

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: INDIVIDUAL 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”

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On Date: 19th January 2026 (via email)

Topic: Conflict prevention in Pacific Islands region

Introduction

I write this submission as an individual, with an interest and some expertise on peace and conflict and development in the Pacific Islands where I have been engaged for over 30 years, including 15 years residing in Solomon Islands, a post conflict Pacific country. While I have this research career¹, I also contribute this submission as an individual who has visited Bougainville after the guns were laid down, the cafes after democracy was returned to Indonesia, the streets after Solomon Islands cities was burnt from riot fires. If given further time, I would have liked to write this submission with others, however, given as I write, many of my colleagues are on leave I will do my best to connect how research and experience can inform the Committee’s important task of considering Australia’s role in conflict prevention.

Relevant to the issue for this inquiry is also the fact that, while my research has been funded by Australian Government for several projects, I have never been a staff of a federal government agency, and have worked with coalitions of Australian and Pacific Islander researchers to provide independent perspectives on the work of Australia’s security and development investments. I have worked to do reviews and research for several large development projects (of UNDP, Australian Aid, USAid, World Bank, World Fish, regional Pacific agencies and others) so know the workings of the aid system. Due to my long residence and family relations with Islanders I often have a position of trust within Island societies and institutions that allow for exchange of critical views of Australian aid with me. In academia, we sometimes call this an “insider-outsider” perspective, in that I am not indigenous to the islands, but have some insider-like relations due to long term relationships.

Distilling practice, research and personal experience learning from Pacific experiences, I would like to suggest to the committee that three areas need consideration in order for Australia to have credibility on the regional, or even global stage, when it talks about “conflict prevention”. These areas for consideration in

¹ Dr Anouk Ride is a sociologist with an interest in peace and conflict in the Pacific Islands region. She was based in Solomon Islands for two decades doing policy orientated research and has managed over 20 projects with Pacific governments, media, police and correctional services, regional organisations and universities. Current academic roles include Associate Professor with the Department of Pacific Affairs at Australian National University and Adjunct Senior Fellow with the Solomon Islands National University. She has a h-index of 11, numerous journal articles, 4 books and 12 reports, including the first regional report on riots in the Pacific (Ride, 2022). Her most cited work is a book on community resilience in natural disasters (Ride & Bretherton, 2011). She was awarded the Dean’s Award for Outstanding Research Higher Degree Theses from University of Queensland for her PhD dissertation on narratives of conflict and peace in Solomon Islands (Ride, 2014).

programming for conflict prevention are first of all understanding conflict and its prevention, then building accountability and local ownership of peacebuilding, and conflict prevention processes amongst both Australia and Pacific institutions and networks.

Considering conflict prevention in the Pacific

I am somewhat encouraged by the very existence of this Committee, as it suggests perhaps Australia is ready to consider its impact on conflict and conflict prevention seriously. I believe it is in Australia's national interest to think further about its impact on conflict in its closest neighbours in Asia and the Pacific. Our neighbours of Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands and Fiji are affected by violence and militarisation in ways that affect us here in Australia, and Australian aid and bilateral relations with these nations are sizable.

In the recent thrust of most large and middle power nations into the Pacific, using aid as some sort of geopolitical tool for influence and power, there is a speed of aid spending and delivery that often leaves aside questions of whether or not large aid spends in the Pacific is making life in these countries better or worse. We know relatively little on what the impact of Australian aid is on the quality of democracy, poverty and relative deprivation, environmental sustainability, social inclusion (beyond gender) and relations between diverse groups of people in Pacific societies.

Over the years, thanks to research and review, Australian aid has made significant strides in understanding for example its impacts on gender, and climate change. However, its impacts on conflict prevention are debatable in part because we have so few common understandings about what conflict prevention is within Australia, and opportunities to learn perspectives from our neighbouring countries.

A few indicators of this problem include:

*Peace and conflict studies (the closest to an interdisciplinary field that examines such issues) has dramatically declined in Australia – when I began my career in the 1990s there were peace research centres at almost all our top universities (12 across Australia and NZ), now only one remains (at University of New England).²

*Pacific universities contain many interested scholars in peace and conflict, but opportunities to connect and learn from experience across contexts is small and rare – I am working with my colleagues in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands to develop an indigenous peacebuilding curriculum, and Timor Leste has reached several university teaching milestones in peacebuilding, but these remain rare, foregoing chances to cement conflict prevention and peacebuilding in local practices and institutions.

