

# Peacebuilding in Australian Foreign Policy

A summary of views and conclusions from the Australia Peacebuilding Network Roundtable

21 February 2024, Parliament House of Australia

*This one-day Roundtable was supported by the Initiative for Peacebuilding, University of Melbourne and hosted by the Asia, Australia and Pacific Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Network. It included current and past diplomatic personnel, academics and practitioners from a range of organisations and associations.*

## Global Context

The urgency of enhancing peacebuilding was discussed in the current global context, with 75 per cent of the world's poor living in extreme settings and the number of people suffering from conflicts increasing.

We are witnessing a tragic repeat of the failure of the MDGs, with backsliding on basic development outcomes. Conflict is the main driver of this, leading to widespread displacement; the number, intensity, complexity, and length of conflicts are also increasing. The destabilising effects of climate change are a considerable and growing factor.

There is significant active and latent conflict in our own region. We need alternative channels, more tracks of engagement and hybrid approaches to address this.

Development strategy, without peacebuilding at its heart, is unlikely to be successful.

It is crucial to build peace at any stage of the escalatory cycle, and to be aware of potential conflicts in our region and beyond. Detailed, thoughtful analysis and inclusive processes are key to any approach to building and sustaining peace, as well as the understanding that peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping are interrelated and are part of a continuum. Being able to present a parallel approach and a narrative of peace to counter the narrative of extremism is key.

## Peacebuilding in Australia

Currently there is limited attention to peacebuilding in Australian foreign policy; the Government's focus being on reactive military options, leaving little place for peacebuilding to be part of the discussion.

Australia requires a longer-term vision regarding crisis planning and peacebuilding more specifically. Senator the Hon Penny Wong, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, has set the tone clearly in her speeches. She has noted that progress has been slow but that we need to continue with determined efforts to ensure a stable, peaceful, and prosperous region which is at the core of our foreign policy. However, this rhetoric must be matched with action, and more transparency from the Government is called for.

Australia has had good credentials historically. We have contributed to peacebuilding, underpinned by economic and social justice as championed early on by HV Evatt. We have had a strong commitment to the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the African Union and other international organisations. Australia influenced the global environment in the early 1990s, built on by valuable experience gained in Cambodia, the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, and Timor Leste, amongst others. We have the opportunity and some capacity to further this if we continue to engage globally and not just regionally; and regional involvement, not just bilateral, will be important. Australian non-government peace organisations could assist with such programs.

More is clearly needed now, especially with Australia's financial support for peacebuilding and peacekeeping at an all-time low. There is no doubt that what we have contributed is much lower than the world and UN expect.

To feed ideas and solutions to the Government now is critical:

- With the timeliness of the new First Nations Office in DFAT, and the new International Development Policy developing its priorities and approaches
- Prior to the UN's 'Summit of the Future' in September 2024 (the Summit will be based on the UN's 'Our Common Agenda'; peacebuilding and conflict prevention are part of its ambition).
- Prior to taking up our seat on the UN's Peacebuilding Commission in 2025
- While DFAT is considering and drafting the next iteration of its humanitarian strategy and its next set of development partnerships before the end of 2024.

Challenges abound, including the need for the Government to win the argument of enacting better strategies in parliament. There is clearly no lack of good intentions, but the challenge is to ensure these become outstanding actions through effective, focused implementation.

## Examples of Good Practice

Norway and Canada have what was described as 'peacebuilding DNA' built into their respective systems and departments; and central to this is that both countries have a 'deep bench' of peacebuilding expertise.

In Norway, peacebuilding is a key government priority. On 15 December 2023, Norway tabled its fifth action plan on women, peace and security, a coordinated effort across five ministries with both a national and global focus, to be implemented by 2030. It co-chaired the Peacebuilding Commission at its start in 2005 and funded the Peacebuilding Fund. Norway will call for a strengthened Peacebuilding Commission at the Summit of the Future. Peacebuilding was also at the core of Norway's recent UNSC term.

