation 9: Conflict prevention work must ensure meaningful coordination across government to realise outcomes.

It is important to recognise that Australia's international development program does not exist in isolation and its conflict prevention work can be undermined by poorly delivered aid, as well as other initiatives of the Australian government. This means paying attention to the unintended consequences of, for instance, the Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme, which while providing real economic benefits to some communities, is also seen to be having some negative socio-cultural impacts that can fuel grievance and conflict. It also means considering how military and policing assistance to countries where security services are captured by elites and not oriented to serving citizen interests might in fact undermine conflict prevention efforts. Being able to reconcile these competing agendas across government is what a 'whole of government' approach must mean – not simply coordination, but a coherent agenda that centres conflict prevention.

Recommendation 10: Australia must keep a watching brief on how its initiatives across different levers of government may unintentionally contribute to conflict drivers and be willing to adapt these as necessary.

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