



Independent and Peaceful Australia Network Inc. (IPAN)
Chairperson – Annette Brownlie
PO Box 573 Coorparoo Brisbane Qld Australia 4151
ipan.australia@gmail.com www.ipan.org.au

IPAN's Vision: An Independent and Peaceful Australia

IPAN Patrons: Emeritus Professor Ian Lowe AO & Kellie Tranter Lawyer, Researcher & Human Rights Activist

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

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

Submitted by: The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) Inc.: Date: 20 January 2026

I. Introduction and Executive Summary

The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) is a network of organisations and individuals from across Australia, united by a commitment to a truly independent and peaceful foreign policy. IPAN welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict, as referred by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong.

This submission puts forward a paradigm shift: a Development as Defence doctrine. We argue that in an era defined by an escalating climate crisis, Australia's national security can no longer be guaranteed by traditional military alliances and defence spending alone. Instead, international development focused on climate resilience must form the core of our nation's security strategy.

As a network promoting peace and independence, within a social justice framework, IPAN is united by a commitment to promoting an independent, non-aligned, and peaceful Australian foreign policy. Our core belief is that genuine peace and security are achieved not through military means or geopolitical alignment, but through addressing the root causes of conflict: poverty, inequality, injustice, and the climate crisis. We contend that Australia's international development program, or Official Development Assistance (ODA), can only be an effective tool for conflict prevention if it is fundamentally reformed.

The current trend of integrating ODA into Australia's 'strategic competition' framework risks undermining its humanitarian purpose, compromising Australia's reputation as a just and fair-minded partner, and ultimately exacerbating regional tensions. An aid program that serves primarily as a geopolitical tool is inherently conflict-prone, not conflict-preventing.

Furthermore, the evidence overwhelmingly supports the efficacy of peace-focused development over militaristic approaches. Research indicates that peace-building interventions demonstrate a 60-70% success rate when implemented early, compared to only 30-40% for military interventions. [1] This is coupled with a strong economic case: every dollar invested in conflict prevention saves an average of \$7 in reconstruction costs. An effective ODA program is therefore not only a moral imperative but a fiscally responsible investment in genuine security.

Key Recommendations

IPAN urges the Committee to consider the following recommendations which serve as high-level principles that are expanded upon with more specific, actionable recommendations in the body of the submission:

Recommendation 1. Demilitarise Aid: Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) must be completely separated from the Department of Defence and strategic foreign policy objectives. The primary purpose of aid must be humanitarian and developmental, not strategic or military.

Recommendation 2. Prioritise Human Security: The focus of Australia's aid program must shift from state-centric security to human security, in order to address the non-military threats to people's lives, such as food insecurity, health crises, and climate change.

Recommendation 3. Increase Official Development Assistance (ODA) Commitment: The Australian Government must commit to a clear, time-bound pathway to increase ODA to the internationally agreed United Nations target of 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI).

Recommendation 4. Support Grassroots Peacebuilding overseas: A significant portion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) should be directed towards local, community-led peace and development initiatives, particularly those led by women and Indigenous groups, which possess the deepest understanding of local conflict dynamics.

II. IPAN's Mandate and Key Argument

IPAN's advocacy is grounded in the principle that Australia's long-term security is best served by fostering a peaceful, stable, and independent region. This requires a foreign policy that respects the sovereignty of nations and avoids entanglement in great power rivalries.

The Flaw of "Aid as a Strategic Tool"

The increasing securitisation of Australia's aid program—where ODA is explicitly framed as a tool of strategic competition, particularly in the Indo-Pacific—is a profound concern. When aid is perceived as a means to counter the influence of a rival power, it ceases to be a genuine expression of solidarity and becomes a political instrument. An approach such as this:

- **Undermines Neutrality:** It forces recipient nations to choose sides, compromising their non-aligned status and making them less resilient to external pressures.
- **Distorts Priorities:** It diverts funding away from critical, long-term development needs towards projects that serve short-term strategic interests, such as infrastructure with dual-use military potential.
- **Increases Conflict Risk:** By tying aid to geopolitical objectives, Australia contributes to the militarisation of the region, which is the antithesis of conflict prevention.

