

Inquiry into the Role of Australia's International Development Programme in Preventing Conflict

Submitted by: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)

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1. Executive Summary

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this timely Inquiry to the Australian Parliament. As the only intergovernmental organisation with a global mandate solely dedicated to the support of democracy, and with its regional office in Canberra supporting democracy throughout the Indo-Pacific region, International IDEA has a unique vantage point on the prevention of conflict in the region.

In the current global landscape characterised by a polycrisis of democratic backsliding, geopolitical contestation, climate vulnerability and digital disruption, Australia's development aid programme is a critical tool of statecraft. This submission argues that the Australian Government's international development programme is most effective in preventing conflict when it treats democratic resilience not as a secondary objective, but as the foundational infrastructure of peace.

Conflict prevention is inextricably linked to the quality of democratic institutions. International IDEA's experience in the region shows that where institutions are inclusive, transparent, and accountable, grievances are resolved through ballots and dialogue rather than bullets and violence. International IDEA recommends that the Australian international development program prioritises democratic resilience by emphasising long-term investment in electoral integrity, rule of law frameworks and institutions, youth inclusion in decision making, and the protection of democratic civic space.

2. The Strategic Context: Preventing Conflict through Strengthening Democracy

Australia's 2023 International Development Policy correctly identifies a "peaceful, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific" as its primary objective. International IDEA's [Global State of Democracy](#) (GSoD) indices provide a longitudinal dataset on the democratic health of states worldwide. Our GSoD indices show that democracy in our region is under significant strain, with declines occurring in key areas such as access to justice, credible elections, and effective parliaments. Myanmar stands as the starkest example in the Indo-Pacific of how democratic breakdown – from the military's invalidation of the 2020 election to the violent suppression of civic actors – has given rise to the region's largest conflict.

Violent conflict is rarely a spontaneous eruption; it is the terminal symptom of a failure in institutionalised dispute resolution. The central premise of ‘democratic resilience’ is that a healthy democracy functions as a sophisticated system of conflict management, where citizens are incentivised to pursue their interests through neutral institutional channels of dispute resolution. When these institutions are captured by elites or hollowed out by corruption, the incentive structure shifts toward extra-institutional means: protests, civil disobedience, and potentially, armed insurgency.

Preventing conflict must therefore focus on the integrity and resilience of a country’s democratic system. Australia’s development programme has historically focused on poverty alleviation and humanitarian assistance, which has been necessary but insufficient. If a community is pulled out of poverty only to have its infrastructure destroyed by civil war stemming from a disputed election, development gains are quickly erased. If aid focused on immediate humanitarian needs does not invest in the integrity of governance systems, including anti-corruption efforts, grievances can spiral into violence. International IDEA welcomes the recalibration in Australia’s 2023 International Development Policy from ‘relief’ to ‘resilience’, which aligns with our focus on supporting the resilience of democratic institutions and processes.

3. Strategic Pillars of Development Aid Focus

This section contains the key pillars of support which International IDEA recommends should constitute the core of Australia’s recalibrated development cooperation and aid efforts in preventing conflict in the Indo-Pacific region.

Pillar I: Strengthening the Rule of Law as Guarantor of Security

Fragility reflects a gap in legitimacy between the state and its people, often rooted in exclusionary legal and constitutional frameworks that fail to represent societal diversity. In post-conflict contexts, winner-takes-all constitutional models can deepen ethnic and regional tensions. This is evident in parts of Melanesia, where centralised state structures frequently clash with customary land tenure and local identities.

A further challenge in the region is the conflation of the rule of law with rule *by* law: while rights may be formally protected in constitutions, they have limited practical effect, and legal institutions are used to consolidate power rather than uphold accountability. This dynamic is reinforced through ‘lawfare,’ as seen in Thailand, where legal and judicial processes are deployed to suppress political dissent.

In Myanmar, arbitrary rule of law practices – including the weaponisation of courts and mass criminalisation of dissent – have accelerated the fragmentation of the state and driven armed resistance. Supporting rule of law institutions that uphold rights rather than enforce authoritarian consolidation is essential to conflict prevention. Our experience indicates that conflict thrives in

contexts where laws are either absent or are applied arbitrarily. When laws and institutions are weaponised by the state, marginalised groups lose faith in peaceful dispute resolution.

Proposed Action for Australian development cooperation: International IDEA recommends that Australia supports inclusive constitutional and legal reform processes in partner countries and facilitates democratic dialogue through empowering local actors to design power-sharing mechanisms and decentralised governance structures. In doing so, Australia can help build governance institutions that citizens view as legitimate, thereby removing the incentive for armed rebellion or secessionist movements. Australia should also invest in strengthening institutional integrity, including support for independent oversight bodies, anti-corruption commissions and CSOs that ensure the state itself is subject to the law.

Pillar II: Putting the Concerns of Young People Front and Centre

From Sri Lanka to Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar and Nepal, Generation Z has been at the forefront of protest movements demanding political and economic change. Across the region, these mobilisations have been met with heavy-handed responses from state security forces, resulting in loss of life, instability, and deepening political crises. These young women and men are not mobilised along party lines but are united in their call for a more equitable economy and a more representative and accountable leadership.

Australia's development policy prioritises inclusion, stability and prosperity in the region. Taking "inclusion" seriously must mean more than offering scholarships or overseas training to young people. It requires using Australia's diplomatic and development partnerships to support governments to meaningfully involve young people in democratic decision-making.

