

# Submission to the JSCFADT Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative

ACFID would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for the opportunity to provide this submission on Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative.

Further information about ACFID's members can be found in Appendix B.

## Executive Summary

Global evidence shows that advancing gender equality increases productivity, strengthens social cohesion, national capability, economic performance and regional stability. Societies that promote women's participation experience higher productivity, stronger governance, reduced conflict, and greater resilience to shocks.<sup>1</sup> Yet, with less than five years remaining before the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), no country is currently on track to achieve gender equality. Between 2019 and 2022, nearly 40 per cent of countries experienced stagnation or regression on key gender indicators.<sup>2</sup> This reversal poses material risks for Australia's national and economic security, and for the stability of our region.

At the same time, the rise of the anti-rights agenda, misinformation, and regressive policy decisions are undermining hard-won gender equality gains and threatening the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ people.<sup>3</sup> These threats are compounded by intersecting global crises — conflict, climate impacts, economic fragility, and democratic backsliding. They disproportionately affect women and LGBTQIA+ communities, who are often the first to face heightened violence, exclusion and poverty during crises, further worsening inequality and increasing instability.

Human security focuses on protecting people's rights, safety, and livelihoods — recognising that when individuals are secure, nations are more stable and resilient. Gender inequality undermines human security by limiting access to resources, representation, and safety for half the population. Where women face violence, discrimination, or exclusion from economic and civic participation, communities become less cohesive, economies lose productive capacity, and institutions are weakened.<sup>4</sup>

Australia's international engagement across diplomacy, development, defence, trade, and humanitarian action is most effective when it embeds gender equality at its centre. The release of the International Gender Equality Strategy (IGES) in February 2025 provides an important platform for this whole-of-government approach.<sup>5</sup> While the IGES outlines ambitious goals, its success will depend on how well it embeds gender equality across

Australia's international affairs portfolio, including decision-making, resourcing, programming, partnerships, and performance frameworks.

Australia's commitment to gender equality is central to upholding a rules-based international order where the dignity, rights, and safety of all people are protected. Meeting this commitment requires principled long-term engagement, particularly in contexts where rights are under threat and civic space is shrinking.

By positioning gender equality as a core driver of its international development and foreign policy agenda, Australia can deliver multiple national-interest benefits: strengthened strategic relationships, enhanced economic and trade opportunities, improved partner-country stability, and more resilient, peaceful communities across the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, Australia not only fulfils its commitments but also advances its security, prosperity, and influence in an increasingly complex strategic environment.

## Summary of recommendations

ACFID makes the following recommendations to the Committee as avenues for Australia to support Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative. Specific financial asks are taken from [ACFID's 2026-27 Pre-Budget Submission to Treasury](#) and can be found in Appendix A.

**Recommendation 1:** Use all diplomatic tools available to work with like-minded governments to address anti-rights movements, including the use of online spaces that spread extremism, disinformation and misinformation across the globe. This should:

- **Recommendation 1a:** Increase support for women's rights organisations to attend discussions in multilateral spaces, including funding for tracking backlash, coordination, and mobilising joint responses.
- **Recommendation 1b:** Resource a diplomatic and civil society response to anti-rights movements including monitoring, coordinated messaging and support for regional digital safety initiatives.

**Recommendation 2:** Strengthen policy coherence and accountability for Australia's second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), positioning WPS as both a prevention framework and a post-conflict response. This should include measurable targets, clear institutional responsibilities, formal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, the integration of First Nations women, and the inclusion of LGBTIQA+-led organisations.

**Recommendation 3:** Extend the best practice of setting targets for gender equality by committing 15 per cent of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to initiatives with gender equality as the principal objective.

**Recommendation 4:** Re-orient Australia's development cooperation program towards sustainable investment to - and through - civil society organisations, providing flexible, core, and multi-year funding. Investments that will achieve this include:

- **Recommendation 4a:** Increase the Gender Equality Fund to expand its reach and impact across Australia's development program.
- **Recommendation 4b:** Deliver a gender-responsive climate adaptation and resilience funding window to ensure Australia's climate finance is accessible to non-government organisations (NGOs) and local civil society organisations (CSOs) working at the intersection of gender equality and climate justice.
- **Recommendation 4c:** Make a landmark investment in adolescent girls' resilience across the Asia-Pacific region. This investment should support and enable targeted engagement with girls in the priority areas of the Australian International Gender Equality Strategy, with a focus on education.
- **Recommendation 4d:** Increase Australia's annual funding for LGBTQIA+ inclusion to ensure meaningful support for LGBTQIA+ people.