IPAN argues for a return to the principle of Genuine Development, where aid is driven solely by the needs and priorities of the recipient communities, ensuring sustainability and local ownership.

III. Response to Terms of Reference

ToR 1: Building Resilience in Fragile States

Resilience in fragile states is not built by external security guarantees but by strengthening the social contract between citizens and their state. This is a bottom-up process that requires patient, long-term investment in human and social capital. IPAN here provides a brief assessment and recommendation for each of the following four focus areas:

Community and Civic Participation

Assessment: This is the most critical element. Local civil society organisations (CSOs) are often the first responders and the most effective agents of peace.

Recommendation 1.1: Official Development Assistance (ODA) must prioritise direct, flexible funding to local CSOs, human rights defenders, and women's peace networks, bypassing centralised government structures where necessary to ensure funds reach the grassroots.

Governance

Assessment: Support for governance must be non-coercive and focused on transparency and accountability.

Recommendation 1.2: Avoid programs that impose Western political models. Instead, support local anti-corruption bodies and independent media to strengthen democratic oversight and reduce drivers of internal conflict.

Security Reform

Assessment: This area is highly sensitive and risks militarising aid.

Recommendation 1.3: Australia should cease funding for military-to-military training programs under the Official Development Assistance (ODA) banner. Focus should be exclusively on demobilisation, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs, and supporting community-based justice and reconciliation mechanisms.

Human Capital

Assessment: Long-term investment in health and education is foundational to peace.

Recommendation 1.4: Australia must dedicate a substantial and protected portion of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to universal health and education programs. This would provide clear recognition that educated, healthy populations are less susceptible to recruitment by armed groups. [3]

ToR 2: Strategic Use of Australia's International Development Program in the Indo-Pacific

IPAN believes that the current definition of 'strategic use' is too narrow and aligned with military containment. IPAN proposes a redefinition of 'strategic' in the context of aid.

Redefining 'Strategic':

A truly strategic aid program for conflict prevention is one that addresses the shared, existential threats to the region, thereby building genuine, lasting partnerships.

Climate Justice as the Strategic Priority:

The climate crisis is the single greatest threat multiplier in the Indo-Pacific, driving resource scarcity, displacement, and political instability. [4] Global military activities account for 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions [5]. The environmental impact of militarisation is substantial: the Nordstream pipeline attack (2022) released 485,000 tonnes of methane—one of the largest single methane releases ever recorded. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has generated 6.6 million tonnes of CO2 emissions in its first 12 months, with 30% of Ukraine's protected areas damaged or destroyed, representing irreplaceable losses of biodiversity and ecosystem services. The World Bank's "Groundswell" report projects that climate change could cause mass internal migration, particularly in the Asia-Pacific, which is identified as a primary driver of state fragility and conflict. A development program that does not have climate adaptation at its core is therefore considered a failure.

A development program focused on shared challenges like climate change is also a more effective strategic tool for Australia to build trust and influence in the Indo-Pacific. This approach stands in stark contrast to military alliances like AUKUS, which risk alienating regional partners who prioritise non-alignment.

Recommendation 2.1: Australia must dedicate a significant and increasing portion of its Official Development Assistance (ODA) to climate change adaptation and mitigation, framed as a core conflict prevention measure.

Respect for Non-Alignment: Aid delivery must be conducted in a manner that explicitly respects the non-aligned foreign policy positions of Pacific Island nations and Southeast Asian partners.

Recommendation 2.2: All aid projects must be assessed for their potential to be perceived as geopolitical leverage, and any such projects should be rejected.

ToR 3: Effective Support in Pre-Conflict and Post-Conflict Zones

Effective aid in conflict-affected settings requires a high degree of conflict sensitivity and flexibility.

