Submission of Search for Common Ground
to the
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict

16 January 2026

Search for Common Ground (Search)[1] has been a global leader in peacebuilding and conflict transformation for over 40 years. We have partnered with the Australian government to support people building healthy, safe, and just societies in Asia, including in Sri Lanka. In response to this Parliamentary Inquiry we offer the following evidence and recommendations to the committee under the topics in the Terms of Reference.

Summary:

Peace and conflict prevention is the issue of our time. Over the past five years, the number and intensity of armed conflicts have doubled. Wars in the Middle East, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo have intensified. Chronic instability and threats from armed groups in the Sahel, Haiti, Yemen, Nigeria, the Horn of Africa, Mozambique and the Central African Republic persist. These conflicts - and the failure to end them - have a terrible human and financial cost. More than 233,000 people were killed in 2024,[2] and many more died from hunger and illness caused by humanitarian crises resulting from war. Millions were forced to flee their homes, joining the more than 120 million forcibly displaced worldwide.[3]

But we know what works to prevent and end conflict. Drawing on over 40 years of experience designing, implementing, and measuring peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs across the globe, Search for Common Ground has developed resources to ensure peace efforts are practical, accountable to those affected, and grounded in the reality of the local context. We have found that five key areas of attention (and measurement) can help us foster healthier and less violent societies: Reducing **polarization**, fostering people's **agency**, promoting **safety** and de-escalating **physical violence**, building trust in and responsiveness by **institutions**, and investing and directing **resources** toward peace efforts.[4]

---

[1] For more information, please visit www.sfcg.org
[2] ACLED. *2025 Conflict Watchlist*. 2025
[3] UNHCR. *2024 Mid-Year Trends Report*. 2024
[4] These five "vital signs" of a healthy society are components of the Peace Impact Framework (PIF), a tool Search for Common Ground developed in consultation with hundreds of experts, civil society organizations, and academics working toward a common measurement framework for peacebuilding. The PIF emphasizes gathering data and information from three key sources: Lived experience of those affected by conflict; aligned measures, which are shared indicators and themes that all peacebuilding practitioners can employ; and expert observations of a range of individuals and organizations working on conflict issues.

Australia's impact in fragile states can be seen through a Search for Common Ground program funded by the DFAT in Sri Lanka, which strengthened women's political participation and bolstered civic participation during and after crises.

Looking ahead, Australia can strategically prevent conflict by targeting key drivers in fragile states like Sri Lanka and Myanmar: In Sri Lanka through investments in inclusive governance (women and youth political participation), social cohesion and reconciliation, digital safety, and economic resilience; and in Myanmar by creating an enabling environment for peace (through inclusive dialogue), social cohesion (countering hate speech), and cross-border/regional approaches to mitigate instability.

We offer suggestions to maximize impact in fragile and conflict-affected states, by prioritizing four key capabilities:

1. **Respond faster:** Rapidly seize opportunities to de-escalate conflicts with quick, modest interventions, supported by local knowledge.

2. **End chronic crises:** Commit sufficient resources and diplomatic capacity to resolve long-running conflicts, supported by expanded analytical tools for the changing nature of conflict (physical and virtual spaces).

3. **Ensure aid is "conflict smart":** Design all humanitarian and development programs to prevent exacerbating grievances and actively contribute to peace, recognizing that the inability to manage conflict is the primary driver of poverty.

4. **Deliver effectively and take accountability:** Maximize transparency and accountability (e.g. through localized indicators and reporting). Prioritize grants over contracts for greater partnership diversity and direct support to on-the-ground groups.

Full submission:

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.***

We have seen firsthand that investments made by Australia foster lasting impact in fragile states, including to bolster resilience, strengthen community and civic participation, and enhance peace outcomes. Sri Lanka is a prime example.

Search for Common Ground implemented the *Women in Learning and Leadership (WILL)* project from 2016 to 2018 with support from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The project aimed to strengthen women's political participation and leadership at the local level by supporting aspiring women leaders in Kurunegala, Badulla, and Ampara districts.

WILL focused on enhancing the capacity of emerging women political leaders to engage effectively in local governance, promoting positive public attitudes toward women in political leadership, and encouraging political parties to increase women's participation in local authority structures. The project employed a multi-pronged methodology combining capacity building, advocacy, media engagement, and community outreach.

While the project was implemented several years ago, the impact sustains to this day. The women political leaders trained through the project contributed to advocacy that resulted in achieving the 25% quota for women in local governance. Some of the women continued to take up office themselves and are engaged to this day to mentor emerging women leaders interested in politics. Learning from the project has informed consecutive projects supported by the EU and Norwegians, amongst others.

