

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

Submission from: Christians for Peace Newcastle, [REDACTED]

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Executive Summary

This submission from Christians for Peace Newcastle contends that Australia's international development program must be fundamentally reoriented to place peacebuilding and conflict prevention at its core. The current approach evident in Australia's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) often subordinates human development goals to geopolitical and security interests, and is counter-productive to long-term regional and global stability. Diplomacy has too often been relegated and poorly funded by the foreign policy decisions of successive national governments of various political persuasions. Content in this submission has drawn from the recently released documents from the *Make Peace a Priority* and *A Safer World for All* campaigns of local agencies for aid and development.

In addressing the Terms of Reference (ToR) for this Inquiry our group wishes to present evidence that the use of ODA funds on projects of militarisation not only diverts essential resources from sustainable development and climate action but also actively contributes to environmental degradation and forced displacement, thereby exacerbating the root causes of conflict. All development programs must respect the sovereignty of the recipient nations and political coercion must never be a condition of receiving assistance.

A strategic shift towards a peace-centric foreign policy, supported by a well-resourced and restructured development program, is essential for Australia to effectively contribute to a more peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific. This submission puts forward concrete recommendations to institutionalise peace within Australia's foreign policy framework, to enhance the effectiveness of its development assistance in fragile contexts, and to ensure that aid is used to build resilience, not to fuel further conflict.

Background and Interest

Christians for Peace Newcastle has a history of supporting efforts for peace at local, national and international levels for over 40 years. Its members represent a range of Christian traditions, Anglican, Catholic, Uniting and Society of Friends, each of which has a strong commitment to a peaceful and independent Australia, evidenced in support for several church-based voluntary agencies delivering overseas development assistance (ODA).

Our interest in this inquiry stems from our core mission to advocate for a foreign policy where peace is the central organising principle. We believe that the current trajectory of increasing militarisation and geopolitical competition poses a grave threat to global and regional stability, diverts critical resources from urgent human and environmental needs, and ultimately makes Australia and the world less safe.

This submission is informed by the collective expertise and concerns of our members with the principal author a former associate professor at Australian Catholic University, where he taught Peace and Conflict Studies and a post-graduate course Educating for International Understanding. He spent a period of study leave as a research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK, and then later at the Global Studies Centre at the University of York. He has written academic papers in the field of international development, especially relating to Australia's overseas aid. For 30 years he held committee leadership positions in what is now called Act for Peace at the National Council of Churches in Australia, and was chair of its national committee for 12 years from 1976 to 1988. In that capacity he was active in what was then ACFOA, now ACFID, the umbrella organisation for all of Australia's aid and development organisations. Voluntary agencies have historically made significant contributions to overseas support. During 60 years of support for ODA he has visited Australian-funded projects in over ten different countries.

Christians for Peace Newcastle contains members with a strong commitment to international development, peace and conflict studies, environmental science, and human rights. We offer our perspective to assist the Committee in its vital work of ensuring that Australia's international development program is a genuine and effective instrument for preventing conflict and building a more just and sustainable world.

Recommendations: This submission argues that the Committee should resolve to:

- 1 **Expand the Mandate of the Minister for International Development and the Pacific to explicitly include Peacebuilding**, creating a dedicated ministerial focus on proactive conflict prevention and peace initiatives.
- 2 **Consolidate all peace-related functions within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) under a single Deputy Secretary**, streamlining coordination and elevating the importance of peacebuilding within the departmental structure.
- 3 **Substantially increase resourcing for conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives**, including Australia's contribution to the UN Peacebuilding Commission and funding for independent research and diplomacy focused on a peace agenda in the Indo-Pacific.
- 4 **Mandate that Official Development Assistance (ODA) not be used for the direct funding of military or security infrastructure projects**, ensuring that aid is directed towards genuine development and poverty reduction outcomes.
- 5 **Broaden the definition of "strategic" in the context of development assistance to prioritise long-term human security goals**, such as regional cooperation on climate change, transnational health issues, and sustainable livelihoods, over short-term geopolitical objectives.

Response to Terms of Reference

Term of Reference 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.

Argument: Australia's international development program is a critical tool for building resilience in fragile states, but its effectiveness is contingent on a foundational commitment to peacebuilding. To genuinely strengthen community and civic participation, governance, security reform, and human capital in recipient communities, programs must prioritise local ownership, address the root causes of conflict, and shift away from a securitised model of aid. A focus on militarised solutions not only diverts essential resources but can actively undermine the very resilience it seeks to build by exacerbating local tensions and eroding trust.

Evidence and Analysis: The imperative to reorient our development program is underscored by the staggering opportunity cost of global military expenditure. The world spends approximately \$2.4 trillion annually on military forces, a figure that stands in stark contrast to the \$400 billion allocated for peace and development [SIPRI 2023]. This 16:1 ratio of military to peace spending highlights a profound misallocation of priorities. These funds could be transformative if redirected towards strengthening human capital through education, healthcare, and sustainable livelihoods, which are the true foundations of resilient societies. Australia could set a priority for others to follow.

