

# Inquiry into the Role of Australia's International Development Program in Preventing Conflict

## *Executive Summary*

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security (“the Coalition”) puts forward this submission to Australia’s Inquiry into the Role of Australia’s International Development Program in Preventing Conflict. This submission argues that Australia’s international development program provides the opportunity to make a strategic contribution to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the Indo-Pacific. A comprehensive, integrated conflict prevention approach needs to include committed and focused funding, government and civil society partnerships, diplomacy, political engagement, defence (beyond deterrence) and economic strategies, as well as humanitarian efforts within the international development program. Specifically, by integrating a human security and WPS lens across this approach, Australia’s efforts can work to strengthen resilience, support locally led leadership and address the drivers of fragility; as well as reinforce the ‘Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus’. Locally led civil society, including feminist organisations, play a critical role in building sustainable peace, implementing early warning systems and contributing to conflict prevention. Australia has a timely and critical opportunity to further use its development program, as part of an overall integrated approach to prevent conflict, strengthen governance, and support inclusive peace and security outcomes across the region.

This submission concludes with five key recommendations to guide future action:

1. **Embed the Women, Peace and Security agenda and a human security lens** across Australia’s international development program and as part of an integrated and coordinated approach, particularly in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, humanitarian response and climate-related crises.
2. **Increase strategic investment in an integrated approach to conflict prevention in the Indo-Pacific, including through an Indo-Pacific Gender Equality Fund**, supporting locally led initiatives, early-warning systems, and the prevention of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) to strengthen resilience.
3. **Resource locally led and feminist civil society organisations** in fragile, conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts through dedicated, flexible and long-term funding to strengthen resilience and prevent conflict escalation.
4. **Establish formal mechanisms for civil society engagement** in Australia’s conflict prevention, early-warning and crisis-response efforts, including engagement with women’s organisations and diaspora communities.
5. **Strengthen monitoring, evaluation and learning** within Australia’s international development program, and as part of an overall integrated and coordinated approach, to assess the impact and effectiveness of initiatives and investments in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and gender equality outcomes across the region.

## *Introduction*

The Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security (“the Coalition”) is a non-partisan and independent coalition of civil society organisations, networks and individuals working to advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in Australia, Asia and the Pacific region and globally.

We bring together activists, feminists, practitioners, humanitarian actors and those with first-hand experience working in the frontline on issues relating to WPS. Coalition members have wide ranging expertise in gender and peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

The Coalition welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. Drawing on our expertise, this submission highlights the strategic role of Australia’s development program plays as part of an integrated approach in preventing conflict as well as the value of locally led and gender-responsive initiatives, and the importance of civil society engagement in informing strategies for peace and security.

## *1. Building resilience in fragile states and civil society engagement*

Across the current geo-political context both globally and in the Indo-Pacific region, tensions and the potential for further conflicts are increasing at many levels; border, inter-state, intrastate; fuelled by multiple factors including increasing militarisation and conflict over scarce natural resources as well as other economic, territorial and environmental stresses. Fragile and conflict-affected states face multiple challenges, including climate disasters, and systemic gender inequality. Development programs grounded in a human security and a WPS approach are more effective at building resilience and in addressing these drivers early and holistically. This includes giving attention to women’s participation, the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, protection of the most vulnerable populations and inclusive relief and recovery, in accordance with Australia’s Second National Action Plan on WPS.

Women’s and feminist civil society organisations are often the first to identify rising tensions linked to resource scarcity, political exclusion, or violence and are leading the way in locally led early warning initiatives. Yet they remain under-resourced within traditional development programming. Coalition research highlights that when women are supported as leaders, mediators, and organisers, communities are better able to manage disputes, respond to shocks, and prevent escalation.<sup>1</sup>

For example, women-led initiatives in Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Fiji, and Vanuatu have coordinated early-warning systems, humanitarian responses, and community recovery after climate disasters including the Pacific Owned Women-led Early Warning and Resilience Systems initiative, which was funded by Pacific Women Lead in 2023-25. These interventions have prevented local disputes from escalating, reinforced social cohesion, and strengthened governance structures.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Pacific Women Mediators Network has facilitated conflict resolution in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands, embedding gender perspectives in local decision-making and dispute resolution. In South-East Asia, regional platforms such as the Southeast Asian Women Peace Mediators, established to engage women negotiators and mediators in preventing or resolving violent conflict and strengthening dialogue across parties, demonstrate how women’s mediation networks are advancing gender-inclusive approaches to peace and conflict resolution in the ASEAN context.<sup>3</sup> In Myanmar, female civil society members documented human rights abuses, coordinated humanitarian support, and provided safe spaces for displaced populations, sustaining resilience even under highly repressive conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Across these contexts, civil society actors are uniquely positioned to identify early warning signs, including rising gender-based violence, exclusion from decision-making, and climate-related tensions, as well as implement preventive interventions before issues escalate into wider conflict. Continuous engagement with civil society

across prevention, early warning, and crisis response strengthens accountability, improves program design, and ensures interventions reflect local realities.

