



Submission on the JSCFADT inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict

Friday, 30 January 2026

Introduction

Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA was established in 1984 by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) as the Australian union movement's global justice organisation. Our purpose is for Australian unions to work globally in partnership for the achievement of dignity at work, social justice, economic equality and the realisation of human rights.

Union Aid Abroad implements development programs in partnership with local civil society organisations, including trade unions and organisations of farmers, women and refugees. Over our 41-year history, Union Aid Abroad has worked in pre-conflict, conflict and protracted crisis and post-conflict environments and supported local organisations actively building peace. See annexes 1-3 for detailed case studies on our experience in post-Independence Timor-Leste, supporting the Myanmar struggle for democracy and peace, and working with Palestinian communities, and annex 4 for a summary of other relevant interventions that have allowed us to draw useful lessons.

Sustainable approaches to conflict prevention require a strong analysis of root causes and assessment of the political situation. Effective and accountable governance structures are integral to conflict prevention. As such, development interventions must look beyond immediate militarised approaches to control violence towards systems change at the political and social level. Peace building interventions that fail to redress inequalities of power, colonial or oppressive structures and assume the problem is prejudice or ignorance on the part of the colonised have always failed, with at best, unmeasurable temporary attitudinal changes and limited longer-term outcomes; for example in Myanmar's 'transition to democracy' the underlying political power of the military was not effectively addressed and remains the key barrier to peace. Conversely, in Timor Leste the independence struggle was secured with governance reform and investment in social cohesion and public demand for accountable democracy. Genuine people-to-people diplomacy, linking Australian civil society organisations with counterparts in conflict zones, low-income countries or refugee communities, can be tremendously effective. This has a proven track record with organisations of women, youth, people with disabilities, sports, professionals, trade unions, farmers/environmentalists, diaspora communities and media.

Trade unions provide an avenue for workers to participate in social dialogue and political democracy. As membership-based organisations with democratic and participative structures, unions create space for workers to engage in peaceful collective bargaining on issues important to them and to their communities. Unions engaging effectively with government and other actors including through tripartite mechanisms create positive and mutually reinforcing public trust in institutions.

Beyond their industrial role, unions have played a central role in many post-conflict political transitions- for example, in Timor Leste and are active in conflict contexts with calls for political peace, democracy and human rights, for example in Myanmar. Trade unions are important actors within broader civil society in maintaining accountability of governments and other conflict actors to the civilian population. By working with local trade unions and civil society groups, the Australian development program can strengthen their capacity and role as trusted local actors which support conflict prevention and resolution.



Recommendations

- 1. Ensure that Australian development programs are actively strengthening local democratic civil society organisations and actors, including by increasing the % of Australian aid funding which goes to non-profit CSOs.** Locally led development approaches require commitment to building and relying on local skills in each phase, including the emergency period, not just in technical areas such as medical, education, protection, WASH and shelter, but in building skills for a local political and organisational culture of human rights. Programs which build movements of people should not only measure quantitative outputs but assess their contribution to maintaining or building civic space.
- 2. Increase development assistance funding,** recognising that conflict prevention is far less costly than conflict response.
- 3. Recognise the role played by democratic civil society organisations** including trade unions in ensuring human rights, mobilising peaceful resistance and proactive peacebuilding, and maintain and increase engagement with trade unions as delivery partners in the Australian aid program.
- 4. Ensure that the design of the Civil Society Partnerships Fund enables funding to local civil society groups and movements who may be marginalised or oppressed** by ruling regimes in conflict and authoritarian contexts. This requires funding approaches that minimise due diligence burdens and recognise the value of investing in core costs of civil society organisations.
- 5. Deliver aid funding through a humanitarian resistance approach** (see Myanmar case study below for more detail) enabling flexible funding approaches which allow local civil society networks to deliver support based on their adaptability, community trust and contextual expertise. This approach simultaneously supports immediate aid delivery and builds long-term capacity of local actors for peacebuilding, governance and public service delivery.
- 6. Ensure that programs in conflict and post-conflict situations incorporate locally-led interventions for internally displaced people and refugees,** including long-term refugees.
- 7. Reaffirm Australian Government support for multilateralism and the role of UN** aid coordination of multilateral agencies and international NGOs as actors in relief, development and peacebuilding, within the framework of international humanitarian law.
- 8. Recognise that the drivers of war and conflict are often exacerbated by the climate crisis,** for instance conflicts over water security in South West Asia, and North East Africa.. Climate change impacts on trade, food security and energy security, and on labour migration/refugee flows, as well as intensifying catastrophic weather events. The Australian aid program must deploy an ecological lens on peace-building programming and incorporate climate responsive approaches.