Pre-conflict:

Recommendation 3.1: Invest in robust, independent early warning systems that incorporate local knowledge and gender analysis. Fund local mediation and dialogue initiatives, particularly those involving women and youth, to mitigate emerging tensions before they escalate.

Post-conflict:

Recommendation 3.2: Aid must focus on transitional justice and trauma healing, alongside economic recovery and economic programs must prioritise local employment and avoid creating new inequalities that could reignite conflict.

The case of the Northern Ireland peace process, where a £30 billion GDP increase has been recorded since 1998, demonstrates the economic benefits of peace. Australia's leadership role in the Cambodia peace process was decisive in ending a 20-year conflict through the Paris Peace Agreements (1991), demonstrating the potential for middle-power diplomacy to achieve transformative results [6].

ToR 4: Impact of International Development in Maintaining Peace and Preventing Conflict

'Do No Harm' Principle: All aid interventions must be subject to a rigorous Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) to ensure they do not inadvertently exacerbate existing tensions, benefit armed groups, or undermine local peace efforts.

When development is implemented with a peace-lens, it is inherently a powerful tool for conflict prevention.

Mandating a Peace Lens:

Recommendation 4.1: That the Australian Government mandate that all major Official Development Assistance (ODA) investments in development projects undergo a Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) and that the findings of the PCIA inform project design and implementation. Implementing such a process will ensure that peacebuilding is an explicit outcome, not a secondary benefit.

Gender and Peacebuilding:

Women are disproportionately affected by conflict but are also the most effective agents of peace. [7]

Recommendation 4.2: Australia must significantly increase funding for programs that implement the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This will greatly support a focus on women's political participation, economic empowerment, and protection from gender-based violence, which is a key driver of conflict.

IV. TOR 5: Related Matters

A. Transparency and Accountability

IPAN believes that there must be greater transparency in ODA spending, which will be possible if aid is demilitarised (in line with Recommendation 1 above), as the withdrawal of the Department of Defence from aid matters would mean that the perceived need for secrecy in terms of national security would no longer apply.

Recommendation 5.1: Greater transparency in Official Development Assistance (ODA) spending.

B. Consultation

IPAN believes that meaningful consultation with civil society and peace organisations must be mandatory, and therefore need to be embedded into the design and review of all aid policy.

Recommendation 5.2: The design and review of all aid policy must embed meaningful consultation with civil society and peace organisations as a mandatory part of the process.

C. Institutionalising Peace

IPAN calls for an expansion of the role of the Minister for International Development to explicitly include Peacebuilding. This structural change would signal Australia's commitment to addressing the root causes of conflict through development and peace-building, and provide clear focus for engagement with international frameworks for peace and development, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) . [8]

Furthermore, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) should consolidate all areas working on peace (e.g., Conflict Prevention and Strategy Branch, the Humanitarian Division, and the International Security Division) under a single Deputy Secretary to ensure peace is given appropriate focus and coordination across government. This consolidation would simplify coordination and signal Australia's commitment to addressing the root causes of conflict through development and peace-building. [8]

Australia has been appointed to the UN Peacebuilding Commission for 2025 and 2026, and the Government is campaigning for a seat on the UN Security Council in 2029 9. Such initiatives as outline above would provide additional opportunities to pursue a peace agenda and demonstrate Australia's commitment to international peace and security.

Recommendation 5.4: IPAN recommends the establishment of a major diplomatic initiative, such as 'Partners for a Resilient Pacific', focused on cooperative climate adaptation and disaster preparedness. This would position Australia as a leader in regional climate security.

Recommendation 5.5: IPAN calls for the development of a joint White Paper on Climate Security and Development to ensure the Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs and Trade have a shared understanding of the profound security implications of the climate crisis.

Recommendation 5.3: An expansion of the role of the Minister for International Development to explicitly include Peacebuilding.