*There is no PhD scholarship program devoted to Asia Pacific scholars on peace or conflict prevention (beyond UNE), meaning I have had to turn away suitable candidates from our neighbours due to lack of funds.

*DFAT's own internal expertise in conflict prevention is minimal and fragmented across Women, Peace and Security, humanitarian assistance, and other roles or boxes of knowledge within the department, to say nothing of the difficulty of working across different Australian government agencies for maximum effectiveness on conflict prevention.

*In my experience, both researchers and officials are guilty of having assumptions or approaches to conflict that are based on personal beliefs or interests, rather than evidence. For example, you'll

² I am working with Dr Tania Miletić from the Initiative for Peacebuilding at the University of Melbourne on a review of this trend and implications and happy to provide further details of this to the committee if requested.

meet people in the aid, diplomatic or academic system who are convinced that unemployment is the main cause of conflicts and prevention, another who thinks its policing, another ethnic stereotypes, and so on, with a partial set of data or experience to draw on, and assumptions that are not tested over time through research and review. Without divulging into a university lecture on what causes violent conflict, I can tell you it is structural (how power is set up and dominated or shared in the economy and politics), psychological (our beliefs and behaviours) and social (created by group norms and interactions) and so identifying “conflict” and “prevention” is rarely one-dimensional or quick to do. Quick fixes are illusions, and solutions requires our most advanced thinking, testing and review.

*Processes to identify and address conflicts arising from Australian aid projects are behind meeting room doors, or seemingly not present at all. It is not true to say “conflict prevention” is separate to aid, as aid itself causes conflicts at levels from the village to the region. Good processes I have seen that have helped to have more frank discussions and air complaints about aid programs are the World Bank’s grievance mechanisms process³, and the Australian Humanitarian Partnership’s focus on lessons learnt and better coordination across agencies⁴. However, both of these can be after the fact, reactive processes. Most Australian NGOs do not have visible processes for members of the public in our neighbouring countries to air grievances or highlight conflict issues related to aid. Australian NGOs have strong incentives to hide grievances and conflict that arise in their programmes and projects in order to get more funding from government and charitable sources; while DFAT, concerned about Australia’s reputation in recipient countries, also may want to pull a rug over any complaints about aid rather than deal with them openly. If Australian aid wants to prevent conflict through its aid program, then how will it enable recipients to raise complaints or conflict issues early? And how will it respond? These are questions all implementing agencies should have a good grasp on. Then for us researchers, we should have access to data across numerous complaints and grievances to see if there is something about the usual business, conduct, scope and operation of aid that is causing conflict. The Australian Government should have an evidence base to say that they have analysis that Australia’s aid is at least not making conflict conditions worse, and, at best, transforming some of the causes of conflict towards peace through good investments in projects and processes.

*Early warning mechanisms for conflict are most effective when they connect local actors and information, and are not just warnings but accompanied by actions. At the moment, there are few examples of investment in such networks in our neighbouring countries – Indonesia has a more formal system of early warning and response to conflict (based on the national violence monitoring system and others), West Papua remains an active conflict with no credible attempts at peacebuilding, while in Timor Leste, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji integration of civil society information networks with the authorities is poor (in part due to low trust in these authorities). Research can usefully be part of early warning mechanisms, as I have seen through personal experience. In the leadup to the riot in November 2021 in Honiara, Solomon Islands, my research colleagues saw clearly that unrest could develop with the potential for violence⁵ and I wrote an article on how this would spread⁶ which in some ways predicted what happened a year later. Australia also could draw more on diaspora residents here within Australia for knowledge on what is happening, and likely conflict flashpoints, and encourage its own citizens to be part of peacebuilding. The point here, is that for every “sudden” riot or outbreak of violence there are

³ For the independent review and comments on this process, see <https://bankinformationcenter.org/en-us/update/civil-society-provides-feedback-on-the-external-re/>

⁴ There are several lessons learned reports arising from places and themes, see <https://australianhumanitarianpartnership.org/knowledge-hub/tag/Learning+briefs>

⁵ See article by Solomon colleagues <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/apv.12431>

⁶ See my article entitled “Solomon Islands’ Long Summer of Discontent” in Development Bulletin here: <https://pacificsecurity.net/resource/development-bulletin-82/>

practitioners and researchers in Australia and the countries concerned who knew very well it could happen and how, and this knowledge is often not used to prevent conflict.

With these knowledge gaps in mind, I would like to propose some ways in which Australia can further invest in, and mainstream, conflict prevention into its aid program through understanding conflict and using evidence to contribute to its prevention.