Annex 1: Australian trade unions and peacebuilding in Timor-Leste

Since 1998, Australian trade unions, working primarily through Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA, have maintained long-term partnerships with Timorese workers' organisations, playing a significant role in post-independence peacebuilding, reconstruction and development. This engagement aligns closely with the Australian Government Peacebuilding Framework, particularly its emphasis on conflict prevention, addressing structural drivers of conflict, inclusive participation, locally led peacebuilding and non-violent dispute resolution.

Timor-Leste's independence in 2002 followed almost 25 years of occupation and widespread violence that devastated social institutions, weakened labour protections and fragmented civic life. While international engagement prioritised security and state-building, sustainable peace required the reconstruction of democratic, civilian institutions capable of addressing grievances, mediating conflict and enabling civic and economic participation. In Timor-Leste, post-independence stability has been underpinned not only by state institutions and UN security interventions, but by the sustained engagement of local trade unions, women's organisations and other civil society actors that created pathways for participation, accountability and non-violent dispute resolution.

In the lead-up to independence and early reconstruction period (2000-2005), Australian trade unions supported Timorese workers to establish independent, democratic trade unions in a context where organised labour had long been suppressed. This support focused on union formation and registration, governance systems, democratic leadership, financial accountability, and education on workers' rights and international labour standards. These efforts contributed to the consolidation of the *Konfederasaun Sindakatu Timor-Leste* (KSTL) as a national union confederation, providing a legitimate civilian platform for worker representation.

By institutionalising peaceful channels (including negotiation, mediation and collective action) for expressing and resolving grievances, trade unions helped embed non-violent mechanisms for managing workplace and social conflict, reducing the risk that labour-related tensions would escalate into political or communal violence. This reflects the Peacebuilding Framework's emphasis on dialogue and dispute resolution mechanisms as core conflict prevention tools.

Alongside institution-building, Australian trade unions supported vocational education and skills development as a deliberate peacebuilding strategy. In post-conflict Timor-Leste, limited access to skills, employment and livelihoods, particularly for young people, has been a persistent driver of social tension and instability.

In 1999–2000, Australian unions supported the reconstruction of the former Golkar building¹ in Dili and its conversion into the *Knua Buka Hatene* ("Place of Learning") vocational training, livelihoods and support centre, upskilling thousands of workers in 16 vocational areas including carpentry, blacksmithing, sewing and tailoring, agriculture, food production, land care, expressional arts, small-scale enterprise and market skills. Combining post-conflict reconstruction, skills transfer and worker

¹ A key administrative centre for the Indonesian government's ruling political party. Following the independence referendum, the Golkar building served as a site where thousands of refugees gathered or were held amid the escalating violence.



training in a civilian space formerly associated with repression, this initiative linked physical reconstruction with democratic renewal and economic participation.

Australian unions contributed to the construction of democratic and free mass media in the new nation, in particular in press and radio, as necessary for peaceful popular participation in elections, policy and social debates, and in nation-building.

Since 2016, Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA's strategic focus in Timor-Leste has continued support for technical and vocational education and training initiatives, while also organising workers linked to domestic and informal work, agroforestry, environmental rehabilitation and rural livelihoods. These programs integrate young people into the labour market while strengthening unions' role in advocating for decent work, women's empowerment and sustainable livelihoods to address economic exclusion - one of the key structural drivers of conflict.

From the mid-2000s onward, Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA -supported unions have engaged in policy advocacy and tripartite dialogue with government and employers on industrial law, wages, occupational health and safety, social protections and public sector reform. This includes union engagement in the development and implementation of Timor-Leste's labour laws, advocacy for minimum wage protections, and negotiated approaches to industrial disputes, including during periods of political instability, such as the 2006 crisis.

Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA supported programs have strengthened unions' capacity to:

- Advocate for Decent Work.
- Train young workers in organising and leadership.
- Organise in sectors employing large numbers of young people and women.
- Monitor labour rights abuses, corruption risks and gaps in policy implementation.

By amplifying workers' voices in national development debates, unions function as accountability institutions, addressing exclusion and inequality - recognised root causes of conflict in Australian peacebuilding policy.

Consistent with Australia's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) commitments, Australian unions have worked with Timorese trade unions and local NGO the Working Women's Centre Timor-Leste (established with APHEDA's support in 2011) to strengthen women's participation and leadership within the labour movement.

This has included leadership, rights-awareness and public speaking training for women workers, support for women's committees in unions, and advocacy on gender-based violence, exploitation and harassment, labour-law reform, workplace discrimination and maternity protections. Women union leaders have played an important role in linking economic justice with household and community stability, ensuring that post-conflict recovery benefited families and communities.

This reflects the Peacebuilding Framework's recognition of gender equality as both a means and an outcome of peace, and women as agents of conflict prevention and social cohesion.

Throughout periods of political instability, including the 2006 crisis and later episodes of tension, Australian unions have maintained solidarity relationships with Timorese unions and civil society

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organisations, supporting peaceful organising and civic participation. This engagement is civilian-led and independent of military or security structures, avoiding the militarisation of aid.

Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA has also supported Timorese civil society participation in regional civic processes, including engagement in the ASEAN People's Forum/Civil Society Conference, strengthening democratic voice and regional solidarity.

A defining feature of Australian trade union engagement in Timor-Leste has been its long-term, movement-based and locally-led approach, sustained over more than two decades. Programs have been implemented through Timorese unions and civil society organisations rather than parallel structures, strengthening legitimacy, trust and sustainability. This engagement helped maintain civic space for peaceful organising, reinforced non-violent collective action, and remained independent of military or security structures.

This experience demonstrates the effectiveness of Australia's commitment to locally led peacebuilding and development, which evidence shows delivers more durable peace outcomes.



Annex 2: Pro-democracy support through civil society during transition in Myanmar

The jailing of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi following her party's overwhelming victory in the 1990 elections marked the beginning of intensified repression under the military government in Myanmar. By 1996, an estimated 90,000 Karen, Mon and Karenni people were living in refugee camps along the Thai–Myanmar border, with thousands more internally displaced within Myanmar. Widespread violence during this period devastated social institutions, weakened labour protections, fragmented civic life and inter-ethnic relations.

It was in this context of political repression and mass displacement that Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA first began its engagement with Myanmar. Acting as a facilitator, APHEDA supported relationships between Australian trade union leaders and Burmese democracy and union leaders. Initially focused on cross-border health initiatives and humanitarian assistance, this engagement laid the foundations for long-term partnerships with civil society actors committed to democracy, human rights and social justice.

Pro-democracy support through civil society during periods of political transition has been central to sustaining resistance to military rule in Myanmar and building resilience in an increasingly fragile state. APHEDA's work focuses on supporting border-based civil society partners, including women's organisations, ethnic service providers, community educators, and independent media as legitimate civic actors able to operate outside junta-controlled systems. Through leadership education, rights awareness, protection and human rights defender training, these partners have sustained civic participation, social cohesion and non-violent resistance under extreme repression.

For example, we partner with the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), a democratic, membership-based organisation of 60,000 Karen women operating in refugee camps and in Karen State. APHEDA supports training for KWO leaders to work effectively as community managers and essential service providers in conflict-affected environments with no or minimal public services. Leaders are supported to understand their rights, define development and justice priorities, advocate for community needs and take collective action, strengthening women's leadership, local governance and community resilience in the absence of legitimate state authority. As a result of this style of leadership development, KWO is able to engage with the broader structures of ethnic community organisations in Myanmar, make policy interventions and advocate for human rights principles at local, regional and global levels.

