

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY ON THE ROLE OF AUSTRALIA'S INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IN PREVENTING CONFLICT

The World Wide Fund for Nature-Australia (WWF-Australia) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict.

Climate change, environmental degradation, and natural resource pressures are increasingly recognised as significant drivers of instability, fragility, and violent conflict worldwide. As the Indo-Pacific faces escalating climate impacts and growing geopolitical competition, Australia's international development program has a critical role to play in reducing conflict risks and supporting resilient, peaceful societies.

WWF's programming across the Indo-Pacific demonstrates how nature-based solutions (NbS), sustainable resource governance, and climate-resilient livelihoods offer cost-effective, community-centred pathways that can reduce tensions, strengthen inclusive governance, and promote social cohesion.

Australia is already contributing to conflict prevention through gender equality, governance strengthening, and climate adaptation programs. However, mainstreaming alone is no longer sufficient given the region's complex and evolving risk landscape, and the fact that poverty is increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected contexts that are especially susceptible to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. To be effective in its delivery of development outcomes and conflict prevention, the development program should deliberately integrate conflict-sensitive, climate-nature-security approaches across the international development program.

This submission recommends:

- Elevating the development program as a central pillar of Australia's conflict prevention architecture;
- Tripling climate finance and ensuring it is new and additional to Official Development Assistance;
- Scaling nature-based, locally led climate adaptation through a conflict-sensitive lens;
- Strengthening DFAT's capacity and resourcing for conflict prevention and strategic coherence;

With 2024¹ and 2025² marking historic peaks in active conflicts worldwide, it is timely for the Australian Government to consider how all aspects of Australian foreign policy, including the international development program, can contribute to peace and stability. WWF-Australia encourages the Joint Standing Committee to include in its deliberations the importance of nature and climate in this effort.

By adopting a more intentional climate-nature-security approach, Australia can enhance regional stability, deepen partnerships, and deliver peace dividends that align with both humanitarian and strategic interests.

¹ Sira Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2024*, Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2025

² <https://www.statista.com/topics/13125/conflicts-worldwide-2025/>

ABOUT WWF-AUSTRALIA

WWF-Australia is part of the WWF International Network, the world's largest independent conservation organisation. WWF's global mission is to 'stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature'. WWF-Australia has approximately two million supporters.

WWF-Australia is the only conservation organisation to hold accreditation under the Government's Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP) and is an active member of the Australian Council for International Development. As part of a global network working in more than 100 countries, WWF-Australia has decades of experience supporting conservation and sustainable development programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, especially in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

If you require further information, please contact Nat Burke, Head of Regenerative Climate [REDACTED]



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together possible. wwf.org.au

WWF-Australia
GPO Box 528, Sydney NSW 2001
Tel: +1800 032 551 | hello@wwf.org.au | wwf.org.au

1. The role of Australia's international development program in building resilience in fragile states, including by strengthening community and civic participation, governance, security reform and human capital

Dominant discourse about conflict prevention currently centres on great power competition and the risk of high-intensity international armed conflict. However, since the end of World War 2, interstate wars have become increasingly rare while conflicts within state borders have become more common³.

While the risk of confrontations between great powers is understandably alarming for Australian policymakers, community-level and other conflict risks within states pose equally significant threats to regional stability and Australia's national interests. Moreover, "dynamics of (geostrategic) competition and fragility are not occurring in parallel but intersecting and driving each other in a sustained and escalating cycle."⁴ For example, in the last two decades, the number of internationalised intrastate conflicts – that is, internal conflicts that involve foreign troops, foreign arms, or other forms of proxy support - have increased fivefold.⁵

It is in this context in which Australia's international development program does, and can, play an important role in preventing conflict.

Australia's international development program makes important contributions to promoting peace and building resilience in fragile and conflict-affected contexts and it does so in ways that support broader international development objectives. Through the Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2021–2031), for example, Australia supports women's participation in peace processes, reduces gender-based violence, and integrates gender perspectives into humanitarian and security responses⁶. Similarly, support for the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund and regional programs like *Pacific Strong* illustrate Australia's commitment to promoting positive peace, stability and inclusive governance through integration with broader development program objectives related to advancing the rights of women and girls.

More broadly, many of Australia's international development partner countries are either conflict-affected or exhibit "dynamics warranting attention from a conflict prevention perspective"⁶. So, even though there is no standalone peace and conflict strategy within Australia's international development program, there is an implicit mainstreaming of conflict prevention⁷ through alignment with the *International Development Policy's* overarching objective to 'advance an Indo-Pacific that is peaceful, stable and prosperous'. Many international development investments, while not explicitly focused on peace and conflict help to build social resilience, address other underlying drivers of conflict, such as vulnerability to climate change and economic inequality, and strengthen state-society relations.

