

29 January 2026

**Inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict**

Please find attached a submission to this timely inquiry on behalf of Peacifica, a not-for-profit peacebuilding research and advocacy organisation that was formed in 2016. We work collaboratively with Australian and regional peacebuilding, development and research partners in pursuit of a more peaceful and prosperous Pacific region.

Thank you for extending the submission date.



James Cox  
Executive Director

## **Inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict**

*Submission by Peacifica, January 2026*

Peacifica welcomes this inquiry into the role of Australia's international development program in preventing conflict. Various forms of conflict are becoming more pressing concerns in our region and around the world. Australia can do more through international development to contribute to peace.

Peacifica is a not-for-profit peacebuilding research and advocacy organisation that was formed in 2016. We work collaboratively with Australian and regional peacebuilding, development and research partners for a more peaceful and prosperous Pacific region.

This submission refers mainly to the role of Australia's international development program in the Pacific islands and is concerned primarily with intra-state conflict.

It is useful to make a few observations to begin:

- 'Conflict' in this submission refers to violent conflict, arising when existing approaches to resolving and mitigating disputes are failing. Violent conflict can be physical, psychological or emotional and can range from open violence (riots, intergroup fighting etc) to less visible acts behind closed doors in communities and households. Conflict drivers can encompass land and resource issues, economic hardship and feelings of disenfranchisement or injustice. These can be compounded by climate change, drug and alcohol abuse, intergenerational and cultural tensions, erosion of social norms, and geopolitical factors. International conflicts and stresses can increase the likelihood and severity of intra-state violent conflict.
- Australia's international development program is just one of the channels through which it can work for conflict prevention. The idea of 'defence, diplomacy and development' working together is a useful way to capture this. Each of these three strands have their own distinctive and complementary roles in preventing conflict and promoting lasting peace.
- While many activities can contribute to preventing conflict, 'conflict prevention' itself stands as a distinct discipline within development and humanitarian work. Development (with diplomacy and defence) runs the risk of exacerbating conflict without the application of conflict prevention principles, at the very least to 'do no harm'. All development actors should ensure that some understanding of conflict prevention informs their work.
- Terminology in this area is sensitive and often contested. 'Fragility' can be particularly difficult for Pacific island states. Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, despite being members of the 'g7plus' group of fragile and conflict affected states, seldom refer to themselves as being fragile. As the dominant local power, Australia needs to consider carefully how best to use this term. Catch-all alternatives are hard to find and it may be that referring to specific issues affecting any given location will be more constructive.

## Summary of Recommendations

These recommendations apply firstly to Australia's international development program, and by extension to DFAT and other parts of government.

Recommendation 1: In Pacific countries, support traditional governance capability for law and order and conflict prevention within existing cultural practices; and strengthen links with formal government systems.

Recommendation 2: In countries with a large young population, build development strategies around the economic and social well-being of young people, using specific objectives and indicators to mitigate the conflict risks affecting them.

Recommendation 3: Deepen DFAT's mandate for conflict prevention beyond the geopolitical sphere, with clear leadership and accountability at Deputy Secretary level. 'Peace' needs to be visible in DFAT's strategies, metrics, position titles and position descriptions if DFAT is to play a catalytic role in promoting peace.

Recommendation 4: Identify a list of priority countries in the Pacific and Asia for investment in conflict analysis and program design capacity to analyse, build strategy and implement programs for conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Recommendation 5: Work in close partnership with partner governments, communities and civil society and with Australia-based peacebuilding and conflict prevention practitioners to develop conflict prevention programs in at risk countries.

Recommendation 6: Ensure that peacebuilding and conflict prevention work includes meaningful ways for all affected groups to participate, and that different forms of leadership are represented.

Recommendation 7: Ensure that peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs continue to be supported for the long term and informed by conflict prevention expertise, to ensure that conflict risks are minimised and past work is not wasted.

Recommendation 8: Position and support First Nations peacebuilders, mediators and conflict prevention practitioners as leading contributors to Australia's conflict prevention work.

## Discussion

*(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*

Violent conflict in Pacific island countries is for the most part localised, taking place within communities and households or between communities. It is also most often resolved at this level, through traditional conflict management approaches with varying levels of involvement from formal law and justice services. This community orientation sits at odds with the traditional mode of Australia's development assistance, which is mostly channelled through partner governments in support of 'formal' government. In many Pacific communities central governments seem remote and have limited influence day to day. Traditional governance has a much stronger influence, including on the resolution of conflict. Donor aid programs seem even more remote.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion is informed by the 2022-2025 *Regional Perspectives* research project, undertaken by Peacifica, Development Services Exchange (Solomon Islands), and Linda Kenni et al (Vanuatu) for the University of Adelaide and the Defence Science & Technology Group.

Another area of mismatch between Australia's aid program and Pacific realities is the status of young people. In countries with very large youth populations, an aid program that does not place them as a central focus is missing an important channel to effectively minimise conflict risks.

