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Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

UNICEF Australia's submission to the Inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict

UNICEF Australia welcomes the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's Inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict. Guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF works across 190 countries to place children at the heart of efforts to build peaceful, resilient societies. We consider Australia's international development program to be most effective in promoting stability and resilience when it prioritises the rights and wellbeing of children and young people.

Children are among the most affected by conflict and are also powerful contributors to peace. Nearly one in six children globally now lives in a conflict affected-area, with crises becoming more frequent, prolonged and destabilising.¹ These shocks interrupt learning, increase children's exposure to violence, and reverse development gains built over decades. The growing impacts of climate change – including more frequent disasters and increased competition over resources – further disrupt essential services for children and young people and heighten instability, reinforcing the urgency of strategic development investments.

UNICEF Australia commends the Government's long history of supporting peace and development overseas, and welcomes the focus on future generations, gender equality and locally led initiatives in Australia's current International Development Policy.

Building on this foundation, we are calling on the Government to prioritise children and young people's rights and wellbeing across its development program in ways that strengthen community leadership, expand young people's participation in decision-making, and promote cohesion and resilience from the ground up. As a key partner to ASEAN and other regional institutions, and as a founding member of the Pacific Island Forum, Australia is well placed to help reduce the social and economic drivers of conflict and promote stability across the region, delivering long-term benefits for children and their communities.

Investing in children and young people as a foundation for peace, stability and resilience

Prioritising children and young people across Australia's development investments reduces structural risks and builds the human capital that future economies and societies depend on. Traditional peacebuilding and diplomatic efforts have tended to focus on high-level political processes and security-driven interventions. Yet UNICEF's global evidence shows that effective conflict prevention occurs at all levels of society and involves multiple stakeholders – from grassroots organisations and civil society to governments.²

It begins with ensuring children have equitable access to quality education, healthcare, clean water and sanitation, social protection, and strong family and community support.³ It also requires recognising young people as legitimate contributors to peace and resilience, and ensuring they have meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Evidence from UNICEF's work in fragile and conflict-affected settings shows the value of expanding equitable access to WASH services, strengthening education systems, and creating opportunities for young people to participate meaningfully in civic life.⁴

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In fragile settings where water scarcity drives local tensions, fair access to clean water can remove a key source of grievance, strengthening vertical and horizontal social cohesion and building greater trust in institutions. UNICEF's work in Lebanon and Ethiopia shows how inclusive WASH services can reduce inequalities and ease intercommunal tensions.⁵ Investments in good sanitation and hygiene are essential for children's physical and cognitive growth. They can also prevent the spread of disease, reducing pressures on local health systems.

Similarly, equitable and inclusive education builds resilience by providing children with protective environments and equipping them with the skills and opportunities needed to contribute to society. This can reduce their reliance on negative coping strategies and strengthen their ability to withstand shocks. Global analysis indicates that better education outcomes are associated with higher social and political stability.⁶

UNICEF's programming in countries such as Sierra Leone and Cameroon demonstrates that participation in school clubs, youth groups and village-level initiatives helps young people develop teamwork and problem-solving skills, build relationships across social divides and become more resilient to political mobilisation and armed recruitment.⁷ Empowering young people as agents of peace enhances their capabilities as the future workforce and leaders of their countries, laying the foundations for more peaceful, stable and resilient societies.

Australia's role in the Indo-Pacific

Australia's development program is uniquely positioned to drive this approach across the Indo-Pacific. By 2050, the youth population is projected to be more than double that of 2023 in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, highlighting the critical need for investments in education, health services and social protection.⁸ Elsewhere, declining youth and rapidly ageing populations – driven by low fertility and outward migration – pose different but equally significant risks, including labour shortages, shrinking tax bases and weakened social support systems.⁹ Around 1 in 5 of all youth in the Asia Pacific region are not in education, employment, or training, with elevated rates for young women.¹⁰

These regional trends reinforce the need to invest early in child- and youth-focused development to enable societies to better withstand economic, political, environmental and demographic pressures. In the following section, we set out our recommendations and highlight three DFAT-supported initiatives that the Government can build on, scale and adapt across the region to enhance Australia's role in preventing conflict.

1. Embed child rights and child-focused programming as core objectives of Australia's international development program

A strong example of how child-focused programming can prevent conflict comes from Mindanao in southern Philippines, where UNICEF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) worked together from 2009–2017 to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, with DFAT's support.¹¹ Through trust-building, targeted communication campaigns, and sustained dialogue with commanders, parents, religious leaders and women's groups, the initiative helped shift longstanding norms that had allowed children to undertake tasks such as cooking, fetching water, carrying messages or standing guard in MILF camps. These efforts supported the safe disengagement of 1,869 children and led to the MILF's formal removal from the UN list of armed groups that recruit or use children.

Community engagement was central. Messages on child rights were delivered through discussion groups, community assemblies, kids' camps and youth activities, ensuring that families and local leaders understood the risks associated with children's involvement in armed groups and the importance of keeping them in school and at home. UNICEF and partners also provided ongoing family-based case management,

psychosocial support, positive parenting programs, referrals to government services, and regular engagement with religious leaders through Friday sermons.

The Mindanao experience shows that long-term, locally led, child-centred approaches can change behaviour, build trust and reduce the drivers of violence in fragile contexts. It provides a practical model for how Australia can continue to prevent conflict by embedding a focus on child rights and child-focused programming across its development program.