³ [Uppsala Conflict Data Program \(2025\)](#) Uppsala Universitet

⁴ Heather Murphy and Martina Zapf, *How geostrategic competition and fragility intersect*, Development Intelligence Lab, October 2024 Rini8631

⁵ Boswinkel, Lotje, et al. "The Future of Intrastate Conflict." *Wars to Come, Europeans to Act: A Multimethod Foresight Study into Europe's Military Future*, Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022, pp. 43–46. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep44059>.7.

⁶ Leben and Zapf (2025) *Deterrence, diplomacy and development: towards an 'Australian Model' for conflict prevention* Development Intelligence Lab

⁷ Ibid

For example, *Climate Resilient by Nature* (CRxN)⁸, a partnership between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and WWF-Australia has supported local WWF offices, Australian international development NGOs, and their local partners in 10 countries across the Pacific and Southeast Asia to advance nature-based solutions for climate change. While these projects are focused on restoring, protecting and sustainably managing ecosystems that support resilience to climate change, they each feature activities that facilitate positive community engagement with local government authorities, build capacity of state duty-bearers, strengthen community governance and decision-making, and address tensions related to natural resource management.

While programs like CRxN play an important role in strengthening community and civic participation, governance and human capital, the growing scale and complexity of conflict drivers globally and within our region make conflict prevention mainstreaming a necessary but insufficient approach. Moreover, as expert analysis collected by The Development Intelligence Lab points out, while there are high-level policy commitments to supporting peace and stability, and project-level outcomes that help to address some conflict drivers, key Development Partnership Plans, which set the strategic direction for bilateral development investments, fail to adequately account for the complexity of conflict dynamics.⁹ Conflict-sensitivity and peacebuilding need to be more explicitly built into development interventions.

2. The strategic use of Australia's international development program to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific

WWF-Australia supports recommendations that the Australian Government increase international development investments explicitly in conflict prevention. However, Australia's Official Development Assistance and climate finance commitments fall well short of its globally determined fair share¹⁰, and it would be counterproductive for the Government to reduce funding to other priorities such as education, gender equity, or climate resilience – all of which address underlying conflict drivers - to pay for conflict prevention programming. As Australia increasingly recognises that its prosperity and security is inextricably linked with that of its neighbouring countries, and as other OECD DAC donors retreat from the region¹¹, Australian international public finance will need to grow to meet the challenge.

In the meantime, just as investments in the Women, Peace and Security agenda have supported both conflict prevention and gender equity outcomes, there are other strategic ways that Australia could achieve peace dividends through more explicitly integrating conflict-sensitive approaches in the international development program.

Climate-Nature-Security Nexus

Climate change is reshaping patterns of fragility by intensifying resource scarcity, weakening governance systems, and escalating competition over land, water, and natural assets. In many countries in the Indo-Pacific, pressures to rapidly industrialise natural resources,

⁸ <https://www.climate resilientbynature.com/>

⁹ Leben and Zapf

¹⁰ Hardefeldt et al (2025) *Financing Survival: Australia's new climate finance goal and the global just transition* <https://actionaid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-Financing-Survival-Australias-new-climate-finance-goal-and-the-global-just-transition-CANA-Briefing-Paper.pdf>

¹¹ European Commission Knowledge4Policy (2025), *Cuts in official development assistance – OECD projections for 2025 and near term*. https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/cuts-official-development-assistance-oecd-projections-2025-near-term_en

inadequate safeguards, weak dispute resolution mechanisms, and uneven benefit sharing exacerbate, and are exacerbated by, climate impacts, which can spark or deepen conflict¹².

Australia's *International Development Policy* recognises that “climate change is the greatest shared threat to all countries... (and that)... measures to adapt and build resilience to climate impacts are urgently needed to defend against climate induced loss and damage.”¹³ More broadly, climate change is now widely accepted as a key threat multiplier for conflict and atrocity crimes¹⁴ and a critical national security concern for Australia and its allies¹⁵.