**Recommendation 5:** Australia should commit to sustained investment in civil society organisations that support Pacific women's leadership with local actors best placed to understand and respond to the needs of their communities. Women are critical to this leadership role with their leadership shown to improve solutions to persistent problems and positively influence policy and legislation.<sup>6</sup>

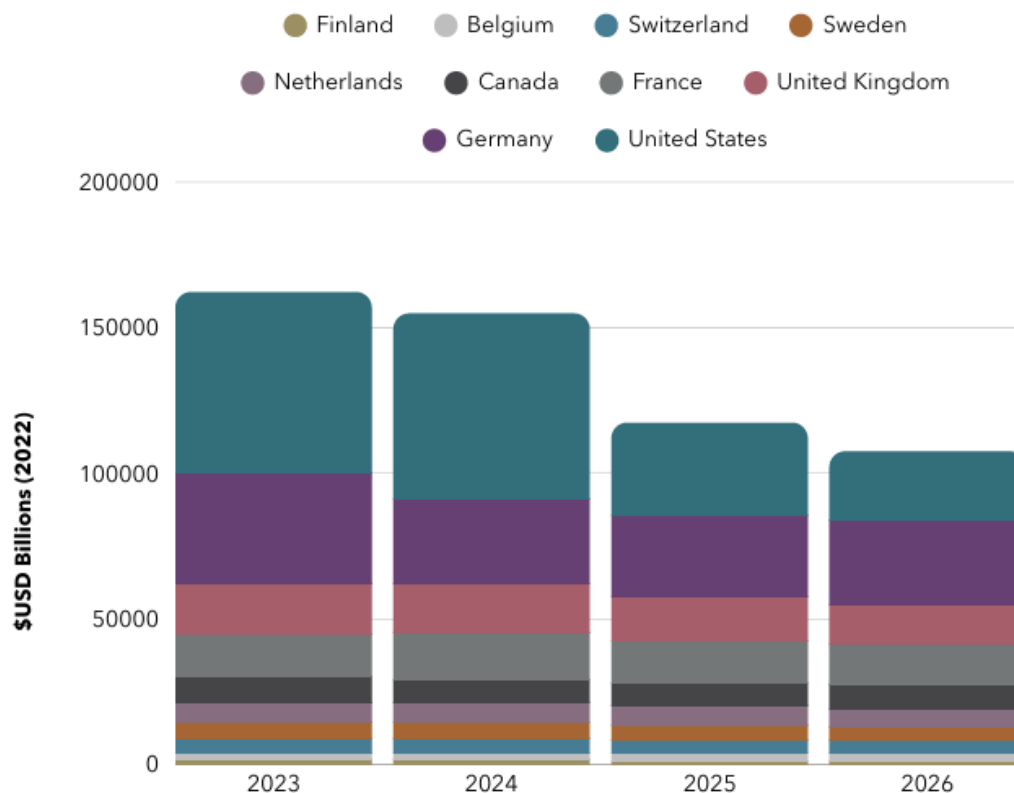
- **Recommendation 5a:** Sustain long-term investment in Pacific Women Lead to ensure gains over the past 15 years can be maintained, and Australia's flagship gender program in the Pacific can continue.
- **Recommendation 5b:** Strengthen Australia's Women, Peace and Security leadership by resourcing and embedding women-led organisations in security and peace decision-making processes, simplifying compliance requirements to enable access for small, grassroots organisations.

**Recommendation 6:** Provide reliable funding and support countries to strengthen their ability to collect and report reliable, inclusive and intersectional data to inform policies, programming and resource allocation. This should build on Australia's rights-protective, community-led approaches to data, ensuring people's circumstances are visible without exposing them to harm. This could include, but is not limited to, data on diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, race/ethnicity, and disability status.

