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

Inquiry: The Role of Australia's International Development Program in Preventing Conflict

Submission from: The Make Peace A Priority (MPAP) Campaign Working Group (www.mpap.au)

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Executive Summary

The Make Peace A Priority (MPAP) campaign contends that the growing militarisation of Australian foreign policy and the integration of the aid program into a framework of "strategic competition" are counterproductive to long-term regional stability.

This approach diverts essential resources from sustainable development and climate action, actively contributes to regional tensions, and exacerbates the root causes of conflict.

A strategic shift towards a peace-centric foreign policy, underpinned 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 sets out concrete recommendations to institutionalise peace within Australia's foreign policy framework, enhance the effectiveness of its development assistance in fragile contexts, and ensure that aid is used to build resilience rather than fuel further conflict.

Recommendations:

1   **The Committee should recommend that the mandate of the Minister for International Development and the Pacific be expanded to explicitly include Peacebuilding.**
2   **The Committee should recommend that all peace-related functions within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) be consolidated under a single Deputy Secretary.**
3   **The Committee should recommend a substantial increase in resourcing for conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives, including a specific funding target as a percentage of the ODA budget.**
4   **The Committee should recommend that the government enact clear guidelines prohibiting the use of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for the direct funding of military or security infrastructure projects.**
5   **The Committee should recommend that the definition of "strategic" in the context of development assistance be broadened to prioritise long-term human security goals, such as regional cooperation on climate change and transnational health issues.**

Background and Interest

The Make Peace A Priority (MPAP) campaign is a national collaboration of civil society organisations, faith communities, peace organisations, academic institutions, and thousands of individual Australians. We are united by the conviction that a more peaceful world is a more secure Australia. Our organisational mandate is to advocate for a foreign policy that institutionalises peace as its central organising principle. This submission is informed by our collective expertise in peacebuilding, international development, and community-led advocacy, and it represents the concerns of a broad cross-section of the Australian public who believe in the efficacy of peaceful solutions to global challenges.

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 development program can be a powerful tool for building resilience in fragile states, but only if it is explicitly designed to address the root causes of fragility - weak governance, social exclusion, and unresolved grievances - rather than being subordinated to short-term geopolitical objectives. A peace-centric approach strengthens community participation and human capital by empowering local actors to lead their own development and peace processes.

Evidence/Analysis: The evidence overwhelmingly shows that top-down, externally imposed solutions often fail in fragile contexts. In contrast, peacebuilding interventions that focus on strengthening local civil society, supporting inclusive governance structures, and investing in human capital (such as education and health) have a high success rate. Research indicates that early-stage peacebuilding interventions demonstrate a 60-70% success rate, compared to only 30-40% for military interventions [1]. By investing in local peace infrastructures, Australia can help build a foundation of resilience that is sustainable long after aid programs conclude.

Recommendation: The Committee should recommend that DFAT prioritise funding for local civil society organisations in fragile states that are working on peacebuilding, dialogue, and community-level conflict resolution.

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

Argument: The current framing of "strategic use" risks subordinating development goals to geopolitical competition, which is counter-productive to long-term peace. A truly strategic approach would leverage Australia's development program to build shared interests in

regional stability, climate resilience, and cooperative security, positioning Australia as a trusted, neutral partner rather than a proxy in a great power contest.

Evidence/Analysis: When aid is perceived as a tool of geopolitical competition, it can generate distrust, undermine local ownership, and exacerbate tensions. This blurs the lines between humanitarian assistance and military objectives, putting aid workers at risk and compromising the integrity of development efforts. A more effective strategy is to define Australia's strategic interest as a stable, prosperous, and climate-resilient region, and to use our development program to achieve that goal.

Recommendation 2.1: The Committee should recommend that the definition of "strategic" in the context of development assistance be broadened to prioritise long-term human security goals, such as regional cooperation on climate change and transnational health issues.

Recommendation 2.2: The Committee should recommend that the government enact clear guidelines prohibiting the use of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for the direct funding of military or security infrastructure projects.

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 long-term, flexible, and well-resourced commitment to peacebuilding. In pre-conflict zones, the focus must be on early warning, prevention, and addressing root causes. In post-conflict zones, support must be directed towards reconciliation, transitional justice, and the building of sustainable peace infrastructure.

Evidence/Analysis: The economic case for prevention is overwhelming. Every dollar invested in conflict prevention saves an average of seven dollars in reconstruction costs, with some studies indicating a return on investment as high as 16 to 1 [2] [3]. This requires a dedicated institutional focus and specialised expertise. Currently, peace-related functions are fragmented across multiple divisions within DFAT, hindering a coordinated and effective response.

Recommendation 3.1: The Committee should recommend that all peace-related functions within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) be consolidated under a single Deputy Secretary to ensure a coordinated and strategic approach to pre- and post-conflict engagement.

Recommendation 3.2: The Committee should recommend a substantial increase in resourcing for conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives, including a specific funding target as a percentage of the ODA budget and increased contributions to the UN Peacebuilding Fund.

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

Argument: International development has a profound and positive impact on the maintenance of peace when it is explicitly designed for that purpose. A development program that reduces poverty, inequality, and injustice, while strengthening governance and promoting human rights, directly mitigates the primary drivers of conflict.

Evidence/Analysis: The World Bank has demonstrated a clear correlation between high levels of youth unemployment and the outbreak of conflict [4]. Similarly, studies have shown that countries with higher levels of gender equality are more peaceful [5]. By targeting these root causes, development assistance acts as a powerful tool for conflict prevention. This requires a clear ministerial mandate to ensure that peacebuilding is a central objective of all development programming.

Recommendation 4.1: The Committee should recommend that the mandate of the Minister for International Development and the Pacific be expanded to explicitly include Peacebuilding, ensuring that conflict prevention is a core metric of success for Australia's aid program.

Term of Reference 5: Any related matters.

Argument: A critical related matter is the environmental cost of militarism, which directly undermines the goals of sustainable development and peace. The resources consumed and emissions produced by military activities represent a catastrophic diversion from the urgent task of addressing the climate crisis, which is itself a primary driver of conflict.

Evidence/Analysis: Global military activities are responsible for 5.5% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions [6]. The $2.4 trillion spent globally on military budgets each year could fund global climate action four times over [7]. Australia cannot have a credible development policy for conflict prevention if its broader foreign policy contributes to both militarisation and the climate crisis.

Recommendation: The Committee should recommend that the government commission an independent audit of the environmental and climate impact of Australia's defence and security policies.

Conclusion

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

[1] Institute for Economics & Peace (2021). *The Economic Value of Peace 2021*. [Online]. Available: http://visionofhumanity.org/resources/the-economic-value-of-peace-2021/

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[4] The World Bank (2013). *World Development Report 2013: Jobs*. [Online]. Available: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/11843

[5] Hudson, V. M., Ballif-Spanvill, B., Caprioli, M., & Emmett, C. F. (2012). *Sex and world peace*. Columbia University Press.

[6] Scientists for Global Responsibility (2022). *The Carbon Boot Print: The Climate Impact of the Military*. [Online]. Available: https://www.sgr.org.uk/resources/carbon-boot-print-climate-impact-military

[7] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2023). *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2022*. [Online]. Available: https://www.sipri.org/publications/2023/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2022