Norway's focus on peacebuilding sees it engage in dialogue, with a focus on women, peace and security, climate and security, protection of civilians and peace diplomacy. Bringing the right people to the table is key as is ensuring that agreements take account of the rights and needs of all citizens. It offers expert assistance if required and has access to a Nordic group of women mediators.

Part of Norway's success in peacebuilding has been its long-term commitment – both through adequate resources and flexibility – to assist with any conflict; its willingness to talk to all parties; and its acceptance of the possibility of failure while building on lessons learned. At its core is a dedicated 14-member unit in its ministry of foreign affairs focused on peacebuilding and reconciliation, which dates back to the early 90s.

Canada takes a broad view of peacebuilding with an emphasis on collaborative action and is proud of its Feminist Foreign Policy. It has been a longstanding advocate of peacebuilding, with a culture of humility and self-awareness at its core.

Global Affairs Canada established its peacebuilding hub in 2005. In 2016, PSOPs (Peace and Stabilization Operations Program) was created to undertake strategic coordination and conflict prevention initiatives through projects and deployments – marrying policy and implementation.

## A Unique Role for Australia

Australia is yet to have a strong sense of its identity in relation to peacebuilding. Although Australia was a small contributor to the UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and its Peacebuilding Fund,

it is clear we are being overshadowed by other countries. We need to do more, especially considering our ambition to secure a UNSC seat for the 2029–30 term and if we are serious about playing a part in the forthcoming UN peacebuilding architecture review.

Australia has an opportunity to play a unique role in peacebuilding by embracing the knowledge, approaches and systems of our First Nations communities, something which has benefited these communities across millennia. While this is at the heart of the work being undertaken by DFAT's First Nations Ambassador, his work is in its nascent stages. As a society, Australia continues to struggle with its own peacebuilding between First Nations and others. As we grapple with this and move through the journey of decolonisation, it will deepen our engagement with other countries. There are rich possibilities for First Nations peacebuilding mediators and their knowledge to be a part of regional peacebuilding dialogues.

Success will also be closely linked to rebuilding a depth of longer-term analysis and understanding of the key drivers of conflict, as well as a willingness to engage with all actors and encourage local ownership over processes and solutions. A dedicated peacebuilding unit within DFAT is necessary to address the current lack of skills and resources and help rebuild our standing globally. This will need to be backed by a political commitment from the Government so that ideas can lead to policy actions, and a 'culture of peacebuilding,' based on humility, can flourish. As a start, we need to build networks with peacebuilding organisations in Asia to create the conversation.

## Actions

- Continue to encourage Government to develop its strategic leadership and play a more active peacebuilding role in our region and beyond
- Continue to encourage DFAT to establish and adequately resource a dedicated unit committed to peacebuilding
  - It will need political leadership to ensure that it has the backing of government so it can take on current global and regional challenges
  - This unit must be able to work collaboratively across DFAT and inter-governmentally
- Advocate for and support the establishment of a parliamentary friendship group focused on peacebuilding
- Work with government to strengthen peacebuilding and embed it in public policy, especially in light of future UN engagement
- Encourage Government to both support and strengthen the UN's Peacebuilding Commission
- Encourage DFAT to increase representation and help plan for a follow up peacebuilding roundtable or conference – with at least three possibilities:
  - Plan for another roundtable with one focussed on our region
  - Plan for another roundtable with other Government Departments with an interest in peacebuilding, such as PM and C, Defence, Home Affairs, Police
  - Plan for a roundtable in the lead up to the UN Summit for the Future, possibly focused on our region
- Encourage the media to pick up peacebuilding/conflict prevention as an issue; and in turn elevate through engagement, the visibility of peacebuilding initiatives and stories in the media
- Advocate and support substantially increased funding for diplomacy and aid through DFAT to enable it to take this agenda forward
- Encourage Government to develop a comprehensive Australian national security strategy that goes beyond defence