## Global aid trends

Aid cuts by several major global donors in the last year are further eroding progress toward gender equality. Among them are the United States, formerly the world’s largest aid donor in nominal terms, and the Netherlands, previously the leading contributor to women’s rights organisations [see Figure 1 below].<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1: Projected ODA Contribution by OECD donor cutters



Source: DevPolicyBlog, Robin Davies, "Burden-shedding: the unravelling of the OECD aid consensus"

These reduced or withdrawn long-standing commitments to gender equality have disproportionately impacted sexual and reproductive health services, gender-based violence prevention, and LGBTQIA+ programs. Funding cuts have also coincided with policies and executive orders that explicitly target gender, women’s and LGBTQIA+ people’s rights and bodily autonomy, including expansions of the Mexico City Policy and restricting data related to reproductive health and sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>8</sup> Together, these changes reduce the capacity of frontline organisations to deliver essential protection, health, and prevention programs in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.<sup>9</sup>

Women-led and women's rights organisations have been severely impacted by recent funding cuts. UN Women reports that nearly half of 411 surveyed organisations operating across 44 humanitarian and crisis settings are at risk of closure within six months if current funding levels persist.<sup>10</sup> This trend poses a significant threat to gender equality. When women are excluded from crisis response and decision-making processes, societies face heightened risks of instability, conflict, and economic fragility. The closely established link between fragility and violent conflict as contributors to and reinforcing factors of each other and the security implications that flow from this provides a strong imperative in and of itself to drive progress on gender equality.

Building on Australia's leadership on gender equality, disability and social inclusion, DFAT should continue championing gender equality while also stepping up efforts to support partners in addressing intersecting forms of inequalities, including economic inequality. Given the significant gap in the global funding context created by the closure of USAID and other donor cuts to gender equality spending, there is an opportunity for Australia to allocate new and additional funds in order to meet gender equality needs, in line with the economic and national security objectives laid out in the following section.

### Gender equality is an economic security imperative

Gender equality is a strategic lever of economic security. Women's leadership is proven to improve decision-making quality, social cohesion and crisis management, reducing conflict risks and strengthening alliances.<sup>11</sup> Evidence shows that gender equality drives economic growth by increasing labour force participation, reducing pay gaps, and improving allocation of talent.<sup>12</sup>

Yet more than 10 per cent of women globally are trapped in a cycle of extreme poverty with discrimination and systemic barriers limiting women's participation in education, employment, and restricting their access to resources, credit and financial assets.<sup>13</sup> More broadly, women face significant barriers to economic participation with one billion women remaining excluded from formal financial services.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly the case for women with disability, who face increased barriers that limit their access to financial services, employment opportunities, education and digital participation.<sup>15</sup> Limiting women's full workforce participation, especially in emerging and strategic sectors like technology, energy, and infrastructure, is a risk to economic growth, with gender balance across sectors boosting innovation and improving economic outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, more work is needed to address current trade agreements that reinforce and deepen discriminatory economic structures. Women are particularly disadvantaged where trade rules stifle workers' rights, disadvantage small-scale farmers, facilitate the privatisation of public services and reduce access to affordable medicines.<sup>17</sup> These rules are exacerbating

gender inequities within economies, limiting women's access to dignified work, increasing the burden of unpaid care work, and deepening poverty in communities.

Education plays a critical role for both national and economic security.<sup>18</sup> The correlation between education and labour market participation remains consistent for women and men and has remained stable over decades, however, globally, only 49 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education.<sup>19</sup> In the Pacific, while education for girls has high rates of early childhood and primary enrolment, significant challenges remain for secondary completion, particularly due to financial barriers, gender norms, and climate-related disruptions.<sup>20</sup> Addressing these barriers through sustained investment in girls' education is essential to strengthening the Pacific's economic resilience and long-term development.

## Humanitarian crises and Women, Peace and Security

With the rise in conflict and violence globally, millions of women have been displaced by conflict, violence, human rights violations, and persecution. Conflict in Myanmar, Gaza, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan, alongside the worsening gender apartheid in Afghanistan, demonstrate how women's rights are systematically targeted during times of instability.<sup>21</sup>

While significant progress has been made on the WPS agenda, the rise of anti-rights movements and the widespread increase in global military spending threatens to stagnate progress.<sup>22</sup> Australia's second National Action Plan on WPS provides a strong framework for addressing the structural drivers of inequality and exclusion, but more coordinated, whole-of-government and sustained action is needed to strengthen implementation across domestic and international policy.

