

24 April 2026

Supplementary inquiry submission.

**The Joint Standing Committee on
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade —
*an inquiry into the role of Australia's
international development program in
preventing conflict.***

**Development
Intelligence
Lab.**

Supplementary submission to the inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict.

24 April 2026



At the time Parliament launched this inquiry, conflict was increasing globally, and in Australia's region. Now, merely months later, conflicts – violent, economic and coercive – have broken out in the Middle East and beyond at a scale not seen for decades.

This means **Australia has a new operating environment**, one in which conflict is more possible than it was, and where **mitigating risks of conflict will be a core feature of Australian foreign affairs** and development cooperation for the foreseeable future.

This makes **adjusting Australia's approach on conflict prevention necessary**, even within constrained budgets. The Australian Government has set out conflict prevention as a clear priority and has already stepped up efforts. But in the current context, it is likely that doing more is essential to Australia's interests and for the region.

In the Lab's view, **the central issue is not necessarily an absence of conflict prevention activity. It is the absence of a defined, practical, active and operationalised system** to ensure consistent and high impact conflict prevention through all elements of statecraft, including the development program.

This supplementary submission sets out practical, immediately actionable options for strengthening Australia's conflict prevention, including through the development program – focused on **six priorities for action**:

1. A whole-of-government conflict prevention model
2. Ministerial and parliamentary oversight mechanisms with a ministerial statement, a report to government and in-camera parliamentary briefings
3. A central function to prioritise and integrate action
4. A targeted Peace and Resilience Fund
5. Four country pilots in priority contexts
6. A resilience monitoring system



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Six questions to resolve.

To improve Australia's conflict prevention approach and the development program's contribution to preventing conflict, six questions must be addressed:

1. What is Australia's approach to conflict prevention?

Recommendation 1: Establish a whole-of-government conflict prevention model

Peace and stability are reflected in many of Australia's international development and foreign policy settings. There is, however, no clear and shared articulation of what constitutes building peace and preventing conflict in practice. This means there are different understandings in government and the development community of what type of conflict matters most to Australia, how conflict can be prevented and who does what. In short, there is no coherent framework for how these efforts are prioritised, coordinated and assessed across government – and which role the development program plays.

Therefore, the Australian Government should articulate a clear whole-of-government conflict prevention model.¹ This should:

- Define what constitutes conflict prevention across diplomatic, development, security and economic tools
- Set out how these tools contribute to addressing specific conflict risks (both interstate and intrastate conflict risks)
- Provide a common framework for planning, prioritisation and coordination

This could take the form of a concise strategy and/or guidance architecture, but the emphasis should be on practical usability across agencies and posts.

2. Who is ultimately responsible?

Recommendation 2: Formalise ministerial and parliamentary oversight with a ministerial statement, report to government and in-camera briefings

Without a defined approach (recommendation 1) and without relevant reporting mechanisms, Parliament and Ministers are not equipped with the information and analysis to assess if the political priority they have placed on conflict prevention is effectively executed in practice.

Therefore, Australian Government should establish clear accountability through:

- An annual ministerial statement on conflict prevention and resilience progress
- An annual conflict and resilience report to government, identifying priority risks and contexts

¹ William Leben and Martina Zapf, *Deterrence, diplomacy, and development: towards an 'Australian Model' for conflict prevention*, Development Intelligence Lab, October 2025, [online](#).

- In-camera briefings to key parliamentary committees, including the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Defence

Together, these mechanisms would anchor responsibility at senior levels, strengthen incentives for coordinated impactful action, and enable more structured engagement with Parliament.

3. Who coordinates conflict prevention?

Recommendation 3: Establish a central function within DFAT

Conflict prevention cuts across defence, diplomacy, development and other security agencies. Coordination across agencies occurs through a range of formal and informal mechanisms. While these can be effective, they are not consistently supported by shared prioritisation processes or joint decision-making structures.

Therefore, the Australian Government should establish a clear central coordination function responsible for:

- Joining up analysis across agencies
- Identifying priority contexts and risks (covering interstate and intrastate conflict risks)
- Linking analysis to agreed courses of action
- Supporting whole-of-government decision-making
- Assessing impact and identifying lessons

In practice, this function should be located where it can credibly span diplomatic, development and security engagements, rather than within a single policy stream; DFAT's Conflict Prevention Branch is one logical option, provided its focus is expanded beyond interstate, geostrategic risks and it is appropriately resourced. It will be essential that the remit of this central function spans interstate and intrastate conflict, which are both relevant for peace and stability in the region and strongly interconnected.²

4. How can conflict prevention be resourced given tight budgets?

Recommendation 4: Establish a Peace and Resilience Fund

Existing systems and processes can limit the ability to reallocate resources or adjust programming in response to emerging risks. In practice, funding arrangements, contractual commitments and approval processes can make it difficult to shift investments in settings where conflict risks are evolving. This can result in delays between the identification of emerging risks and the implementation of preventive actions, reducing the overall effectiveness of the response.

