

***Inquiry into the Role of Australia's International Development Programme in Preventing Conflict  
World Food Programme (WFP)  
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**Executive Summary**

The World Food Programme (WFP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Parliament's inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict. Conflict and food insecurity are deeply intertwined: conflict is now the leading driver of global hunger, while fragile food systems can fuel tensions, weaken social cohesion, and erode trust in institutions. In this context, food security is not only a humanitarian imperative but a foundational pillar of peace and security.

Drawing on evidence from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and global research, WFP's submission demonstrates that well designed food security and resilience interventions can reduce conflict risks in three interconnected ways. First, by Third, by supporting a return to daily life, food and cash-based assistance helps households avoid desperate coping strategies and reduces pressures that can escalate into unrest. Second, by fostering social cohesion, inclusive and equitable programmes help strengthen relationships between communities, reduce perceptions of unfairness, and create opportunities for cooperation. Third, by strengthening capacities for contributing to local peace, participatory processes and transparent targeting build trust, support local governance, and enhance communities' ability to manage disputes constructively. Social cohesion has been defined as WFP's main contribution to peace at the local level.

WFP's research and measurement work provides empirical evidence for these pathways. The Cox's Bazar Social Cohesion and Peace Measurement Report offers detailed insights into trust, perceptions of fairness, and intergroup relationships in one of the world's most complex humanitarian settings. Findings show that market-based assistance, livelihood support, and transparent processes had measurable, positive effects on social cohesion between Rohingya refugees and host communities. Similarly, WFP's collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies on school feeding in fragile environments demonstrates how school meals can create inclusive spaces, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and reduce household stress, all of which contribute to more peaceful societies. In Afghanistan, community led targeting processes have reduced tensions around aid distribution and reinforced local ownership.

These examples illustrate a broader lesson: the *how* of assistance delivery is as important as the *what*.

Conflict sensitive approaches, early warning systems, and investments in participatory governance can transform humanitarian interventions into stabilizing forces. When food security interventions address immediate needs and at the same time reinforce equitable systems, they can help reduce tensions, prevent conflict and strengthen social cohesion.

Australia's international development program aligns strongly with these approaches. Australia's emphasis on resilience, human security, good governance, gender equality, inclusive development, and anticipatory action resonates with WFP's operational priorities and evidence base. WFP's reach into highly fragile settings, its neutrality, and its ability to link humanitarian and development interventions make it a uniquely positioned partner for Australia's conflict-prevention ambitions.

The submission recommends that Australia continue and expand support for food security and social cohesion initiatives that demonstrate measurable contributions to peace. Strengthening investment in evidence generation, school feeding in fragile contexts, climate-adapted food systems, and community-led approaches would enhance Australia's capacity to address the drivers of instability and reinforce resilience in vulnerable regions. These investments can provide significant returns by reducing the likelihood of crises escalating into conflict. Food security is central to peace. WFP's experience across multiple contexts shows that when communities are able to meet their basic needs, interact with one another through fair and transparent systems, and rely on inclusive

institutions, they are better equipped to navigate tensions without violence. Through its partnership with WFP, Australia has a vital opportunity to advance global security, reduce suffering, and support communities in building the foundations for lasting peace.

## **1. Introduction**

WFP welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Parliament's ongoing inquiry into how Australia's international development programme can more effectively prevent conflict. Preventing conflict is one of the most impactful investments governments can make, not only for saving lives and ensuring global security but also for strengthening regional security, reducing poverty levels and, and building resilience. As one of Australia's largest humanitarian and development partners, WFP brings long-standing experience working at the intersection of food security, conflict, fragility, resilience, and social cohesion across some of the world's most complex operational environments.

Around the world, conflict has become the primary driver of acute food insecurity. At the same time, food insecurity itself often intensifies tensions and contributes to cycles of instability. This interdependence means that humanitarian and development actors must recognize food security not simply as a humanitarian outcome, but as a pathway towards security. WFP's extensive presence in fragile and conflict affected countries provides a unique vantage point: in many places, WFP is the earliest or only actor with sustained access, enabling it to stabilize communities, strengthen relationships between population groups, and reinforce local systems essential for peace.

This submission draws on WFP's resources, including the Three Pathways to Peace framework, published research conducted in partnership with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), publicly available case studies and videos, and detailed social cohesion measurements from Cox's Bazar. The submission is written in a narrative style, integrating conceptual, operational, and evidence-based insights that address the Committee's Terms of Reference holistically.

## **2. Food Security, Fragility, and Conflict: Understanding the Interdependence**

Conflict and food insecurity reinforce one another in ways that are profound and mutually destructive. Ongoing conflicts disrupt agricultural production, displace communities, reduce household assets, undermine infrastructure, and destabilize markets. The consequences ripple outward, often for years or decades, even after violence subsides. Conversely, when people cannot reliably access food or sustain their livelihoods due to economic shocks, natural disasters, or displacement, the resulting pressure and competition can heighten tensions within and between communities. Competition over scarce resources, especially in fragile and densely populated settings, is likely to increase grievances and create fertile ground for unrest.