APHEDA also supports ALTSEAN-Burma's Women of Burma program, which contributes to building resilience by strengthening community and civic participation, inclusive governance and human capital. By equipping women leaders from diverse ethnic backgrounds with skills in human rights, advocacy, project management and political engagement, the program builds a cohort of experienced civil society leaders able to return to Myanmar and contribute to democratic recovery and future governance and security reforms.

Working with border-based partners enables APHEDA and our partner organisations to avoid operating through junta-aligned systems or registering under military-controlled authorities which limit access to some populations in Myanmar. This approach reduces the risk of legitimising perpetrators and enables continued support to oppressed pro-democracy actors in conflict-affected areas. Long-term investment in civil society and border-based groups during earlier periods of



conflict has contributed directly to the scale, coordination and endurance of democratic resistance following the coup.

In the context of protected conflict and displacement in Myanmar, the distinction between humanitarian and development response needs has blurred. APHEDA calls for direct support for humanitarian resistance approaches, defined as support to civilian-led service delivery structures that reject military authority, as a critical strategy for both current survival and future peacebuilding in Myanmar. APHEDA's experience demonstrates that, in contexts of authoritarian collapse and active conflict, effective Australian aid requires flexible, non-state delivery models that prioritise civilian-led structures over state-centric mechanisms. Following the 2021 coup, the collapse of state legitimacy rendered conventional centralised aid delivery ineffective and, in some cases, harmful.

Border-based humanitarian agencies and ethnic service providers represent an effective option for Australian support across pre-conflict, active conflict and post-conflict settings. Many have operated for decades and possess deep community trust, conflict sensitivity and the capacity to deliver assistance safely to conflict-affected and inaccessible populations. Operating outside junta-aligned systems, they provide education, health care and humanitarian assistance using adaptive logistics, including informal cash transfer systems, and coordinate rapidly in response to displacement and airstrikes.

Support to these civilian-led systems also functions as an investment in post-conflict recovery and peaceful state-building. In Chin State, women-led organisations have established hospitals providing free medical care. In Karen State, ethnic education systems have expanded in response to the collapse of state education services, while Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) teachers and health workers continue to sustain essential services in Karenni areas and refugee camps. These locally governed systems, in some areas supported by the National Unity Government, are re-imagining inclusive, federal democratic governance. Prioritising support to such partners enables Australia's aid program to deliver immediate humanitarian outcomes while contributing to long-term conflict prevention and localised durable governance solutions.

Between 2015-2021, APHEDA had an office in Yangon to support a program of trade union organising work. This included strengthening the organising, education and bargaining capacity of Myanmar trade unions and labour rights partners. Unions were among the first actors to initiate coordinated resistance following the 2021 coup, with the Women Garment Workers Union leading the first strike action. Trade unions have been central to the leadership and coordination of Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement, demonstrating the importance of organised labour as a movement for democratic and accountable governance.

Large proportions of education and health workers joined the CDM despite severe retaliation, sustaining professional ethics and service delivery under repression. This previous investment in union organising and women's leadership continues to contribute to the democracy movement with many current or former union leaders active in international advocacy. Women have been at the forefront of union-led resistance, aligning strongly with Australia's Women, Peace and Security agenda. Female civil servants in the Ministry of Health were the first to strike, and available data show that 72 per cent of suspended civil servants were women. During the early weeks of the CDM, women made up an estimated 60 per cent of protestors.

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APHEDA's work in Myanmar has demonstrated that locally-led development programs which prioritise capacity building of local civil society actors, including unions and women's organisations, contribute to longer term social institutions which are essential in preventing conflict, responding to the needs of their community during conflict, and contributing to peacebuilding post-conflict.



Annex 3: Supporting Palestinian development during displacement and war

As with APHEDA programs in other countries, our engagement in relation to peace in the Eastern Mediterranean region began with a response to refugee needs, in this instance during the civil war in Lebanon, also involving troops from neighbouring countries. Immediately after its establishment as the ACTU aid organisation, APHEDA began work in health worker training for Palestinian nurses from Lebanon in 1984, as part of conflict recovery, consistent with APHEDA's focus on health, refugees, women and training. This first project involved nurses coming for community health training in Sydney, and this garnered longstanding and significant support within Australian communities.