Recommendation 1. Fund evidence-based and locally informed research on Pacific conflict conditions and solutions. Australian Government introduces a flexible, and easy to apply for, conflict prevention fund available to researchers and civil society actors in Australia's neighbouring countries (in collaboration with Australian researchers where practicable) that would allow for independent and local research on conflict conditions and also to respond to issues as they arise. For example, civil society actors with an idea on how to cut gun violence in their city could propose a research action project, a Pacific university could develop a new early warning system or a set of actors in countries could study violence over time with a view to understanding conflict patterns and intervening earlier. Such funds should be made in grant form, and as flexible as practicable, in order to be useful for those in conflict-affected places.

Recommendation 2. Establish a conflict prevention PhD program for scholars with solutions orientated research in Australia's neighbouring countries to research and test their ideas at Australian or Pacific universities. This would balance Australia's heavy focus in PhD scholarships on development and public service, and open up new opportunities for research on ideas for peace and conflict prevention.

Recommendation 3. Conduct an independent review into Australia's aid investments to uncover effects of Australia's aid spend on conflict and conflict prevention in select settings. This would build on the work of this Inquiry to review, across all aid investments in Australia's neighbouring countries, over an agreed time period (e.g. 10 years) overall impacts on conflict conditions. The review would need to take a view over how aid investments are impacting the state of peace and conflict in each context; and identify whether aid is "doing no harm"⁷ or in fact exacerbating or alleviating conflict.

Recommendation 4. New aid investments have a "peace and conflict impact statement" which lays out how the new project itself, or with other parts of the aid programme, addresses conflict and its prevention. This would require officials and implementing agencies to be more explicit about their own assumptions about peace and conflict, think further about the connection between aid and conflict, and encourage cross-agency cooperation to explain the interconnections. DFAT with other agencies (notably Defence) could coordinate then, and explain clearly what are the impacts of Australian investments in our neighbouring countries on peace and conflict to the public in Australia and overseas. These statements and whether they are realised could also be tracked over time.

Recommendation 5. Link related investments across different agencies for development and security in a learning network – i.e. an Australian Conflict Prevention Partnership (similar to or, or an offshoot of, the Australian Humanitarian Partnership, and working across the climate/environment-conflict/peace nexus) so agencies can share learnings about how to identify, prevent and respond to potential conflict, and hold each other accountable through reports and review, involving government and civil society in our neighbouring countries to do so.

Recommendation 6: Establish a transparent complaints mechanism that would allow aid recipients and the public in aid recipient countries to identify complaints and conflicts arising from any Australian funded project and report them. This would help with early identification of conflict issues, increase trust in Australian aid and implementing partners and provide a point of difference between Australia and other

⁷ For a good read on this topic, and highly relevant to the Inquiry, see https://www.rienner.com/title/Do_No_Harm_How_Aid_Can_Support_Peace_or_War

donors, as Australia would be seen as “walking the walk” when it talks about the importance of democracy and conflict prevention in how it does its own operations and investments.

Recommendation 7: Support public dialogue on peace and conflict in Australia. Public debate tends to crystallise around Australian government decisions to intervene in wars in contexts like Solomon Islands or Timor Leste, but the understanding of how conflict develops over time and what can be done prior to intervention would be good to instil in, for example, undergraduate students, and public officials at federal and state levels. I am fortunate to teach both Pacific affairs and peace and conflict issues to undergraduate students at Australian National University, but I am acutely aware that most students will not have this exposure and go into their work in government and industry being relatively unaware of both peace and conflict prevention and the Pacific Islands region.

Recommendation 8: Privileging First Nations voices and multicultural perspectives in dialogue and education around peace and conflict. Indigenous Australians’ knowledge and experiences should be a key part of public dialogues to make Australia become more reflective and credible in conflict prevention at home and in its relations with our region. There is much to be learnt from Australian experience of conflict as well as that of its neighbours. This also includes learning from communities of people from conflict-affected countries who know well not just the horrors of war, but how institutions and groups can alleviate or fuel conflicts. Diasporas can be positively engaged in for example reducing violence and promotion of conflict in social media, providing support to peacebuilders in conflict affected countries, and in many cases have been influential in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. Australia has small but significant communities of people with ties to our neighbouring countries, often with intellectuals, artists, business people and others that can provide important points of thinking and grounding for peace.

