



Australian Multicultural Action Network Inc

32 Quandong Street, O'CONNOR ACT 2602

ABN: 40 172 914 431

Assn No: A06217

Mr Ravi Krishnamurthy JP

PRESIDENT

President.AMANACT@gmail.com

Mobile: 0404629700

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

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

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Submitted by:

Mr Ravi Krishnamurthy JP

President, Australian Multicultural Action Network (AMAN)

Executive Summary

Australia's international development program is not merely a humanitarian instrument—it is one of our most powerful strategic assets for preventing conflict, fostering stability, and advancing a just and peaceful Indo-Pacific. From the perspective of the Australian Multicultural Action Network (AMAN), and drawing on my lived experience across multicultural leadership, community resilience building, policy advocacy, and civic engagement, I submit that development assistance must be repositioned as a long-term peace architecture rather than a short-term response mechanism.

This submission proposes a future-facing framework for Australia's aid program that integrates community empowerment, governance reform, human capital investment, and culturally intelligent peacebuilding. It emphasises the necessity of locally anchored solutions, diaspora-informed diplomacy, early warning systems rooted in grassroots intelligence, and innovative development partnerships that blend technology, social enterprise, and inclusive governance.

Australia has an opportunity to lead globally—not simply as a donor nation, but as a peace partner. With deliberate strategy, courageous innovation, and genuine co-design with communities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, our international development program can become a cornerstone of regional stability and shared prosperity.

About AMAN and the Perspective of this Submission

The Australian Multicultural Action Network (AMAN) is a national grassroots organisation committed to advancing social cohesion, inclusion, civic participation, and equity across culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Our work bridges community engagement, policy advocacy, leadership development, and practical innovation.

As President of AMAN, and through my work contributing to parliamentary inquiries, advisory councils, and cross-sector collaborations, I have seen firsthand how resilience is built from the ground up—through trust, participation, dignity, and access to opportunity. These same principles are directly transferable to Australia's international development engagement in fragile and conflict-prone environments.

This submission is grounded in three core convictions:

1. Conflict prevention must begin long before violence erupts.
2. Sustainable peace is built with communities, not for them.
3. Australia's diversity, democratic institutions, and social infrastructure give us a unique comparative advantage in peace-oriented development.

1. Building Resilience in Fragile States

Australia's development program must deepen its investment in the social and institutional foundations of resilience. Fragile states are not simply characterised by weak institutions—they are often defined by eroded trust, exclusionary governance, and unaddressed historical grievances.

1.1 Strengthening Community and Civic Participation

Community participation is not a peripheral activity; it is the bedrock of peace.

Key recommendations:

- Fund community-led microgrants for local peacebuilding initiatives, particularly those led by women, youth, and minority groups.
- Support participatory budgeting and local governance forums that give communities a direct voice in development priorities.
- Embed conflict-sensitive civic education programs that promote dialogue, mediation, and democratic engagement.

Innovative idea:

Establish a *Community Peace Innovation Fund* within DFAT that backs grassroots solutions—digital platforms for dialogue, youth leadership incubators, and community reconciliation projects co-designed with local actors.

1.2 Strengthening Governance and Institutional Trust

Weak governance is both a driver and consequence of conflict.

Key recommendations:

- Expand long-term institutional partnerships with local governments, judicial bodies, and anticorruption agencies.
- Support public service reform programs that prioritise transparency, service delivery equity, and citizen feedback mechanisms.
- Invest in digital governance tools that increase accountability and reduce elite capture.

Innovative idea:

Create a *Governance Mentorship Exchange*, pairing Australian public servants, local council leaders, and community administrators with counterparts in fragile states to share practical governance capabilities.

1.3 Security Sector Reform and Human Security

Security reform must centre on human dignity, not coercive power.

Key recommendations:

- Support community policing models that emphasise trust-building and civilian protection.
- Integrate trauma-informed approaches into police and military training.
- Ensure accountability mechanisms for security forces are independently resourced.

1.4 Investing in Human Capital

Education, health, and skills are the most reliable long-term conflict prevention tools.