This includes the need to strengthen WPS as a strategic framework for conflict prevention, not only post-conflict response, but to rebuild political commitment around its core principles. While women play vital roles in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, they remain significantly under-represented in formal peace processes and high-level decision-making, despite research showing that peacekeeping operations are more effective, build deeper community trust, and create more durable peace outcomes when women are included and gender perspectives are integrated.<sup>23</sup>

The WPS agenda can be strengthened by adopting measurable targets, clear institutional responsibilities and accountability mechanisms that make prevention, participation and protection enforceable in practice. This includes increasing funding for women-led organisations through predictable, flexible financing and simplified compliance requirements.

WPS in Australia must also recognise the importance of integrating First Nations women's leadership and lived experience into Australia's WPS agenda including addressing the ongoing

impacts of colonial violence and embedding a commitment to justice and peacebuilding within Australia's borders.

In the Pacific, Australia should facilitate, convene and coordinate support for Pacific-led approaches, ensuring policy coherence across development, diplomacy and defence.<sup>24</sup> This includes backing women's and locally led peacebuilding initiatives, strengthening regional gender-responsive early warning systems, and aligning Australia's international engagement with Pacific priorities and leadership.

### Climate change impacting regional stability

Climate change is a recognised driver of insecurity, and its gendered impacts have direct implications for national and regional security.<sup>25</sup> Research shows that gender, climate and security are inextricably linked with climate impacts exacerbating instability, limiting access to resources, increasing food insecurity, and intensifying protection risks—particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.<sup>26</sup>

This fragility has cross-border consequences, with evidence showing that instability and violence frequently extend beyond the country of origin, contributing to regional displacement, pressures on neighbouring states, and wider economic and geopolitical disruptions.

These consequences intensify existing gender inequalities and disproportionately affect women and other marginalised groups. According to the UN, under a worst-case climate scenario, significantly more women than men will be pushed into poverty, with nearly 160 million women and girls affected, which will evidently lead to weakened economic and national security.<sup>27</sup>

The Pacific is among the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, with communities already experiencing rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, sea-level rise, and more frequent and intense extreme weather events.<sup>28</sup> In the Pacific, climate change poses a significant threat due to the region's unique geographic, cultural and socio-economic conditions, particularly impacting infrastructure, food and water security and healthcare. Women in the Pacific face greater impacts from climate change, because they are more likely to be economically, socially and politically marginalised, and are also underrepresented in policy-making and adaptation planning processes.<sup>29</sup>

While Australia has demonstrated a strong commitment to respond to the gendered impacts of climate change, this could be strengthened by increased funding for gender-responsive climate adaptation and resilience. This funding should be accessible to NGOs and local CSOs working at the intersection of gender equality and climate justice, enabling women to engage in climate decision-making and drive gender-transformative climate change programming and advocacy at all levels.

## Locally-led approaches

Women are influential leaders in their communities, organisations, and governments. Yet historical, cultural, and structural barriers continue to limit their ability to exercise leadership and shape decisions that directly impact their lives. In the Pacific, much of the peacebuilding work occurs at the community level, yet women who are driving these grassroots efforts are frequently excluded from formal decision-making processes. For example, women's representation in political leadership in the Pacific stands at just 8.2 per cent.<sup>30</sup>

Advancing women's leadership requires locally led approaches that address the culturally specific barriers to women's participation in leadership. In the Pacific, approaches that centre Pacific women's leadership and regional institutions have delivered significant progress in leadership and economic participation—strengthening local economies and regional security.

Women's rights organisations are essential to this work, yet further core, flexible, and long-term funding is needed for these organisations. In 2023-24, these groups received just \$49.5 million per year, representing one per cent of ODA.<sup>31</sup> Setting a target for 15 per cent of ODA to be directed to investments with gender equality as the principal objective would align Australia with commitments made by leading donors and would expand the pool of funding for gender-focused programming, strengthen women's rights organisations, and improve outcomes for communities.

Progress towards this target could also be supported by funding the next phase of Pacific Women Lead, building on the Australian Government's long-standing investments in women's political leadership across the region. Increasing support for locally led initiatives would reinforce and expand these gains by ensuring Pacific women have the resources to drive the leadership priorities that matter most in their communities. Finally, embedding locally-led commitments across programs—through stronger incentives for delivery partners to equitably resource local organisations—would help shift power to those best placed to deliver sustainable, community-driven change.

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## Appendix A: ACFID's 2026-27 Budget Proposals

Table A includes Budget Proposals from [ACFID's 2026-27 Pre-Budget Submission to Treasury](#) that are referred to in this submission to the JSCFADT Inquiry into Gender Equality as a National Security and Economic Security Imperative.