Therefore, the Australian Government should establish a Peace and Resilience Fund, using an NPP-style mechanism, to support targeted conflict prevention efforts. This should:

- Pool a modest proportion of existing resources across agencies (including non-ODA funding)
- Enable country posts to bid for funding against prioritised risks

² Heather Murphy and Martina Zapf, *How geostrategic competition and fragility intersect*, Development Intelligence Lab, October 2024, [online](#).

- Include streamlined approval processes to allow early action

Crucially, this approach would create incentives for practical, context-specific prevention initiatives without requiring large new funding commitments.

5. How does this work on the ground?

Recommendation 5: Establish four country pilots

Evidence to the Committee highlights the importance of locally grounded approaches in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where many drivers of conflict manifest most acutely. This underscores a dual requirement: ensuring all development programs are conflict-sensitive, while also investing in more deliberate, context-specific prevention interventions where risks are highest. The greatest opportunity to strengthen Australia's approach is therefore to complement system-wide improvements with focused effort in a small number of countries. The Australian Government should establish four country pilots in high-risk contexts. These pilots should:

- Apply the operating model (Recommendation 1)
- Be prioritised and coordinated through the central function (Recommendation 3)
- Be informed by the resilience monitoring system (Recommendation 6)
- Be supported through the Peace and Resilience Fund (Recommendation 4)
- Be assessed and reported on (Recommendation 2)

Priority countries should include a mix of Indo-Pacific fragile and conflict-affected settings where Australia has a significant presence. Contexts proposed for consideration include: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Vanuatu.

In practice, pilots should:

- Establish a resilience monitoring system
- Identify gaps and opportunities to calibrate Australian assistance to better mitigate conflict risks and maximise resilience
- Invest in locally led initiatives addressing subnational drivers of conflict
- Integrate conflict sensitivity and political economy analysis into all existing and major new investments to ensure they *Do No Harm* (i.e. unintentionally exacerbate conflict drivers)
- Establish clearer links between local programming, Development Partnership Plans and strategic prioritisation
- Report annually and be featured in the annual conflict report (Recommendation 2)

These pilots would provide a practical test of how to connect analysis, resourcing and delivery in real-world contexts.

6. How can Australia act earlier to prevent conflict?

Recommendation 6: Establish a resilience monitoring system

Current approaches to conflict prevention are often centred on “early warning” systems that identify risks relatively late, resulting in action that is already reactive rather than preventive. For example, once protests are visible on the streets in a context, risks have already escalated and the window for prevention has largely passed. A resilience monitoring approach would instead track earlier signals – such as rising local grievances or institutional stress – enabling action before tensions crystallise. Another challenge is that analysis is not consistently linked to timely programming decisions.

A more effective approach would focus on monitoring both risk and resilience dynamics over time – identifying not only where instability is increasing, but where resilience can be strengthened. This would enable earlier, more deliberate adjustments to programming, helping partners build the conditions to absorb, adapt and respond to shocks.

Therefore, the Australian Government should establish a resilience monitoring system focused on tracking underlying drivers of fragility and sources of resilience in the four priority pilot countries – not predicting crises at the last minute. This system should:

- Monitor key indicators of resilience and instability over time
- Be embedded within country programs and planning processes
- Trigger earlier, incremental adjustments to programming and resource allocation
- Inform bids for the Peace and Resilience Fund (Recommendation 5)

This would enable Australia to move from reactive responses to more deliberate, preventive action – strengthening the overall effectiveness of its development program.

Conclusion.

Australia's international development program plays an important role in preventing conflict, particularly through its contribution to resilience, governance and human development.

However, the evolving strategic environment is placing increasing pressure on how different elements of statecraft are prioritised and applied. As recent international discussions have highlighted, global security debates are becoming more focused on deterrence and hard security responses, with a risk that the preventive value of development cooperation is overlooked or underutilised.

This creates a dual challenge: not only to sustain investment in development as a tool of prevention, but to more clearly articulate and operationalise its distinct contribution in addressing the underlying drivers of fragility and instability.

The evidence before the Committee suggests that the primary opportunity for strengthening this role lies not in expanding the range of activities undertaken, but in improving how existing efforts are prioritised, coordinated and implemented.

Strengthening the operational connections between analysis, decision-making, resourcing and programming would enable Australia to better leverage its development program as part of an integrated approach to preventing conflict—complementing, and enhancing the effectiveness of, its diplomatic and security engagement.

Development Intelligence Lab.

About the Lab

The Lab is a think tank working on development cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. We're convinced that great development cooperation comes from unusual collaborations, inspired leadership, good natured debate, and cracking analysis.

Join us for the latest debates on [The Intel](#), where every fortnight we ask three experts one question that's top of mind for the development and foreign policy community. Stay up to date with rich insights on Australian development cooperation in the region through [Our Analysis](#). And keep an eye out for our [Situation Room](#), an off-the-record dialogue to test ideas, deepen understanding, and shape Australian policy and practice.

Further Information

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