Young people's concerns are practical and immediate – access to housing, decent work and fair opportunities – and a say in how scarce resources are allocated. Investing in youth inclusion is therefore not rhetorical, but preventative: supporting meaningful dialogue and ensuring young people's voices shape national priorities helps reduce the risk of political frustration, instability and insecurity.

Proposed action for Australian development cooperation:

1. Embed youth inclusion in development partnerships

- Make youth participation a benchmark in bilateral programs with partner governments.
- Support mechanisms that bring young voices into national policy dialogue.

2. Rebalance aid modalities

- Shift a portion of aid funding from government-to-government channels towards youth-led organisations, civic initiatives, and independent media platforms.

3. Support meaningful dialogue platforms

- Fund and convene intergenerational forums where young people can engage directly with policymakers on economic, social, and climate priorities.

Pillar III: Electoral Integrity and the Prevention of Election Violence

When an electoral process lacks integrity, it does not provide a mandate; it provides a grievance. Disputed elections in the region have led to protracted political crises and have served as justification for entrenchment of authoritarian or military rule – particularly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific – creating a downward spiral of conflict and violence. Modern elections are not just about operational aspects; they are about the integrity of the information environment before, during, and after the vote.

Myanmar demonstrates how the collapse of electoral integrity can become a catalyst for state-wide conflict. The military's annulment of the legitimate 2020 election results and subsequent organisation of 2021 post-coup sham elections in December 2025/January 2026 have entrenched conflict dynamics and delegitimised state institutions. International IDEA and others have [warned](#) that the junta-run elections lack credibility, do not meet democratic standards, and risk enabling international normalisation of authoritarian rule. The Myanmar case shows that where elections lose legitimacy, they cease to function as peaceful mechanisms for political competition and instead entrench authoritarian rule and trigger protracted cycles of violence.

Proposed Action for Australian development cooperation: International IDEA proposes that Australia should transition from 'event-based' electoral support to 'cycle-based' institutional support, in line with the Australian Government's [response](#) to the report, 'Supporting democracy in our region'. This involves strengthening the integrity of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to build technical and logistical autonomy, legal independence, digital security, and transparent results-management systems. It also requires supporting CSOs that facilitate citizen participation in, and monitoring of, electoral processes, and encouraging EMBs to engage with civil society and media. By supporting the perceived and actual fairness of electoral processes, Australia can mitigate a primary spark of civil conflict.

Pillar IV: Information Integrity to Protect Democracy

A critical area of significance for this inquiry should be the role of technology. Modern conflicts are often pre-heated in digital spaces. State and non-state actors are increasingly using disinformation to polarise our region. Interference in the digital space is now a widespread and cost-effective way to destabilise democracies. When populations cannot agree on a shared reality, the risk of violence increases.

Proposed Action for Australian development cooperation: International IDEA proposes that Australia's development programme invests in information integrity and cognitive resilience. This includes supporting independent media, funding fact-checking ecosystems, and training government officials on how to respond to digital threats without resorting to censorship. A society that can distinguish between legitimate political debate and manufactured disinformation is a society that is significantly harder to destabilise.

4. Australia's Strategic Advantage in Conflict Prevention

Australia's comparative strength in the Indo-Pacific is its reputation as a stable, long-standing democracy with robust social cohesion. At a time when democratic backsliding is coinciding with decline in international support for democracy and governance, Australia has a unique opportunity to become an even more significant actor in safeguarding democratic resilience in the region.

International IDEA recommends Australia approaches its development cooperation based on:

- **Integrating democracy indices into conflict risk assessments.** DFAT may adopt International IDEA's GSoD indices, [Democracy Tracker](#) and indicators as data in its conflict analysis and early-warning systems.
- **Addressing root causes of conflict.** Many past efforts have focused on the visible 'costs' of conflict (economic, social, humanitarian) or a rush to provide urgent relief, rather than pre-emptively addressing the underlying political, social, or economic drivers of conflict.
- **Inclusivity.** Australian aid should ensure women, youth, displaced populations and Indigenous voices are represented in decision-making.
- **Sustainability.** In situations where democratic transitions are ongoing, Australia should provide sustained, multi-year funding for reform rather than one-off project grants.

International IDEA, with its longstanding experience and partnerships in the region, is ready to partner with the Australian Government in these efforts. As an intergovernmental organisation known for its technical expertise and political impartiality, International IDEA can help Australia deliver its international assistance through a multilateral framework while achieving high-impact strategic outcomes. International IDEA's Canberra Regional Office – including its country offices across the region – is well placed to offer technical expertise to partner countries during moments of political transition or crisis.

5. Conclusion

The prevention of conflict is perhaps the most significant "return on investment" a development programme can achieve. A single year of violent conflict can erase decades of progress in health, education, and economic growth, while peace and stability – best achieved and sustained through democracy and its institutions – present opportunities for economic, diplomatic, and strategic partnerships.

For Australia, supporting democracy is thus not just a moral imperative; it is a strategic necessity. A region of resilient democracies is a region where Australia's security interests are most protected. International IDEA stands ready to partner with the Australian Government, and will be pleased to provide further evidence, data, and technical briefings to the Committee as it progresses with this vital inquiry.