Today, more than two-thirds of the world's acutely food-insecure people live in conflict-affected environments. The causal pathways are clear: conflict destroys food systems, while fragile food systems can drive grievances that escalate into violence. This dynamic is especially evident in regions experiencing climate shocks, rapid demographic change, or protracted displacement.

Food systems are not only economic or technical constructs; they are deeply social and political. They shape how communities relate to one another, how resources are managed, and how institutions are perceived. When food systems are equitable and resilient, they strengthen trust and security. When they fail, they can become sources of tension, exclusion, or competition. For Australia's development programme, with its growing emphasis on resilience, governance, climate adaptation, and human security, investing in food systems is therefore an investment in conflict prevention.

WFP's conceptual framework, the Three Pathways to Peace, illustrates the ways in which food assistance and related programming reduce conflict risks. Although simple, the framework captures an essential truth: that addressing

hunger does more than alleviate suffering; it stabilizes communities, strengthens relationships, and enables systems that support long-term peace.

### **3. WFP's Three Pathways to Peace: How Food Assistance contributes to security**

WFP's contribution to peace is guided by three pathways identified through research, evaluations, and extensive programming experience:

- Equitable Access to Natural Resources
- Citizen State Trust
- Supporting a Return to Daily Life

These pathways reflect how hunger-related interventions, when designed with inclusion, equity, and transparency, can strengthen the relationships, routines, and governance dynamics that underpin social cohesion. By embedding participatory approaches and ensuring that assistance is delivered fairly and in consultation with communities, WFP's engagement supports local efforts to reduce tensions, foster cooperation, and reinforce the conditions necessary for sustaining peace.

Together, these pathways offer a practical framework for aligning food security programming with peace-positive outcomes. They help WFP and its partners intentionally shape interventions so that they not only address immediate needs but also contribute to strengthening trust, respect, tolerance, and solidarity, key elements of social cohesion and WFP's primary contribution to peace.

While these pathways are simple in presentation, they are grounded in years of operational practice and empirical evidence from multiple countries. They serve as the conceptual foundation for WFP's contributions to the prevention of conflict.

### **4. Measuring What Matters: Evidence on Social Cohesion, Peace, and Food Security**

Demonstrating contributions to peace requires more than programmatic intent; it requires evidence. Recognizing this, WFP has invested heavily in research and measurement tools that illuminate how humanitarian and development interventions affect relationships, perceptions, and trust, all of which are central to peace.

One of the most significant contributions to this evidence base comes from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, one of the world's largest refugee settings. Hosting nearly one million Rohingya refugees alongside Bangladeshi host communities, Cox's Bazar is a complex environment with high levels of vulnerability, resource pressure, and social tension. The Cox's Bazar Social Cohesion and Peace Measurement Report and its accompanying brief provide a detailed analysis of the dynamics between communities, with insights drawn from quantitative household surveys and qualitative focus group discussions.

The findings show that WFP's interventions contributed to measurable improvements in trust, social cohesion, and perceptions of safety. The research highlights that social cohesion is not a static concept but a dynamic set of relationships influenced by access to services, economic opportunities, perceptions of fairness, and the quality of interactions between different groups. WFP's work in market integration, livelihood support, and equitable assistance delivery strengthened cooperation between host communities and refugees. This evidence demonstrates that humanitarian programmes can do more than mitigate suffering; they can foster peace-positive outcomes.

Similarly, WFP's research partnership with the Institute of Development Studies on the role of school feeding in fragile and conflict-affected settings provides insight into how education, nutrition, and social cohesion intersect. School feeding programmes, often seen primarily as educational or nutritional interventions, also promote social cohesion by creating safe, inclusive spaces where children from diverse backgrounds interact. They reduce economic pressures on households by offsetting food costs, thereby reducing stress that can manifest as tension or conflict within communities. They also strengthen the perceived legitimacy of institutions delivering services equitably.

The evidence from Afghanistan further highlights the importance of inclusive processes. In Afghanistan, WFP's community-led targeting processes create spaces for dialogue, transparency, and collective decision-making. In environments where resource allocation could easily spark tension, these participatory approaches help prevent conflict by fostering fairness and building trust.

Across these diverse contexts, one theme emerges clearly: the processes through which assistance is delivered, transparency, inclusion, fairness, community participation, can be as important for peace as the assistance itself.

### **5. Conflict Sensitivity, Risk Analysis, and Early Warning**

Preventing conflict requires not only responding to existing vulnerabilities but also anticipating and mitigating emerging risks. Conflict sensitivity is therefore a central component of WFP's work in fragile contexts. Conflict-sensitive programming involves a systematic effort to understand the conflict context, identify how interventions might interact with that context, and adapt programmes to minimize negative impacts while enhancing positive ones.

In Cox's Bazar, WFP's analysis combined household surveys, conflict mapping, and qualitative discussions to capture perceptions, identify latent tensions, and uncover potential drivers of conflict. This approach allowed WFP to refine its programmes, for example, by improving communication around targeting criteria, adjusting distribution schedules, or adapting livelihood activities to reduce stress on shared resources.