Australia's international development program has a central role in strengthening institutions and people in conflict affected or at-risk settings in the Pacific. In an environment where new development funding is limited, we suggest that prioritising traditional governance and the interests of young people could have a significant impact on the incidence of violence in the Pacific:

Traditional governance: Culture sits at the core of resilience in the Pacific. For most Pacific people living outside towns and for many in town, life is dominated not by national or provincial governments, but by traditional leadership and by the church. There is a lot of local variation, but clan and tribal structures led by chiefs are the norm. These structures facilitate strong, grounded cultural practices and ways of decision making and problem solving. Conflict prevention techniques – mediation, dialogue, trust building - are intrinsic to traditional governance. People tend to seek out local solutions before looking to those offered by government.

This preference is not a failure of formal governance but rather a function of its immaturity. Traditional governance has been refined over centuries while formal governance is new, evolving, and often confusing. New initiatives come and go and government officials are often neither adequately trained nor resourced to implement them. In Australia we tend to think of governance as a pyramid with the national government at the top, but for many people in the Pacific, formal government is off to one side from the familiar traditional hierarchies. There is a common perception that the benefits of programs targeted at central governments don't reach the village.

It is important to note that simply supporting traditional governance will not fix everything. Land and resource conflicts can be significantly mitigated through traditional justice and decision making but contemporary pressures (increased population, climate change, land degradation) can require additional engagement with the formal sector. Perhaps most pressingly, traditional governance sometimes struggles with violent crime, and especially with the seeming difficulty that both traditional and formal governance has in protecting modern Pacific women and children. These 'law and order' issues require accessible and trustworthy access to qualified police, justice systems and social support, as well as building the capability of local leadership.

Supporting the capability of traditional governance alongside assistance to the formal sector would be a valuable way to build resilience across Pacific communities and done right would be a strong demonstration of inclusive, locally led development. Development programming that explicitly addresses both forms of governance would help to better equip traditional leaders to manage conflict in their communities and to close the distance between communities and government. It may also have a secondary effect, as a perception of increased equity in the distribution of aid may lessen conflicts between the centre and periphery and between groups.

**Recommendation 1: In Pacific countries, support traditional governance capability for law and order and conflict prevention within existing cultural practices; and strengthen links with formal government systems.**

Young people: A great deal of conflict risk arises from economic hardship, especially for younger people. Meaningful work can be hard to come by in both rural and urban areas, leading some young people to the abuse of (often home-made) alcohol and, increasingly, drugs. Outside the economic sphere, younger people often lack other channels for relaxation and self-expression. Violent behaviour can be an outcome of these pressures and poor understanding of them can lead to an

unfair amount of blame being directed at young people. Cycles of intergenerational misunderstanding, blame and mistrust can result.

It is however a mistake only to problematise young people in these situations. Many young people across the Pacific are leaders and innovators in finding solutions and building prosperity for themselves and their communities.

It is striking that in Pacific countries with a very large youth population (eg Solomon Islands with around 60% of the population under the age of 28), these concerns are not more central to Australian development assistance. 'Youth' programs often appear to sit as an addition to the main aid program, rather than being a core focus. An aid program that prioritises economic, sport and cultural opportunities for young people, and places measurement of their well-being as a central indicator of progress, would contribute substantially to conflict prevention.

**Recommendation 2: In countries with a large young population, build development strategies around the economic and social well-being of young people, using specific objectives and indicators to mitigate the conflict risks affecting them.**

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

~and~

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

Development assistance appears to contribute to a more peaceful environment by promoting trust and inclusion when it is implemented in line with effectiveness principles, characterised by open communication and responds to clearly articulated local priorities. However this peace dividend is likely be minimal without clear intent to prevent conflict being reflected in the setting of strategy and targets and in monitoring and implementation. Intentional conflict prevention and peacebuilding will have more impact than any incidental benefit.

It does appear that Australia's international development program does not have a clear focus on peace at present. Even though 'peace' has a prominent place in its overarching objective of "A peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific," neither the strategy or its performance framework appear to have a clearly thought through conception of peace and what is required to bring it about. This has led to a loss of capability within DFAT since it disbanded its governance program in 2020. There is today little conflict prevention capability currently within DFAT to enable the systematic pursuit of better peace outcomes via the aid program.<sup>2</sup>

**Recommendation 3: Deepen DFAT's mandate for conflict prevention beyond the geopolitical sphere, with clear leadership and accountability at Deputy Secretary level. 'Peace' needs to be visible in DFAT's strategies, metrics, position titles and position descriptions if DFAT is to play a catalytic role in promoting peace.**

This is evident in the way that the aid program is being implemented. The Solomon Islands-Australia Development Partnership Program, for example, includes a good analysis of the country's conflict risks, but this analysis does not appear to have significantly influenced the DPP's content or its

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<sup>2</sup> DFAT's recently formed conflict prevention branch focuses on geopolitical conflict, not the forms of violence that are covered by this submission.

performance indicators. There is nothing specifically about conflict prevention strategy, nor much in the way of other indicators (eg youth empowerment, equitable distribution of development outcomes across the country) that might be used to track progress towards peace. Without the right targets and indicators we can't say with any confidence how the DPP will contribute to a more peaceful and secure country.