We have sustained projects in Beirut, 1984-2026, with DFAT and Australian trade union funds, around the rights of children, women, refugees and people with disability, with focus on health and education, within a framework of post-conflict recovery and peace-building, even during times of great suffering and insecurity. Though the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has not improved, and their political and economic situation remains untenable, there are sustainable gains in health and education, and in the development of a strong autonomous organisation of women refugees.

APHEDA began projects in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 1984, in Gaza, Bethlehem and Nablus, with Anglican church and Near East Council of Churches, and later in 1989, with the MA'AN Development Centre, a secular, independent national Palestinian NGO. In some areas of West Bank, and in Gaza Strip, the participants in these activities have been refugee communities. Between 1989 and 2025, APHEDA implemented projects with ANCP and donated funds, with MA'AN Development Centre, on youth, women, farmers, environment, vocational skills, and people with disabilities, all with an ecological and human rights-based approach, including with many Australian volunteers.

In 2001, after the start of the second intifada, there was a joint medical appeal, with DFAT support, APHEDA, along with six other Australian NGOs (AVI, Anglicord, MAA, WVA, NCCA, Caritas) to support five Palestinian hospitals in Jerusalem, West Bank, and Gaza Strip, dealing with casualties in second intifada. This was followed by projects in Jenin and Gaza 2009-15 with community funding on post conflict medical and rehabilitation treatment.

DFAT frameworks on aid to Palestine have shifted from state-building, to peace building, to market system development under occupation. In relation to state-building, via World Bank, and UN, and scholarships, there was emphasis on building skills in the Palestinian Ministries and administrative institutions. In relation to peace-building, there was a focus on woman and peace, youth, and building democratic civil society.

APHEDA assisted Prof Hal Wooten in establishing scholarships for Palestinian law and medical students with UNSW and University of Wollongong; this laid the basis for inclusion of Palestinians in the Australian Awards Leadership program for post graduate students, who can contribute to development of Palestinian national institutions in context of effective governance, democratic accountability, economic prosperity, a culture of human rights and conflict resolution.

Between 2009-2021, the Australian government designed two programs, Australian Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreements (AMENCA 2 and 3), with a peace-building framework. In AMENCA 2, APHEDA, along with MA'AN Development Centre was one consortium, along with ActionAid, World Vision Australia and CARE, whose goal was "to improve livelihoods to reduce the socio-economic



vulnerability of the Palestinian people with priority focus on women, youth and farmers". APHEDA worked on developing agriculture, environment and local food security in the northern part of the West Bank and the southern part of the Gaza Strip. The program was positively evaluated, and this led to the design of the AMENCA 3 program in 2015-6.

After the Israeli military intervention in Gaza Strip in 2014, the Australian government granted \$2 million extensions of the program for both APHEDA and World Vision, with a focus on immediate recovery of farming/food security, and psychosocial services for children traumatised by bombing.

In AMENCA 3, "Palestinian Farmers Connecting to Markets", APHEDA was in a consortium with MA'AN, Asala Businesswomen's Association, and the Institute for Community Partnerships at Bethlehem University. Three other consortia were World Vision until 2016, Oxfam and CARE. The program design was shifted towards a market system approach, but this was somewhat constrained by the increasingly adverse realities of the occupation. The rationale was that local economic success, increased employment, and healthier local markets, would lessen the drivers to conflict. In addition to working on value chains for almonds, vegetables and dates, with substantial tangible results in terms of production and incomes, APHEDA implemented a national campaign on women's inheritance rights, with national ministries and Muslim authorities, along with projects with people with disability, and youth entrepreneurship.

Our experience, along with other Australian NGOs who have worked in partnerships in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and with Palestinian refugees, is that effective conflict prevention, conflict-response or peace-building interventions must be tangibly addressing needs expressed by Palestinian democratic and expert civil society organisations, sustainably building their capacities within frameworks of ecological, social and political sustainability, and contributing to a local culture of human rights, and the rights of women, indigenous people, youth, people with disabilities, workers, and refugees.

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