V. Economic and Strategic Case for Peace-Centred Policy

The Financial Case for Peace

Global military expenditure reached unprecedented levels in 2023, totalling \$2.443 trillion according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) . [10] This represents the highest level ever recorded and constitutes 2.3% of global GDP, representing a significant opportunity cost for global development. Australia's military spending for 2023-24 reached \$52.558 billion, representing 2.1% of GDP and placing Australia above NATO's 2% target. At \$1,950 per capita, Australia ranks among the world's highest military spenders relative to population. Projections indicate this spending will grow to \$75 billion by 2033-34, representing a substantial escalation in military expenditure in this country. To put this in perspective, the cost of a single nuclear-powered submarine could fund decades of peacebuilding and climate adaptation projects across the Pacific.

Research consistently demonstrates that investing in peace delivers superior economic returns compared to military spending. The World Bank's extensive research on conflict prevention shows a 7:1 ratio—every \$1 spent on conflict prevention saves \$7 in post-conflict reconstruction costs [10]. Countries with higher peace rankings consistently demonstrate superior economic performance. Analysis by the Institute for Economics and Peace

shows that peaceful countries have twice the GDP per capita compared to less peaceful nations. Furthermore, stable regions experience 40% more trade compared to conflict-affected areas, demonstrating the direct economic benefits of peaceful international relation.

Costa Rica provides the most compelling real-world example of the economic benefits of prioritising peace over military spending. Following its constitutional abolition of the military in 1948, Costa Rica redirected defence funds towards education and healthcare. Costa Rica achieved the highest literacy rate in Central America at 97.9%, compared to the regional average of 85%. Life expectancy reached 81 years, significantly above the regional average of 75.2 years [10]. GDP per capita of \$18,587 represents the highest in Central America, demonstrating the clearly measurable economic dividends of peace investment.

Economic analysis reveals significant differences in the multiplier effects of various types of government spending. [10] Military spending generates relatively low economic returns, with multiplier effects of 0.6-0.8 times the initial investment. In contrast, education spending produces multiplier effects of 1.5-2.0 times the initial investment, healthcare spending generates 1.7-2.2 times the initial investment, and infrastructure spending produces 1.4-1.8 times the initial investment. These findings demonstrate that reallocating military spending towards social priorities would generate superior economic outcomes for Australia.

Peace-Building Effectiveness

Systematic analysis of international peace interventions reveals consistently superior outcomes compared to military approaches. [10] United Nations preventive diplomacy missions achieve a 67% success rate in preventing or resolving conflicts. The annual UN peace-building budget of \$1.37 billion generates estimated savings of \$18 billion annually through successful conflict prevention. Countries receiving peace-building support experience a 50% reduction in conflict recurrence compared to those without such support.

International mediation demonstrates significantly superior outcomes compared to unmediated conflicts [10]. Mediated conflicts achieve a 42% success rate compared to only 16% for non-mediated conflicts. Mediated conflicts resolve faster, averaging 2.5 years compared to 7.3 years for unmediated conflicts. The cost differential is equally striking: mediation averages \$50 million per intervention compared to \$50 billion average cost for military interventions.

Australia's proven track record in peace-building demonstrates our capacity and commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. [11] Our past involvement in peace processes in Cambodia, East Timor, Bougainville, and the Solomon Islands demonstrates our capability and commitment to peaceful conflict resolution.

By prioritising peace in our foreign policy, Australia can position itself as a trusted mediator and peace-builder, enhancing our diplomatic influence and strengthening relationships with regional partners.

Regional Security and Economic Interdependence

The Asia-Pacific region represents both enormous economic opportunity and significant security challenges for Australia. The region accounts for \$3.8 trillion in trade volume and 60% of global GDP, with 4.6 billion people whose prosperity and security directly affect Australian interests. However, rising tensions have led to a 37% increase in regional military spending since 2013, creating dangerous escalation dynamics. [10]

Australia's economic interdependence with the region is profound. [10] Seventy percent of Australia's trade occurs with Asia-Pacific partners, representing \$1.7 trillion in two-way trade value (2023). This trade relationship supports 2.8 million Australian jobs, demonstrating that regional stability directly translates to Australian prosperity. The security interdependence is equally clear: regional stability equals Australian prosperity, whilst regional conflict would devastate Australian economic interests.