Formal engagement with civil society is essential to ensure development programs are responsive, contextually grounded, and effective in preventing conflict. Evidence shows that civil society engagement is most impactful when structured, continuous, and adequately resourced. Feminist civil society organisations, grassroots networks, and diaspora communities bring lived experience, local knowledge, and trusted networks that are vital for early identification of risks and preventive interventions.<sup>5</sup>

Australia's international development program can strengthen resilience in fragile and conflict-affected contexts by investing in inclusive civic participation, supporting women's leadership, and resourcing locally led civil society as a core component of prevention. Evidence from the Coalition's Afghanistan and Gaza convenings highlights that women-led civil society organisations play a critical role in sustaining essential services, maintaining community cohesion, and responding to crisis where state systems and formal peace processes are absent or inaccessible. In Afghanistan, women's organisations continue to operate under severe constraints, adapting service delivery and informal advocacy to meet community needs, demonstrating the importance of flexible, locally driven funding models.<sup>6</sup> In Gaza, women remain at the forefront of humanitarian responses, delivering healthcare, running shelters, and bolstering community survival.<sup>7</sup> These cases demonstrate that development programs which prioritise women's leadership and civic participation are essential to building resilient communities capable of anticipating, withstanding, and responding to emerging challenges.

## *2. Strategic use of development programs to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific*

Integrating WPS and a human security lens into Australia's development programming strengthens early warning capacity, mitigates drivers of instability, and strengthens regional resilience. Evidence from Coalition convenings and member research across the Pacific and Southeast Asia demonstrates that locally led, gender-responsive initiatives are particularly effective in preventing conflict escalation.<sup>8</sup> These initiatives address underlying risks such as gender-based violence, political exclusion, climate displacement, and shrinking civic space, all recognised as early indicators of broader instability.<sup>9</sup> Supporting women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding contributes to more inclusive governance and long-lasting peace.

In the Pacific, women have long acted as frontline peacebuilders. Matriarchs in Bougainville brokered ceasefires, mediated tribal disputes, and organised community recovery efforts. Women in the Solomon Islands created safe spaces for dialogue and reconciliation, while mothers in the Cook Islands mobilised local networks to safeguard families, uphold cultural protocols, and maintain social cohesion during crises.<sup>10</sup> In Vanuatu, women have been central to climate resilience and disaster recovery efforts following increasingly severe cyclones, leading community-based preparedness, coordinating recovery and resilience planning, and addressing heightened risks of gender-based violence in post-disaster contexts, demonstrating the interconnected humanitarian, development, and peace dimensions of climate change.<sup>11</sup> Today, Pacific women are also asserting leadership in cyberspace, defending digital sovereignty, countering online violence, and shaping inclusive cyber norms.<sup>12</sup>

Strategic investment in prevention, through mechanisms such as the Indo-Pacific Gender Equality Fund, directly supports Australia's regional interests by reducing the likelihood of crises that require costly humanitarian or security responses. This approach reinforces Australia's credibility as a regional partner committed to long-term stability and conflict prevention.

### *3. Supporting pre-conflict and post-conflict zones*

Development programs must operate across the full spectrum of fragility, from pre-conflict to post-conflict contexts. Integrating a human security and WPS lens ensures these programs can anticipate risks, strengthen governance, and empower women and local actors to act early, preventing escalation and violence.

In pre-conflict settings, programs that strengthen civic participation, local governance, and women's leadership are critical to settling tensions before violence occurs. Evidence from Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands shows that when women and local actors are supported to mediate disputes and participate in decision-making, community tensions are addressed before escalating into conflict. Pacific perspectives emphasise that peace and security are relational, anchored in land, culture, and social cohesion.<sup>13</sup> Development programs that recognise and resource these local knowledge systems, including feminist civil society, can identify and mitigate risks before they escalate.<sup>14</sup>

In post-conflict settings, long-term and flexible support for women-led organisations is essential to sustaining peace. In Bougainville, investment in local mediation networks has reduced conflict recurrence and facilitated reconciliation processes.<sup>15</sup>

Peacebuilding is not linear, therefore sustained engagement beyond formal peace agreements ensures durable long-lasting outcomes. Supporting continuity across pre- and post-conflict phases allows Australia's development program to build resilient communities capable of responding to emerging challenges whilst also embedding WPS and human security principles. Development programs should therefore enable local actors to maintain leadership throughout fragile and post-conflict periods, to ensure peacebuilding and conflict prevention continues.

### *4. Conflict prevention, monitoring, learning and resources*

Critical to a strategic and comprehensive approach for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the Indo-Pacific is the need for learning and partnership framed around robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) systems to further enhance conflict prevention. Indicators that track the effectiveness of different models of engagement, interventions, early warning systems, participation of women and gender diverse people, civic space, gender-based violence, and access to resources, coupled with feedback loops with civil society, ensure programs remain adaptive, relevant to lived experience and evidence-based. Where civil society is actively involved in monitoring, evaluation and learning, development programs better identify emerging risks, adjust interventions, and mitigate escalation.<sup>16</sup> Critically, implementation, accountability and sustainable peace all require dedicated resources.