*Not only can nature and environmental factors drive insecurity, but conflict and insecurity are also drivers of environmental degradation. Environmental degradation and biodiversity loss are part of a complex web of interactions between different social, economic, political and environmental risk drivers. In particular in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, environmental factors can undermine peace and contribute to different security risks ranging from political instability to organised crime and violent conflict, while at the same time insecurity and conflict further damage the environment*¹⁶

Conflict-sensitive, nature-based climate adaptation and other environmental programming offer ways to reduce these risks by strengthening inclusive governance, improving transparency in resource management, protecting and sustainably managing critical resources, and supporting community-driven decision-making. This is not merely an environmental imperative; it is a strategic opportunity to address climate vulnerabilities and conflict drivers simultaneously, through a single, cost-effective investment modality. As climate impacts and environmental degradation accelerate, integrating these approaches into Australia's development program becomes essential for building long-term peace and resilience.

Nature-based Solutions for Peace

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are “actions aimed at protecting, conserving, restoring, and sustainably managing natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal, and marine ecosystems, which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services, resilience and biodiversity benefits.”¹⁷ More than two-thirds of parties to the Paris Agreement are using NbS to achieve their Nationally Determined Contributions, while more than 100 countries are drawing on NbS approaches in support of their efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change¹⁸.

¹² UNDP & UNEP (2015) *Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners*

¹³ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2023) *Australia's International Development Policy: for a peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific* p.18

¹⁴ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2024) *Climate Change and Mass Atrocities: Policy Brief* Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, CUNY, USA

¹⁵ Morgan, W. (2023) *Climate Allies: Australia-US Cooperation in a Warming World* Black Swan Strategy Paper, University of Western Australia

¹⁶ Rüttinger, L., Munayer, R., van Ackern, P., et al (2022) *The Nature of Conflict and Peace: The links between environment, security and peace and their importance for the United Nations* WWF International, Gland and Adelphi Consult GmbH, Berlin

¹⁷ As defined by the 5th United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA 5.2)

¹⁸ Seddon, N., Sengupta, S., García-Espinosa, M., et al. (2020) *Nature-based Solutions in Nationally Determined Contributions* IUCN: University of Oxford, UK.

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are a proven¹⁹, cost-effective²⁰, and politically feasible approach that simultaneously support climate adaptation, biodiversity protection, and inclusive development.

For instance, protecting and sustainably managing mangroves can significantly reduce wave heights and storm surge impacts and mitigate annual flood damages by up to USD65 billion globally²¹, while in many cases being two to five times less expensive than submerged breakwaters²². Unlike engineered infrastructure, healthy mangroves also help to address the underlying causes of climate change, storing more carbon per hectare than any other ecosystem except for tundra and peatlands²³.

Additionally, unlike breakwaters and seawalls which degrade over time, mangroves offer dynamic, adaptive protection that improves as the ecosystem grows. Mangroves also serve as important spawning sites for fish and crustaceans critical to food and economic security.

At least 40% of intrastate conflicts over 60 years have been linked to natural resources²⁴. When designed with strong conflict-sensitivity principles, NbS can reduce stress on contested natural resources, provide shared community assets that encourage collaboration, and create platforms for dialogue in fragile and conflict-affected contexts²⁵. A 2023 thematic review of climate-security and peacebuilding, for example, found evidence that:

*...‘bottom-up’ peacebuilding around local natural resource issues may be among the most promising areas for peacebuilding in these difficult conflict environments, offering opportunities to alleviate local conflicts and sources of vulnerability, while also offering entry points to work on other trenchant social issues, such as women’s or youth exclusion.*²⁶

3. Options for effective support through Australia’s aid program in pre-conflict/ post-conflict contexts

The table below outlines illustrative nature-based solutions that can be tailored to support anticipatory action and post-conflict recovery. While not exhaustive, these examples highlight approaches that require careful, context-specific adaptation and draw on WWF’s programming experience as well as an expanding evidence base²⁷ on environmental peacebuilding and nature-based solutions for peace.

¹⁹ Roe, D, Turner, B, Chausson, A, Hemmerle, E and Seddon, N (2021) *Investing in nature for development: do nature-based interventions deliver local development outcomes?* IIED, London.

²⁰ Vicarelli et al (2024) “On the cost-effectiveness of Nature-based Solutions for Reducing Disaster Risk” *Science of the Total Environment*, Vol 947

²¹ Ayassamy, P (2025) “Mangroves as a Nature-based Solution and a Tool for Coastal Resilience” *Wetlands* 45,89

²² Narayan S, Beck MW, Reguero BG, Losada LJ, van Wesenbeeck B, et al. (2016) *The Effectiveness, Costs and Coastal Protection Benefits of Natural and Nature-Based Defences*. PLOS ONE 11(5)

²³ Alongi, D.M. Global Significance of Mangrove Blue Carbon in Climate Change Mitigation. *Sci* 2020, 2, 67.