To this date, Search has trained 2,000 female representatives in Sri Lanka and supported the Parliamentary Women's Caucus (PWC) in the creation of media campaigns, highlighting the achievements of female politicians. Search developed the concept of WILL clubs, which are cross-party, cross-council, women-only safe spaces, where elected women discuss issues that are of importance to them as well as a space through which they can collaboratively advocate for policy changes. 65% of participants strongly improved their abilities to engage in local governance due to their involvement in WILL clubs. In this way, DFAT contributions have made a significant difference to women political leaders' life over the last decade.

This is particularly important as Sri Lanka has faced serious challenges and upheaval over the last decade, from the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 to the economic crisis, to the subsequent demonstrations and political turmoil resulting in the resignation of government officials in 2022. In this context, support to civic participation and inclusion of diverse groups in political leadership has helped to prevent escalations of violence or destabilization. As Sri Lanka continues to grapple with the impacts of the civil war, even more than 15 years since its conclusion, this kind of grassroots investment remains critical.

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

Australia has a key role to play in preventing conflict in the Indo-Pacific, given its long standing experience and diplomatic engagement. We see specific opportunities in two fragile states in the region: Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

Sri Lanka
Australia's international development program can play a strategic role in preventing conflict in Sri Lanka by investing in inclusive governance, social cohesion, and resilience to emerging conflict

drivers. In Sri Lanka, long-standing ethno-religious divisions, governance failures, economic shocks, and rising digital harms continue to pose risks to stability, despite the opportunity created by recent democratic change.

Priority areas for conflict prevention investment include strengthening **inclusive and participatory governance**, particularly by supporting women and youth to engage meaningfully in decision-making at local and national levels. Low representation, entrenched social norms, and limited accountability mechanisms continue to undermine trust in institutions and create conditions for unrest (as seen in the Aragalaya movement). Targeted support to women's political leadership, participatory governance models, and implementation of the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security agendas can help consolidate democratic gains.

Australia can also address **social cohesion and reconciliation**, including inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue, community-based approaches to addressing historical grievances, and initiatives that promote pluralistic national narratives. These efforts are critical to reducing polarization and preventing the re-emergence of identity-based conflict.

Finally, investment in **digital safety and economic resilience**—including countering online hate speech, supporting safe online participation for women and minorities, and strengthening livelihoods affected by economic and climate pressures—can mitigate emerging conflict risks. Together, these strategic investments position Australia's development program to support durable peace and stability in Sri Lanka and the wider Indo-Pacific

Myanmar
Australia's international development program can play a critical role in preventing conflict in the Indo-Pacific by addressing the drivers of protracted violence and regional instability emanating from Myanmar. Since the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has descended into a full-scale civil conflict marked by widespread militarization, fractured governance, mass displacement, and escalating humanitarian needs, with direct spillover effects across Southeast Asia.

Strategic investment should prioritize **creating an enabling environment for peace** by supporting inclusive dialogue and confidence-building processes at community, national, and regional levels. With governance fragmented among armed actors, safe and inclusive platforms—particularly those engaging women, youth, ethnic minorities, religious communities, and displaced populations—are essential to reduce violence, counter polarization, and rebuild social cohesion.

Australia can also contribute to conflict prevention by investing in **social cohesion and inclusive visioning** initiatives that address deep-rooted ethno-religious divisions, counter misinformation and hate speech, and support communities to articulate a shared vision for an inclusive future

Myanmar. These efforts are vital to preventing further fragmentation and cycles of grievance-driven violence.

Finally, Australia's development program can mitigate regional instability by supporting **cross-border and regional approaches** that respond to displacement, humanitarian crises, climate-related shocks, and transnational crime. By aligning peacebuilding with humanitarian and development responses, Australia can help reduce conflict drivers in Myanmar while strengthening stability across the Indo-Pacific.

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

As Australia considers options for its aid programs in pre- and post-conflict zones, we recommend prioritizing four key capabilities to save lives and use resources effectively: 1) Respond faster; 2) End chronic crises; 3) Ensure aid is "conflict smart;" and 4) Deliver effectively.

1. **Respond faster**: Australian diplomats and aid programs should be able to rapidly respond in fast-changing situations. Diplomatic tools and assistance delivery mechanisms should be set up to seize windows of opportunity to prevent and de-escalate conflicts before they become expensive chronic emergencies. A quick and modest intervention saves money and lives, particularly when coupled with diplomatic efforts. Rapid response requires Australian officials to have local knowledge and access to understand what is needed to address the situation. This means being present on the ground in Embassies, or at the very least engaging regularly with local communities and organizations like Search who work on the frontlines of conflicts.