By valuing the expertise and leadership of local actors, Australia can strengthen early-warning systems, reinforce resilience, and ensure development investments contribute directly to conflict prevention, human security, and gender equality. Sustained engagement with civil society, supported through formal mechanisms and flexible funding, is critical to realising the preventative potential of Australia's international development program and to building sustainable peace and human security across the Indo-Pacific.

## Recommendations

1. **Embed the Women, Peace and Security agenda and a human security lens** across Australia's international development program and as part of an integrated and coordinated approach in Australia, particularly in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, humanitarian response and climate-related crises.
2. **Increase strategic investment in an integrated approach to conflict prevention in the Indo-Pacific, including through the Indo-Pacific Gender Equality Fund**, supporting locally led initiatives, early-warning systems, and the prevention of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) to strengthen resilience.
3. **Resource locally led and feminist civil society organisations** in fragile, conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts through dedicated, flexible and long-term funding to strengthen resilience and prevent conflict escalation.
4. **Establish formal mechanisms for civil society engagement** in Australia's conflict prevention, early-warning and crisis-response efforts, including engagement with women's rights organisations and diaspora communities.
5. **Strengthen monitoring, evaluation and learning** within Australia's international development program, and as part of an integrated and coordinated approach, to assess the impact and effectiveness of initiatives and investments on conflict prevention, peacebuilding and gender equality outcomes across the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, WPS Regional Convening Summary Report, ACSC WPS, 2025, [https://www.wpscoalition.org/files/ugd/fc0472\\_adde28317d2e4d22ada992c9feff035a.pdf](https://www.wpscoalition.org/files/ugd/fc0472_adde28317d2e4d22ada992c9feff035a.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, Climate, Women, Peace and Security, ACSC WPS, 2025, [https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28\\_5a6272858f4c44d4bb1599bfa8daaa9d.pdf](https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28_5a6272858f4c44d4bb1599bfa8daaa9d.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Global Women Mediators, Southeast Asian Network of Women Peace Negotiators and Mediators, accessed February 2026, <https://www.globalwomenmediators.org/southeast-asian-network-of-women-peace-negotiators-and-mediators/>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, WPS Regional Convening Summary Report, ACSC WPS, 2025, [https://www.wpscoalition.org/files/ugd/fc0472\\_adde28317d2e4d22ada992c9feff035a.pdf](https://www.wpscoalition.org/files/ugd/fc0472_adde28317d2e4d22ada992c9feff035a.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, Government-Civil Society Dialogue Report, ACSC WPS, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, Discussion Summary: 25 Years of WPS – Challenges and Opportunities in Advancing Afghan Women's Rights, ACSC WPS, 2025, [https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28\\_9a1070a02c3b4392b6b591104a3c17cd.pdf](https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28_9a1070a02c3b4392b6b591104a3c17cd.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, Discussion Summary: 25 Years of WPS – Amplifying Palestinian Women's Voices, ACSC WPS, 2025, [https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28\\_0ce6b1a31e40482a87653164df83347f.pdf](https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28_0ce6b1a31e40482a87653164df83347f.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, WPS Regional Convening Summary Report, ACSC WPS, 2025, [https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28\\_19db1558543745219986af027fa88276.pdf](https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28_19db1558543745219986af027fa88276.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security, WPS Regional Convening Summary Report, ACSC WPS, 2025, [https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28\\_19db1558543745219986af027fa88276.pdf](https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28_19db1558543745219986af027fa88276.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Pua Hunter, A Pacific Reflection on Women, Peace and Security, *The Strategist*, 2025, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-pacific-reflection-on-women-peace-and-security/>

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<sup>11</sup> *Country Brief on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus 2024: Vanuatu*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/country-brief-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-2024-vanuatu>

<sup>12</sup> *Asia Pacific 4D*, Partnering on Pacific WPS, 2023, <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/partner-on-pacific-wps/>

<sup>13</sup> Pua Hunter, A Pacific Reflection on Women, Peace and Security, *The Strategist*, 2025, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/a-pacific-reflection-on-women-peace-and-security/>.

<sup>14</sup> Partnering on Pacific WPS, *Asia Pacific 4D*, 2023, <https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/partner-on-pacific-wps/>

<sup>15</sup> *Australian Outlook*, Women on the Frontlines of Pacific Peacebuilding, 2024, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/women-on-the-frontlines-of-pacific-peacebuilding/>

<sup>16</sup> *Australian Civil Society Coalition for Women, Peace and Security*, What Do Peace and Security Mean to Diverse Women in Australia? Roundtable Summary, ACSC WPS, 2023, [https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28\\_19db1558543745219986af027fa88276.pdf](https://17b3688d-ea3c-4192-80cd-ae98dad749bf.filesusr.com/ugd/62fd28_19db1558543745219986af027fa88276.pdf)