Beyond Cox's Bazar, WFP's broader approach to conflict sensitivity reflects an institutional commitment to designing programmes that are equitable, inclusive, and responsive to local realities. Transparent targeting systems reduce perceptions of bias. Community consultations improve trust. Coordination with local authorities fosters cooperation and legitimacy.

In addition to conflict sensitivity, early warning and anticipatory action play an increasingly important role in preventing conflict. Many conflicts are triggered or exacerbated by shocks, climate-related disasters, sudden price spikes, or displacement flows. By monitoring food security indicators, markets, and climate patterns, WFP helps identify stress points before they escalate. This proactive approach aligns with Australia's growing interest in anticipatory action and climate-security analysis.

### **6. Case Studies: How Food Security Interventions Reduce Conflict Risks**

WFP's contributions to peace can be best understood through examples from contexts where food insecurity and conflict intersect most acutely.

In **Bangladesh**, In Cox's Bazar, WFP helps ease tensions between Rohingya refugees and host communities by combining market-integration initiatives with resilience-building support. Connecting refugee and host markets stimulates the local economy, while targeted livelihood activities for hosts reduce pressure and perceptions of imbalance. This programming is reinforced by WFP's social cohesion survey—measuring trust, respect for diversity, solidarity, and helpfulness—complemented by risk-mapping through community discussions. Together, these efforts strengthen relations between the two populations.

In **Sierra Leone**, WFP's participation in a Peacebuilding Fund project illustrates the role of food security in supporting youth engagement and reducing grievances. The publicly available Sierra Leone video showcases livelihood and training activities that enabled young people to access economic opportunities, reducing the appeal of violence and contributing to the security of communities.

In **Afghanistan**, WFP's community-led targeting offers a model for transparent, locally owned decision-making in resource-constrained environments. This approach enhances trust between communities and humanitarian actors, reduces tensions surrounding aid distribution, and lays the groundwork for collective problem-solving. These examples highlight an essential point for Australia's considerations: food security interventions are not peripheral to peace; they are foundational.

### **7. Implications for Australia's International Development Programme**

Australia's international development programme operates in a world where conflict is rising, threats are transnational, and fragility is deepening. Food insecurity, climate shocks, weak governance, and demographic pressures intersect in ways that amplify risks. As a result, humanitarian and development interventions must be designed with conflict prevention in mind.

WFP's work aligns closely with Australia's priorities in human security, resilience, gender equality, social inclusion, governance, and climate adaptation. Food assistance stabilizes vulnerable communities; participatory processes strengthen governance; school feeding supports education outcomes while building social cohesion; and climate-adapted food systems reduce risks of conflict linked to environmental stress.

The strategic alignment between WFP and Australia provides a strong foundation for deepened partnership. As Australia continues to expand its focus on addressing the causes of instability and investing in prevention, WFP's evidence, operational capacity, and global footprint offer a unique opportunity for collaboration.

### **8. Recommendations**

In light of the evidence presented, WFP encourages Australia to continue and expand its support for food security and social cohesion initiatives that contribute to conflict prevention. Strengthening investment in these areas will allow Australia to enhance security in fragile contexts, support global peace efforts, and reinforce its humanitarian leadership.

WFP also encourages Australia to support investments in evidence generation, such as social cohesion measurement, which allow both WFP and partners to understand the impacts of their interventions on peace-related outcomes. Such insights improve effectiveness, enhance accountability, and contribute to a global evidence base that benefits all development actors. Furthermore, WFP encourages expanded support for participatory and community-led approaches. These models have consistently demonstrated their ability to strengthen social cohesion, build trust, and reduce tensions.

### **9. Conclusion**

Preventing conflict is one of the most important contributions Australia can make through its international development programme. Food security is not only a basic human need but also a cornerstone of security, social cohesion, and peace. WFP's experience across fragile and conflict-affected settings demonstrates that humanitarian and development interventions can reduce tensions, strengthen relationships, and build resilience against shocks that might otherwise escalate into conflict.

Australia's partnership with WFP is a powerful mechanism for advancing these objectives. Together, Australia and WFP can help communities move from crisis towards security, dignity, and peace.

WFP appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and stands ready to provide any further information the Committee may require.

## **Documentation**

- [WFP's three pathways to peace](#) (Video)
- WFP's Contributions to Peace (CtP) [two-pager](#)
- IDS paper: IDS paper "[\*The importance of school meals programmes in fragile and conflict affected settings: framing the prospects for contribution to peace and social cohesion | World Food Programme\*](#)"
- *Cox's Bazar Social Cohesion and Peace Measurement Report.*
- *Cox's Bazar Social Cohesion and Peace Measurement Brief.*  
Both available here: Brief [WFP Bangladesh –Cox's Bazar Social Cohesion and Peace Measurement Report | World Food Programme](#)
- [WFP's contribution to peace in Sierra Leone](#) – PBF project (Video)