Key recommendations:

- Expand scholarships, vocational training, and digital education access in fragile regions.
- Support maternal health, mental health, and nutrition programs as peacebuilding investments.
- Fund youth employment pathways linked to local infrastructure and climate adaptation projects.

Innovative idea:

Launch a *Peace Skills Passport*—a portable credential system recognising vocational, civic, and leadership competencies acquired through Australian-supported programs.

2. Strategic Use of Australia's Development Program in the Indo-Pacific

Australia's geopolitical environment makes development diplomacy indispensable.

2.1 From Aid to Partnership

Australia should frame its development engagement as mutual prosperity and shared security.

Key recommendations:

- Shift from short-term project cycles to 10–15 year regional compacts focused on stability, climate resilience, and inclusive growth.
- Embed peace impact metrics into all major development investments.
- Increase co-financing with regional governments and multilateral partners.

2.2 Leveraging Australia's Multicultural Advantage

Australia's diaspora communities are underutilised strategic assets.

Key recommendations:

- Establish a *Diaspora Peace Advisory Council* to inform DFAT strategy.
- Fund diaspora-led development initiatives that strengthen people-to-people ties.
- Support cultural exchange and reconciliation programs facilitated by Australian communities with lived experience of conflict.

3. Effective Support in Pre-Conflict and Post-Conflict Zones

3.1 Pre-Conflict Prevention

Conflict often follows predictable social, economic, and political fault lines.

Key recommendations:

- Fund early warning systems combining satellite data, climate indicators, and community reporting.
- Expand mediation training for local leaders.
- Support inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation forums before tensions escalate.

Innovative idea:

Create a *Regional Conflict Prevention Lab*—a multidisciplinary platform using AI, community intelligence, and diplomatic insight to identify emerging risks.

3.2 Post-Conflict Recovery

Peace cannot be sustained without economic dignity and institutional rebuilding.

Key recommendations:

- Support small business recovery funds and cooperative enterprises.
- Invest in trauma recovery and psychosocial support.
- Rebuild local governance systems before large-scale infrastructure.

4. Development Impact on Peace Maintenance and Conflict Prevention

4.1 Measuring What Matters

Traditional development metrics fail to capture peace outcomes.

Key recommendations:

- Develop peace impact indicators: trust levels, civic participation rates, youth employment, and community cohesion.
- Mandate conflict sensitivity audits for major aid projects.

4.2 Early Identification and Mitigation

Key recommendations:

- Integrate local civil society organisations into formal early warning networks.
- Establish a rapid-response peace financing mechanism.
- Support mobile mediation teams deployable within weeks of emerging conflict signals.

5. Related Matters: Climate, Technology, and Regional Stability

5.1 Climate as a Conflict Multiplier

Australia must treat climate adaptation as peacebuilding.

Key recommendations:

- Fund climate-resilient agriculture and water security programs.
- Support climate migration planning frameworks.
- Invest in disaster preparedness and early recovery.

5.2 Technology for Peace

Key recommendations:

- Support digital ID systems for service access.
- Fund misinformation resilience and digital literacy.
- Develop secure community reporting platforms.

Conclusion: A Vision for Australia as a Peace Partner

Australia stands at a strategic crossroads. Our international development program can either remain a reactive humanitarian instrument or evolve into a defining pillar of regional peace and stability.

From the perspective of AMAN, conflict prevention is not an abstract policy ambition—it is the lived reality of communities striving for dignity, security, and opportunity. It is built through trust, inclusion, and meaningful participation.

Australia has a rare opportunity to lead globally by:

- Embedding peacebuilding into the DNA of its aid program.
- Co-designing development solutions with communities.
- Leveraging its multicultural strength as a diplomatic and social asset.
- Investing in long-term resilience rather than short-term relief.

As President of the Australian Multicultural Action Network, and as a lifelong advocate for inclusive development, I respectfully urge the Committee to adopt a bold, forward-looking approach that positions Australia as a genuine peace partner in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

This inquiry is not merely about development policy—it is about the kind of regional future Australia chooses to help shape.

Submitted by:

Mr Ravi Krishnamurthy JP

President, Australian Multicultural Action Network (AMAN)
Canberra, Australia