2. Strengthen mechanisms that elevate young people's voices and improve local accountability

With DFAT's support, UNICEF Pacific and the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) co-developed a Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM) to ensure communities could raise concerns, access services and influence decision-making.¹² In a context where cyclones, floods and public health emergencies regularly disrupt children's access to safe water, health, education and protection, the CFM provided accessible digital channels (SMS, Viber, Facebook Messenger) alongside offline reporting through District Councils of Social Services (DCOSS).

Between 2023 and 2025, the mechanism reached 76 communities and an estimated 12,350 people, with 1,127 community members, including many young people, participating in dialogues to identify WASH, health, nutrition and protection needs. Importantly, youth feedback played a catalytic role, prompting FCOSS to integrate youth representatives more actively into DCOSS structures. Young participants reported that the CFM strengthened their confidence that their concerns would be heard and acted upon.

Fiji's experience illustrates how Australia's investments in locally led systems can improve responsiveness to issues that directly affect children and young people. By enabling early identification of risks, improving access to essential services and reinforcing safeguarding, the CFM ensured youth experiences shaped both emergency response and long-term development. It provides a practical model for strengthening social cohesion and resilience in climate-vulnerable contexts across the Indo-Pacific.

3. Invest in resilient, integrated health, WASH services, education and social protection systems that protect children during shocks and reduce the drivers of conflict

In Myanmar, conflict, displacement, economic decline and repeated climate shocks have eroded health and social systems. With DFAT's support, UNICEF has prioritised strengthening of essential health, nutrition, WASH and immunisation services to ensure continuity during and after shocks. Despite historic flooding in 2024, UNICEF delivered primary healthcare to 66,567 people and WASH supplies to over 532,000 people, ensuring children continued to receive lifesaving services.¹³ Immunisation efforts reached more than 370,000 children under 12.¹⁴

Protecting children's health, sustaining essential systems and maintaining immunisation coverage are critical to preventing disease outbreaks, reducing child mortality and avoiding long-term developmental harm. Strong systems also reduce family hardship, prevent negative coping strategies and strengthen community trust – all key conditions for stability. Myanmar's experience shows how targeted, integrated system-strengthening can support children's wellbeing and offer practical insights to inform resilience strategies across the Indo-Pacific.

4. Increase Australia's Overseas Development Assistance to 1% of the Federal Budget to resource long-term, preventive, child- and youth-focused investments

Long-term, preventive development requires predictable and sustained investment. Increasing ODA to 1% of the Federal Budget by 2027–28 would help Australia meet its international responsibilities and position the country as a regional leader in peace, stability and resilience. It would also provide the resources necessary to

scale child- and youth-focused development approaches that address structural risks and strengthen community resilience.

As crises become more frequent and protracted, humanitarian responses cannot keep pace with rising needs, underscoring the importance of long-term development investments. UNICEF Australia stands ready to work with the Australian Government in collaboration with UNICEF and our colleagues in the Indo-Pacific to help shape a development program that strengthens essential services in fragile contexts. We are committed to ensuring children and young people have the support they need to withstand shocks, participate in decisions that affect their lives, and contribute to lasting peace and stability.

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<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/not-new-normal-2024-one-worst-years-unicefs-history-children-conflict>

² See e.g. UNICEF, UNICEF and Sustaining Peace: Strengthening the Socio-Economic Foundations of Peace through Education, Young People's Engagement & WASH (February 2020), available at: https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/june_3-unicef_thematic_paper_for_2020_sg_report_mf.pdf; UNICEF, UNICEF Programme Framework for Fragile Contexts (April 2018), available at:

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³ UNICEF, UNICEF Peacebuilding Programming Framework (2023), available at:

<https://www.unicef.org/media/162516/file/UNICEF%20Peacebuilding%20Programming%20Framework.pdf.pdf>, p.18.

⁴ UNICEF, UNICEF and Sustaining Peace: Strengthening the Socio-Economic Foundations of Peace through Education, Young People's Engagement & WASH (February 2020), available at: https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/june_3-unicef_thematic_paper_for_2020_sg_report_mf.pdf

⁵ UNICEF, UNICEF and Sustaining Peace: Strengthening the Socio-Economic Foundations of Peace through Education, Young People's Engagement & WASH (February 2020), p.14.

⁶ Institute for Economics & Peace and the Global Partnership for Education, Key Findings from Analyses on the Relationship Between Education and Peace (April 2024), available at: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2024-04-iep-gpe-key-findings-education-and-peace-rev1.pdf>, p.5.

⁷ UNICEF, UNICEF and Sustaining Peace: Strengthening the Socio-Economic Foundations of Peace through Education, Young People's Engagement & WASH (February 2020), pp.10-11.

⁸ UNESCAP, Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023 (2023), available at:

https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesap_pd_2024_escap-report-population-development-17.pdf, pp.62-63.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ILO, Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Asia and the Pacific (2024), available at: <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific%20Brief%20GET%20Youth%202024.pdf>, p.1.

¹¹ UNICEF, CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT: PHILIPPINES Action Plan on the Recruitment and Use of Children in Armed Conflict Processes and Lessons Learned | 2009-2017 United Nations and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (1 May 2019), available at: <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/reports/children-armed-conflict-philippines>

¹² See UNICEF Fiji (Pacific Islands), Annual Report 2024 (February 2025). More information available on request.

¹³ UNICEF Myanmar, Humanitarian Situation Report No. 8, 2024 (19 November 2024), available at: <https://myanmar.un.org/en/283864-unicef-myanmar-humanitarian-situation-report-no-8-2024>

¹⁴ Ibid.