2. **End chronic crises:** Wars are dragging on longer than ever. Conflict in Afghanistan has endured in various forms for decades, places like Myanmar see cycles of violence every few years, and the recent escalation of violence between Thailand and Cambodia has its roots in border disputes dating back to the colonial period. These cycles take a horrifying human and financial toll. While the burden of breaking these cycles of violence are first and foremost on these societies, Australian development assistance and diplomacy should support these efforts. Resolving long-running conflicts requires sufficient resources and capacities. Mediation, dialogue, and negotiations are complicated processes, and require skills from across the Government.

   It also requires expanding **analytical tools** to understand the changing nature of conflict. Conflict should be analysed in the way it now evolves – across borders, and in both physical and virtual spaces. Social normative factors should be recognised equally to institutional, economic, physical, and environmental factors. This means that Australia must re-conceptualise what constitutes security and utilise analytical approaches to

conflict and peace that bridge the gaps between lived experiences and conceptual and indicator-based frameworks. Australia should partner with academics, civil society, and the private sector to invest in research, evidence, and other forms of capital to build the evidence base for our understanding of conflict and peace.

3. **Aid should be conflict smart:** The inability to manage conflict is the primary driver of poverty and suffering. People in Sudan are not hungry because of crop failures, but because of ongoing conflict; people in Yemen are not poor because they cannot find jobs, but because decades of war decimated the economy. Therefore the priority for addressing food insecurity, poverty, disease, and education deficits should be resolving and preventing conflicts that drive these issues. Humanitarian, development and other programs should be "conflict smart." Australian assistance should not exacerbate or create new grievances or violence. Aid provided in conflict zones should also be designed in ways that break the cycle of dependence and contribute to peace. Efforts to support Australia's global priorities, including human rights, can contribute to building healthy, safe, and just societies more able to resist war or see future conflict. To succeed in their mission, Australian leaders should have access to the best technical expertise, and prioritize key areas common across peace processes like: ceasefire verification, humanitarian access negotiations, strategic communications, accountability & transitional justice, stabilization & security sector reform, disarmament & demobilization, and post-conflict reconstruction issues.

4. **Deliver, measure, and take accountability, building on what works:** In order to carry out the priorities of rapidly responding to changing contexts, ending chronic crises, and integrating conflict into all areas, Australia needs to maximize its tools and resources for effectiveness and accountability, and communicate to both the Australian and foreign public. Investments should be accountable to Australians as well as the people benefitting from the assistance. Foreign assistance recipients should publish evaluations and audits, and report regularly to the Australian government. Evaluations should be informed by an *Impact framework*[5] – a simple set of key measurements that track success across individual programs and agencies.

   Foreign assistance should also make sense to the people being helped. Assistance should be transparent about the resources committed, how they will be used, and should use a *Grounded Accountability*[6] mechanism to make sure that the money being spent is delivering things that local people actually want. The DFAT should prioritize grants over cooperative agreements or contracts. This allows for more diverse partnerships and burden-sharing. Grants require less paperwork for both the Australian Government and non-profit partners. A larger number of relatively smaller grants enables higher risk-tolerance. Funding should directly focus on supporting groups that are on the ground

---

[5] Search for Common Ground, "Measuring our impact"
[6] Urwin, E., Botoeva, A., Arias, R., Vargas, O., & Firchow, P. 2023. *Flipping the power dynamics in measurement and evaluation: international aid and the potential for a Grounded Accountability Model. Negotiation Journal.*

working, rather than "parachuting in" management schemes. This will require the DFAT to have sufficient technical expertise in grants management and monitoring and evaluation, and strong and effective financial oversight of grants and implementation, particularly within Embassies, including the ability to closely monitor programs for responsible use of taxpayer funds, and reasonable adjustments/ adaptations in response to conflict contexts.

Ensure that Australia's foreign policy is grounded in the realities of conflict. Effective foreign policy reflects the dynamic nature of conflict. Australia can centre its foreign policy on the realities of conflict by cultivating a more intersectional, people-centred approach that creates a listening and learning environment for those affected by instability and violence. DFAT could work alongside multilateral organisations, like ASEAN and the World Bank, to synchronise complementary goals and actions. This would equip Australia to pursue political, economic, and diplomatic efforts to have the greatest impact on the ground.