Recommendation 9: Support regional cooperation. Australia has a relatively good standing with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and leaders, and financially backs many of its key meetings and activities. This is important, as the Pacific Way of solving conflicts between Pacific states and across borders, which is reliant on relationships and dialogue, has prevented and calmed many potential situations in the Pacific in the past.⁸ Where needed, the Biketawa Declaration of the Pacific Islands Leaders has also provided a mandate for agreed multilateral intervention in conflicts (rather than bilateral interventions which can lead to further instability, as we will see with Venezuela). But beyond active violent conflicts, likely future crises in our neighbouring countries will include a) drugs (particularly meth) and corruption leading to unchecked criminal activities, hollow states and increased burdens for communities to care for addicts and former addicts b) unrest – this may include denigration of democracies due to influences from within and outside Pacific countries (including online disinformation and influence campaigns) and separatist and independence movements arising from systems of power and government that are perceived as unjust c) environmental and climate crises – related to food insecurity and hardship and disputes over resources. Countering these threats require some level of regional cooperation, and the Pacific Islands’ track record in successful cooperation on fisheries and climate change provide hope that new threats can be dealt with also. Backing regional cooperation in important matters such as transnational crime, fisheries and illicit and exploitative trade of natural resources (including logs, wildlife, minerals and others), and increasing digital literacy of the public and government capacity in cybersecurity is key to reducing conflicts and security threats amongst Pacific Island countries.⁹

Recommendation 10: Reconsider security spends in light of their impact on conflict. There are two things to consider here – first is that Australia’s emphasis on security pacts and working with law and order agencies in our neighbouring countries is a double-edged sword. Yes, it may contribute to greater integration and

⁸ A fantastic resource on this is the book “Oceanic Diplomacy” and the work of these contributors, see <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/items/c4e74e23-7012-486d-84cb-a8a69fd0b200>

⁹ See article coauthored with Dr Henrietta McNeill for some ideas on useful points of cooperation <https://devpolicy.org/from-partner-of-choice-to-problem-solving-partners-in-the-pacific-20250604/>

perhaps influence standards of operations, but supplying arms and tactics for crowd control in countries with low police and military standards of transparency and accountability is likely to lead to Australia's security support being used for human rights abuses, including physical violence, suppression of free speech and violence against women. At the time of writing the riots report in 2022¹⁰, in the Pacific for example, more people had died from police firing into crowds of people (in PNG) than of rioters killing others deliberately, or accidentally in fires. One of the most dispiriting days of being an Australian citizen in Solomon Islands for me was the day there was a high-profile announcement and presentation of weapons to the Prime Minister Sogavare of Solomon Islands by Australia¹¹. All day Solomon Islanders from business, NGOs, government and other sectors kept asking me "why is Australia doing this?" This weapons supply was not seen as support but heightening the risk of violence. A major escalation of the civil conflict from 1998-2003 in Solomon Islands was the moment when militants raided and controlled the police's arms (with help from police officers). After that point, many people in Honiara, Guadalcanal and Malaita were more likely to have interactions where a gun was pointed in their face and threats (or worse) were made. People who had these experiences of being threatened by guns, and also know that there is theft of police resources by police now¹², have little faith that the weapons supplied from Australia will be kept safely and used appropriately. I share this concern, and sincerely hope that "conflict prevention" includes some consideration of the interaction between what the development and security sectors in Australia are doing in countries where the police and armed forces still have a long way to go towards being trusted service providers.

The second point here is that we should consider overall defence spending in light of development spending. I am sure other submissions may touch on this in more detail, but to give you an example: for 2023, all of the aid given to Pacific on climate change by all donors amounted to only 4% of Australia's military spend. The spend on defence is enormous compared to the spend on reducing threats to Pacific Islands – to democracy, to sustainability and ongoing inhabitancy of Pacific Islands, given climate change and other stressors, and to Pacific cultures and ways of life. This imbalance of spending could be better known, addressed in our priorities and spending allocations, and responded to with more conflict-sensitive defence spends to complement the renewed attention we see on conflict prevention and development.

In summary, there is much that can be done to better understand the impact of Australian aid spending on conflict in our closest neighbours and I welcome the recent political and bureaucratic attention to this topic and the work of the Inquiry. The increased number of outbreaks of violent conflicts in other regions around the world can perhaps shake us out of the complacency that war cannot happen in our closest neighbouring countries, then we can act now to reduce conflict, militarisation and crime in partnership with relevant actors in government and civil society.

¹⁰ See https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/v3-Riots_Pacific_-Final-Design-.pdf

¹¹ For details of this day, and some responses to the announcement see <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-02/australia-supplies-vehicles-guns-to-solomon-islands-police/101606466> and other ABC reporting.

¹² Notably the OneLink case, where money was stolen from the police evidence lockup by officers.