Furthermore, the environmental cost of militarisation directly undermines resilience in fragile states, which are often the most vulnerable to climate change. Military activities account for an estimated 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, accelerating climate change and its associated security risks, such as resource scarcity and displacement [SGR 2022]. By contributing to environmental degradation, a militarised approach to security actively creates the conditions for future conflict, forming a vicious cycle that our development program should be designed to break.

Effective resilience-building requires a bottom-up approach that empowers local communities. Strengthening civic participation means supporting grassroots peace initiatives and ensuring that local voices, particularly those of women and marginalised groups, are central to the design and implementation of development projects. When aid is perceived as being driven by the geopolitical interests of donor countries, it can be rejected by local populations and fail to achieve its objectives. Therefore, security sector reform should be approached with caution, focusing on accountability, human rights, and community trust, rather than simply equipping and training security forces.

Recommendation 1.1: The Committee should recommend that the Australian Government formally expand the mandate of the **Minister for International Development and the Pacific to explicitly include Peacebuilding**. This would create a dedicated ministerial focus on proactive conflict prevention, ensuring that peacebuilding is integrated

across all facets of Australia's development program and elevating its importance within the government's foreign policy agenda.

Recommendation 1.2: To enhance governance and coordination, the Committee should recommend the consolidation of all peace-related functions within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) under a single Deputy Secretary. This would unify the currently fragmented responsibilities of the Conflict Prevention and Strategy Branch, the Humanitarian Division, and the International Security Division, creating a more coherent and effective structure for advancing a peace agenda.

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

Argument: The concept of "strategic use" of Australia's development program must be redefined to prioritise genuine conflict prevention and human security over narrow geopolitical interests. The current framing, which often aligns aid with strategic competition, risks securitising development assistance, making it counter-productive to long-term peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. A truly strategic approach would focus on addressing the root drivers of conflict, such as climate change, inequality, and weak governance, through multilateral cooperation and a commitment to shared regional well-being.

Evidence and Analysis: Many of Australia's voluntary agencies have argued that transforming Australia's approach to international relations by institutionalising peace as the central organising principle of our foreign policy is the most strategic way to ensure long-term security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. When development assistance is perceived as a tool of geopolitical influence, it can breed mistrust among partner nations and local communities, undermining the very partnerships that are essential for effective conflict prevention. The focus on short-term strategic gains can lead to the neglect of long-term development goals, creating a vacuum that can be filled by instability and conflict.

The diversion of resources towards military-aligned projects under the guise of strategic interest is a critical concern. For example, the global military spending represents a colossal misallocation of resources that could be used to address the drivers of conflict. In the Indo-Pacific, these drivers include climate vulnerability, economic inequality, and transnational challenges like pandemics. A strategic development program would invest in climate adaptation funds, support equitable economic growth, and strengthen regional health security systems, rather than focusing on military-centric initiatives. Furthermore, the environmental impact of militarisation poses a direct threat to the stability of the Indo-Pacific. With military activities contributing significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions, a securitised aid program can inadvertently exacerbate the climate crisis, which is a primary source of instability in our region. This creates a dangerous feedback loop where our policies contribute to the very conflicts we seek to prevent

Recommendation 2.1: The Committee should recommend that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) issue a clear directive that **Official Development Assistance (ODA) is not to be used for the direct funding of military or security infrastructure projects.** This will ensure that Australia's aid budget is directed towards genuine poverty reduction and development outcomes, in line with its intended purpose and international best practice.

Recommendation 2.2: The Committee should recommend that the definition of "strategic" in the context of Australia's international development program be broadened to include long-term human security goals. This should include a focus on regional cooperation on climate change, transnational health issues, sustainable development, and the promotion of human rights, moving beyond a narrow focus on geopolitical competition.

Term of Reference 3: Options for effective support through Australia's aid program in pre-conflict and/or post-conflict zones.

Argument: Effective support in pre- and post-conflict zones requires a significant increase in investment in diplomacy, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention mechanisms. Australia's aid program must be agile and responsive, with a clear focus on supporting local peace initiatives and strengthening institutions that can manage conflict non-violently. This involves a shift away from reactive, crisis-driven responses towards proactive, long-term engagement that addresses the underlying causes of fragility.

Evidence and Analysis: As international tensions rise, it is crucial that DFAT has the resources to pursue a proactive peace agenda. This includes providing additional funding to independent research bodies that can offer evidence-based analysis of conflict dynamics, as well as expanding resources for diplomacy and participation in multilateral peace forums. The UN Peacebuilding Commission is a key platform where Australia can and should play a more active role, and this requires dedicated funding and diplomatic capacity.

In pre-conflict zones, the focus should be on early warning and early action. This means investing in local networks that can identify and report on rising tensions, as well as supporting community-level dialogue and mediation efforts. Australia's aid program can play a vital role in providing flexible funding to these local peacebuilders, who are often best placed to de-escalate conflicts before they turn violent.

In post-conflict zones, the challenge is to support a sustainable peace. This requires a long-term commitment that goes beyond simply rebuilding infrastructure. It means supporting transitional justice processes, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants, and the establishment of inclusive political settlements. Australia's aid program should prioritise projects that promote reconciliation and social cohesion, and that empower local communities to lead their own recovery processes.