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

Underinvestment in conflict prevention and peacebuilding has allowed violent conflicts to persist. Diplomatic proclamations for peace have been detached from programs to prevent violence on the ground. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars, pounds, and euros invested in places like Nigeria, South Sudan, and Myanmar, some of the most devastating violent conflicts persist. According to the Global Peace Index, in 2024, peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts cost 47.2 billion USD, which accounted for only 0.52 percent of the total spending on military options for addressing conflicts.[7] This imbalance results in ever-growing humanitarian need and never-ending peacekeeping and military operations that span decades. Conflict prevention investments are also much cheaper than the cost of conflict. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) found that in countries with recent violence, each dollar invested in conflict prevention could return as much as $103.[8]

But early intervention and investments during periods of relative stability can interrupt cycles of violence and prevent further escalation. When looking at risks of atrocities, Search found that early action to invest in diverse and inclusive peace architectures, supporting social cohesion during times of less intense violence, and bringing people together in collaborative spaces that reduced polarization, all contributed to greater resilience to violence and improved prevention.[9]

---

[7] Institute for Economics & Peace. "Global Peace Index 2025: Identifying and Measuring the Factors that Drive Peace." Sydney, June 2025. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Global-Peace-Index-2025-web.pdf
[8] Hannes Mueller, et al. The Urgency of Conflict Prevention – A Macroeconomic Perspective International Monetary Fund (Dec 2024).
[9] Katie Smith. "Polarization, Social Cohesion, and Atrocities: Approaches for a Safer World." Search for Common Ground (July 2023).
https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Polarization-Social-Cohesion-Atrocities_FINAL.pdf

Across the globe, we have seen investments in early warning systems, participatory governance, security sector reform, community dialogue, and interfaith tolerance result in less violence, greater trust in institutions, and reduced polarization.[10] For example:

- In the border region between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan where violence has frequently broken out, Search worked with institutional funding to build relationships, support dialogue, and facilitate negotiations with political leaders, all of which led to a historic agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on March 13, 2025 which ended the border dispute.

- In 2024 Search's investments in local mediation - made possible through international development assistance from several donors - were crucial for establishing legitimacy in efforts to reduce violence. Investing in Insider Mediators to proactively address intercommunal conflicts built trust and recognition among community members. In some areas, this created a sense of safety that allowed residents to resume economic activities. This approach to tackling violence and insecurity also attracted support from other actors, both national and international, which helped communities enhance their resilience. The trust established between community members and institutions also proved to be a marker of successful outcomes in violence reduction. Notable achievements included the commitment of state actors to support community efforts to address security challenges.

- Similarly on violence reduction, in response to rising tensions between the FARDC and an armed group in Twirwaneo in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Search focused on supporting local leaders and communities to resolve immediate conflicts by helping them set up ad hoc committees that brought together FARDC and other local actors to jointly address criminal issues and improve security in the area. That investment in local leaders required building credible relationships with both groups, protecting people who came forward, and providing follow-up support.

- In Nigeria in 2021, a Search program - funded by international development assistance - helped support defections of Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa members, by disseminating messages encouraging people to leave extremist groups; 75 percent of surveyed defectors had seen these messages.[11]

- Search's Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) programs - primarily funded through international development assistance from government donors - significantly reduced inter-religious hostility, negative perceptions, and acceptance of violence in 2024. In Nigeria, interfaith collaboration on important topics to communities rose from 58% to 81%, highlighting the critical role of religious actors in bridging divides. A clear example is the interreligious network in Doruwa Babuje, Bokkos LGA, Plateau State who launched a farming initiative to support the less privileged. By fostering solidarity across religious lines

---

[10] Dembele, Limou and Abdalrahman, Samah, 2025. "2024 Global Impact Report: 44 Million Voices for Peace". Search for Common Ground, 2025. https://www.sfcg.org/annualimpact-report/

[11] Search for Common Ground, "Final Evaluation: Jandeniyo! Let's Talk About It," April 2021.

and promoting self-sustainability, this effort strengthened community bonds and showcased the effectiveness of interfaith cooperation in addressing social challenges.

● Amidst challenges emerging from domestic conflicts, economic struggles, and competing ideologies, women in Pakistan face discrimination and violence, with very limited space to shape what happens and what decisions are made affecting their lives. With institutional development assistance, Search established a support network across Pakistan among women peace advocates and key stakeholders involved in conflict resolution and transforming violent extremism. The network equipped women with the skills and confidence to address violent extremism, enabling their contributions to policy and decision-making. The political landscape in Pakistan is turbulent, making sustained advocacy for women's rights and peacebuilding initiatives precarious. But by fostering inclusive dialogue, adapting strategies to cultural contexts, and actively involving marginalized groups, the initiative demonstrates the potential for transformative change within Pakistani society.

There is no shortage of localized evidence that peacebuilding works. Again and again, interventions have shown they can counter polarization, violence, and harm. Yet, the international response has largely been to keep these efforts small or to write them off for not ending war everywhere at once. This standard would be unthinkable in other sectors: if independent scientists around the world were repeatedly producing convergent evidence for an effective treatment for disease, the response would not be to keep it trapped in isolated labs, but to invest in scaling and testing whether it works at population level.