²⁴ Ahmadnia S, Christien AM, Spencer P, et al. (2022) *Defueling Conflict: Environment and Natural Resource Management as a Pathway to Peace* The World Bank, Washington DC

²⁵ Hillert, L (2023) *Linking Conservation and Peacemaking* Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Switzerland

²⁶ Gaston, E, Brown, O, al-Dawsari, N et al. (2023) *Climate-Security and Peacebuilding Thematic Review* United Nations University

²⁷ See, for example, United Nations Environment Programme (2024) *Nature-based Solutions for Peace: Emerging practice and options for policymakers* Nairobi; and Rüttinger, L, Munayer, R, van Ackern, P, et al (2022) *The Nature of Conflict and Peace: The links between environment, security and peace and their importance for the United Nations* WWF International, Gland and Adelphi Consult GmbH, Berlin

NbS approach	Peace Dividend
Rehabilitating water catchments	Secures reliable water supply and reduces competition over scarce resources, lowering risks of localised tensions and stress-related conflict.
Restoring riparian zones	Buffers communities from floods and droughts, reducing displacement pressures and preventing climate-amplified conflict triggers.
Promoting drought-resistant crops and agroforestry	Reduces vulnerability to climate shocks and food insecurity, supporting livelihood stability and easing resource-related grievances.
Protecting/ restoring mangroves and other coastal ecosystems	Strengthens natural storm and erosion buffers, protecting homes and infrastructure; creates shared community assets that foster cooperation and reduce conflict.
Community-led watershed governance platforms	Builds participatory decision-making over shared resources, improving trust, reducing grievances, and opening channels for cooperation.
Climate-smart land-use planning	Reduces competition for land, prevents land degradation, and lowers the likelihood of disputes by clarifying access and strengthening institutions.
Restoring degraded forests or reforestation	Provides sustainable livelihood options, reduces illegal extraction pressures, and supports community cohesion through shared stewardship.
Developing urban green spaces	Improves air quality, heat and flood resilience, and provides safe public spaces for community interaction and cohesion, especially important in context of displacement and unplanned urbanisation. Urban green infrastructure development can also create jobs for people recently displaced from rural areas.
Restoring wetlands	Enhances flood control and water purification; reduces disaster risk and tensions over degraded water resources while creating shared conservation benefits.
Nature-based livelihood initiatives	Expands equitable, self-determined livelihood opportunities, reducing exclusion and contributing to social stability in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
Developing biodiversity corridors/ habitat connectivity	Reduces human-wildlife conflict and supports sustainable resource access across communities, fostering cooperative management arrangements.
Fostering transboundary cooperation on nature-based solutions and other environmental issues, such as water diplomacy	Builds confidence between countries, reduces competition over shared resources, and creates platforms for broader peaceful cooperation.

While these nature-based solutions can support peace and resilience outcomes, their effectiveness depends on careful, context specific design. NbS interventions in fragile and conflict-affected settings must be conflict sensitive – seeking to at minimum do no harm and working toward contributing to peace - grounded in robust conflict analysis, strong safeguards, and participatory processes. Without these, NbS may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities or exacerbate grievances. With adequate resourcing, understanding of

power dynamics, and inclusive governance, however, they can serve as powerful entry points for peace, social cohesion, and equitable development.

4. Recommendations

- A. Establish a whole-of-Government conflict prevention framework that positions Australia's international development program as a central pillar - equal in significance to defence and diplomacy - and explicitly recognises climate change and environmental degradation as core drivers of instability and conflict.
- B. Recognising climate change and environmental degradation as key drivers of conflict and fragility:
 - i. Triple Australia's climate finance contribution to \$11 billion over 2025-2030, in line with the trebling of the global climate finance goal, with all climate finance being new and additional to Official Development Assistance (ODA);
 - ii. Increase the proportion of international development investments with a principal focus on climate change to 30 percent of ODA by 2030; and
 - iii. Design and deliver a flexible \$400 million fund for NGOs and local communities to advance locally-led climate adaptation and resilience initiatives in the Pacific, with a focus on conflict-sensitive nature-based solutions.
- C. Develop conflict-sensitivity standards and guidance for Australian ODA and climate finance, applicable across climate, environment, governance, infrastructure, and humanitarian investments
- D. Review existing programming and investment priorities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts against conflict-sensitivity standards and explore opportunities to augment existing investments with targeted peacebuilding activities, including NbS for peace approaches.
- E. Increase resourcing to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Conflict Prevention and Strategy Branch and encourage deeper integration with climate diplomacy and resilience programming within DFAT and across Government.

If you require further information, please contact

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Head of Regenerative Climate



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