This is a demonstration of why conflict prevention expertise is valuable, particularly for those contexts that face conflict risk. In such places it would be hugely beneficial to include conflict analysis at strategic and program levels and conflict prevention techniques in programs. In an environment where resources are limited, it would be reasonable and straightforward to prioritise certain countries across the Pacific and Asia for the use of conflict prevention expertise.

**Recommendation 4: Identify a list of priority countries in the Pacific and Asia for investment in conflict analysis and program design capacity to analyse, build strategy and implement programs for conflict prevention and peacebuilding.**

Australia has demonstrated that it can do this, perhaps most notably in addressing gender violence. [DFAT's website](#)<sup>3</sup> demonstrates the extent and diversity of its support in this area, reflecting a long-standing and clear commitment. This has resulted in a network of programs and practitioners across the region, and a demonstrable Australian contribution to ending gender violence.

For some contexts, better application of conflict prevention expertise would lead to subtle change. For others it may demand a more far-reaching adjustment to the development partnership, with support for mediation and dialogue far more prominent. This could be the case in responding Papua New Guinea's ongoing violence crisis. Australia is perhaps uniquely placed to contribute. We have some historical responsibility, a good track record in Bougainville to draw on, and a massive budget to work with – even a relatively small budget adjustment could go a long way. However while there is need, opportunity and responsibility, Australia should also exercise 'strategic humility'<sup>4</sup> – we have the resources to help, but it is Papua New Guinea's problem to fix. Development and diplomacy need to work closely together.

**Recommendation 5: Work in close partnership with partner governments, communities and civil society and with Australia-based peacebuilding and conflict prevention practitioners to develop conflict prevention programs in at risk countries.**

As a final observation in this section, the perceived use of development to other ends, such as its use as a tool of competition with other donors risks playing more of a destabilising role, particularly at the national level. It is our experience in Solomon Islands, for example, that people across the country interpret a lot of recent aid activity as being part of donor competition. An Australia that was seen to act as a middle power, or honest broker, would be warmly received and a positive contributor to regional peace and stability.

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

We would like to put forward three options for effective support through the aid program, encompassing inclusion, time and who from Australia should be involved.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/gender-equality/australias-international-support-for-gender-equality>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-case-for-investment-in-peacebuilding-and-mediation-in-the-pacific/>

Assuring that everyone with an interest in an issue is meaningfully involved is a vital contributor to peace. There is no one way to do this, and following culturally appropriate ways for all those interested to participate is critical – a simple ‘community meeting’ is almost certainly not enough. Localisation can occur at every stage of a program, from conception to evaluation and it can almost certainly be pushed further every time. This can offer huge benefits in terms of program outcomes and the empowerment of all those who are involved.

There is perhaps no more critical time for this than in immediate post-conflict settings. It is often the case that negotiations are confined to ‘leaders’ (usually men), with groups like women, young people and people with disabilities – those most affected and who have often been instrumental in stopping violence – excluded. It has been demonstrated many times that inclusive peace processes are more effective.

Getting inclusion right takes time. It requires handing over control to others, and a series of interactions to build trust, allow for ideas to be developed and to mature, and to ensure that everyone has their say. Peacifica has experienced in its own work what a difference this can make.

**Recommendation 6: Ensure that peacebuilding and conflict prevention work includes meaningful ways for all affected groups to participate, and that different forms of leadership are represented.**

Time is also important for lasting, effective peacebuilding. It may take years before communities or countries are ready to talk about and act on underlying tensions and conflict drivers. However this pulls against an understandable wish on the part of governments to move on, to say that conflict is in the past and the country is on the path to development. Failure to address the underlying causes of conflict risks a return to violence. It places a burden on conflict survivors who carry its legacy with them.

The need for conflict sensitivity in the international development program (and in defence and diplomacy also) lasts far beyond the end of conflict. This can be a sensitive issue – as a donor Australia needs to respect its partners’ desire to look forward while continuing to find ways to support people in their work to resolve past conflicts. Visible and significant participation of conflict prevention specialists in negotiations with development partners could lead to a more prominent place for peacebuilding work in Australia’s international development partnerships.

**Recommendation 7: Ensure that peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs continue to be supported for the long term and informed by conflict prevention expertise, to ensure that conflict risks are minimised and past work is not wasted.**

Finally, as Australia develops its First Nations foreign policy, we suggest that conflict prevention and peacebuilding, especially in the Pacific, represents a huge opportunity for Australia to learn from its First Nations peacebuilders and to position them as leaders in our international peacebuilding work. Indigenous peacebuilding and conflict prevention in Australia is rooted in traditional governance and culture in a similar manner as in the Pacific and elsewhere. While each community has its own unique practices, First Nations peacebuilders have experience in negotiating these cultural differences in their work, literally and metaphorically speaking the same language as the communities they are working with. Bringing this expertise into DFAT and supporting the work and profile of this community of practice generally would be hugely beneficial.

**Recommendation 8: Position and support First Nations peacebuilders, mediators and conflict prevention practitioners as leading contributors to Australia’s conflict prevention work.**