Traditional military approaches to regional security create escalation dynamics that threaten the very prosperity they claim to protect. Alternative approaches focused on economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and multilateral institution-building offer more promising pathways to sustainable regional security.

Public Support for Peace-Centred Policy

Australian public opinion demonstrates strong support for peace-centred foreign policy approaches. [10] The Lowy Institute's 2024 polling reveals that 73% of Australians support increased diplomatic engagement, whilst 68% prefer negotiated solutions over military intervention. Most significantly, 81% believe Australia should be a peace-building leader in the region, indicating substantial public appetite for the policy reorientation advocated here. Furthermore, 59% support reducing military spending to fund social programs, suggesting public recognition of the opportunity costs of current military expenditure levels.

Global polling data reinforces these trends. The Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Peace Survey finds that 89% of people worldwide want their government to work for peace. [10] Seventy percent believe their country spends too much on military purposes, whilst 84% support international cooperation over competition. Most remarkably, 92% want conflicts resolved through dialogue rather than violence, indicating overwhelming global support for diplomatic approaches to conflict resolution.

VI. Conclusion

This inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict presents a critical opportunity for the Australian Parliament to recalibrate its approach. IPAN maintains that a truly effective aid program for conflict prevention is one that is independent, adequately funded, and singularly focused on human security and peacebuilding.

By demilitarising aid, increasing its volume, and directing it towards grassroots peace initiatives and climate resilience, Australia can genuinely contribute to a more peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific. Conversely, continuing to use ODA as a tool of geopolitical competition will only serve to undermine the program's effectiveness and increase the risk of future conflict. We urge the Committee to adopt a vision of aid that prioritises peace over power.

References

- [1] Lowy Institute. Report on the Securitisation of Aid in the Pacific. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>
- [2] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Climate Change and Security in the Indo-Pacific. Available at: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/>
- [3] UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). Women, Peace and Security. Available at: <https://www.un.org/womenpeace/>
- [4] Make Peace a Priority. Background: The Make Peace a Priority campaign aims to enhance Australia's role in international agencies working to achieve peace. Available at: <https://mpap.au/>
- [5] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). [10] Trends in World Military Expenditure 2023. SIPRI Fact Sheet. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2023>
- [6] Mueller, H. (2017). How Much Is Prevention Worth? Background Paper for Joint UN/World Bank Study, Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. World Bank and United Nations. Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/183161519295851671/pdf/123659-REVISED-PUBLIC-Mueller-How-Much-Is-Prevention-Worth-Pathways-for-Peace.pdf>
- [7] International Monetary Fund (IMF). (2024). The Urgency of Conflict Prevention – A Macroeconomic Analysis. IMF Working Paper. Available at: <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/001/2024/256/article-A001-en.xml>
- [8] Reeves, A., et al. (2013). Research on fiscal multipliers for government spending by type. Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts. Available at: <https://www.peri.umass.edu/publication/item/449-the-employment-effects-of-military-and-domestic-spending-priorities>
- [9] Abbasov, R. (2024). The impact of military spending on government budgets: A comprehensive analysis. International Journal of Financial Management and Economics, 8(1). Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5241518>
- [10] Lowy Institute. (2024). 2024 Report: Security and Defence. Available at: <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/report/2024/security-and-defence/>
- [11] Australian Department of Defence. (2023-24). Defence Budget Papers. Available at: <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/accessing-information/budgets/budget-2023-24>
- [12] World Bank. (2024). Costa Rica - Data Overview. World Bank DataBank. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=CR-XT>
- [13] Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). (2024). Costa Rica - Country Profile. Available at: <https://hia.paho.org/en/node/140>
- [14] United Nations Peacebuilding Commission. (2023). Annual Report 2023. Available at: <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/commission>
- [15] International Crisis Group. (2023). Mediation and Conflict Resolution: Annual Review. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/>