Recommendation 3.1: The Committee should recommend a **substantial increase in resourcing for the Department's conflict prevention work and Australia's participation on the UN Peacebuilding Commission**. As international tensions rise, DFAT should be equipped with additional funding for research, diplomacy, and direct support to peacebuilding initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.

Term of Reference 4: The impact of international development in the maintenance of peace & prevention of conflict, including for early identification and mitigation of conflict.

Argument: International development, when strategically oriented towards peacebuilding, is one of the most effective tools for the maintenance of peace and the prevention of conflict. Its impact is maximised when it moves beyond traditional aid delivery to actively support mechanisms for early identification and mitigation. This requires a paradigm shift from a reactive, crisis-response model to a proactive, preventative approach that invests in the social, economic, and political institutions that underpin peaceful societies.

Evidence and Analysis: The link between development and peace is well-established in international forums. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), explicitly recognises that there can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. Both the Make Peace a Priority and A Safer World for All campaigns contain proposals that are grounded in this understanding, advocating for an expansion of the Minister for International Development's role to include Peacebuilding, thereby formally linking Australia's development efforts with its peace objectives.

The early identification and mitigation of conflict are severely hampered by a global political environment that prioritises military solutions. The fact that global military spending outstrips peace spending by a ratio of 16:1 as described above, is a clear indicator of this imbalance. This disparity starves early warning systems, mediation efforts, and local peacebuilding initiatives of the resources they need to be effective. A development program that is serious about conflict prevention must be resourced to invest in these areas.

Furthermore, the impact of development assistance is significantly diluted when it is not conflict-sensitive. In fragile contexts, poorly designed development projects can inadvertently exacerbate tensions, for example by creating competition over resources or by reinforcing existing inequalities. A peacebuilding approach to development, by contrast, would ensure that all projects are designed with a clear understanding of the local conflict dynamics and that they actively contribute to social cohesion and reconciliation.

Recommendation 4.1: The Committee should recommend that DFAT adopt a **"peacebuilding-first" approach to its international development program in fragile and conflict-affected states**. This would involve mandatory conflict-sensitivity analysis for all projects and a requirement that projects demonstrate how they will contribute to local peacebuilding objectives.

Term of Reference 5: Any related matters.

Argument: A critical related matter is the need for greater transparency and public engagement in Australia's foreign and development policy. The decision to choose between a path of peace or militarisation should not be made behind closed doors but should be the subject of a broad and inclusive national conversation. Both the *Make Peace A Priority* and *A Safer World for All* Campaigns are a testament to the growing public appetite for a more peaceful and independent foreign policy, and the government has a responsibility to engage with this sentiment. The agencies involved also urge the Australian government to increase the quantum of ODA, which has fallen significantly over recent decades. Our ranking in OECD donor nations is now 28th from a position of 14th ten years ago. From a target of 0.7% of GNI the ODA funding is now 0.19%, leaving scope for much greater support in the future.

Evidence and Analysis: The Make Peace A Priority campaign is supported by a wide range of civil society actors, including the Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN), Friends of the Earth Australia, faith communities, unions, NGOs, and academic institutions. This broad coalition demonstrates a significant and diverse constituency for peace. The campaign's calls to action, such as encouraging citizens to contact their MPs and spread the word, are designed to foster a more democratic and participatory foreign policy process. A Safer World for All has been initiated by Micah Australia with the support of many ACFID member organisations.

Furthermore, the acknowledgment of Traditional Owners and the recognition that peacebuilding begins with respect for Country and the wisdom of First Nations peoples is a crucial dimension of a holistic peace policy. An authentic commitment to peace abroad must be matched by a commitment to justice and reconciliation at home. This includes learning from First Nations peoples' long traditions of diplomacy and conflict resolution. DFAT must acknowledge this objective as a priority in its work.

Finally, the issue of climate change, as highlighted by both the MPAP and ASWFA campaigns, is inextricably linked to conflict prevention. The environmental devastation caused by military activities and the security risks posed by a changing climate are not separate issues but are two sides of the same coin. A development program that fails to address the climate crisis is a development program that is failing to prevent conflict.

Recommendation 5.1: The Committee should recommend that the Australian Government establish a **formal mechanism for regular and meaningful consultation with civil society organisations on foreign and development policy**, including an annual public forum on peace and conflict issues.

Recommendation 5.2: The Committee should recommend that the Australian Government commission an independent review of the **environmental impact of Australia's defence and security policies**, with a view to mitigating their contribution to climate change and environmental degradation.

Conclusion

We declare that a more peaceful world is a more secure Australia. The reforms proposed in this submission are not merely a moral imperative; they are a pragmatic and necessary adjustment to the complex security realities of the 21st century. By institutionalising peace within our government and reorienting our development program to focus on conflict prevention, Australia can enhance its security, strengthen its international standing, and contribute to a more stable and prosperous region. We urge the Committee to endorse these recommendations in full, providing the Australian government with a clear and actionable roadmap to make peace a priority.

References

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