Table A

| Proposed Investments  | Budgetary Ask              |
|---|----------------------------|
| <b>Double the Gender Equality Fund to \$130m</b>  | \$65m additional p.a.      |
| <b>Establish a gender-responsive climate adaptation and resilience funding window (\$300m over 4 years)</b> | \$50 additional in 2026-27 |
| <b>Commit targeted funding for Adolescent Girls (\$50m over 4 years)</b>                                    | \$12.5m p.a.               |
| <b>Increase the Inclusion and Equality Fund by \$11.5m p.a.</b>   | \$11.5m additional p.a.    |
| <b>Sustain long-term investment in Pacific Women Lead (\$250m over 5 years)</b>                             | \$50m p.a.                 |

## **Appendix B: About ACFID**

*The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is the peak body for Australian non-government organisations involved in international development and humanitarian action.*

### **OUR SHARED PURPOSE**

Our purpose is to lead, unite and support international development and humanitarian organisations to realise our vision.

### **ABOUT ACFID**

Founded in 1965, ACFID currently has 138 full members and 17 affiliate members operating in more than 85 developing countries. The total revenue raised by ACFID's membership from all sources amounts to \$1.968 billion (2023-24), \$750 million of which is raised by 793,274 Australians. ACFID's members range between large Australian multi-sectoral organisations that are linked to international federations of NGOs, to agencies with specialised thematic expertise, and smaller community-based groups, with a mix of secular and faith-based organisations.

ACFID members must comply with the ACFID Code of Conduct, a voluntary, self-regulatory sector code of good practice that aims to improve international development and humanitarian action outcomes and increase stakeholder trust by enhancing the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of signatory organisations. Covering 9 Quality Principles, 31 Commitments and 90 compliance indicators, the Code sets good standards for program effectiveness, fundraising, governance and financial reporting. Compliance includes annual reporting and checks. The Code has an independent complaint handling process.

### **ACFID'S VALUES**

#### **INTEGRITY**

We act with honesty and are guided by ethical and moral principles in all that we do.

#### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

We take responsibility for our actions and are accountable to our stakeholders, and in particular primary stakeholders, for our performance and integrity.

#### **TRANSPARENCY**

We openly share information about our organisations and our work with all our stakeholders and the public.

#### **RESPECT**

We recognise the value and diversity of all people and are committed to treating others with due regard for their rights, dignity and integrity.

#### **EFFECTIVENESS**

We strive to deliver outcomes that bring about positive change in the lives of people living in poverty.

#### **EQUITY**

We are committed to overcoming prejudices and disadvantage and promoting fair and just access to resources and opportunities.

#### **COOPERATION**

We work with and alongside others in a spirit of mutuality, respecting diversity and difference in the pursuit of common goals.



## Current Member List

### Full Members: 138

- ACC International Relief
- Act for Peace - NCCA
- Action on Poverty
- ActionAid Australia
- ADARA Development Australia
- ADRA Australia
- Afghan Australian Development Organisation
- Anglican Overseas Aid
- Anglican Relief and Development Fund Australia
- Anglicans in Development
- ASHM Health
- Asia Justice and Rights
- Asian Aid Organisation
- Assisi Aid Projects
- Australia for UNHCR
- Australian Afghan Hassanian Youth Association
- Australian and New Zealand Intensive Care Society (ANZICS)
- Australian Centre for the Prevention of Cervical Cancer
- Australian Doctors for Africa
- Australian Doctors International
- Australian Himalayan Foundation
- Australian Lutheran World Service
- Australian Marist Solidarity Ltd.
- Australian Medical Aid Foundation
- Australian Red Cross
- Australian Respiratory Council
- AVI
- Bridgit Water Foundation
- Brien Holden Vision Institute Foundation
- Burnet Institute
- Cambodia Rural Students Foundation Ltd.
- CARE Australia
- Care for Africa
- Caritas Australia
- CBM Australia
- CFC ANCOP Australia Ltd.
- ChildFund Australia
- CINI Australia
- CLAN (Caring and Living As Neighbours)
- Conciliation Resources Australia Ltd.
- Cufa
- Dana Asia Ltd.
- Destiny Rescue Australia
- Diplomacy Training Program
- Door of Hope Australia Inc.
- Edmund Rice Foundation (Australia)
- Educating the Future
- Engineers Without Borders
- Every Home Global Concern
- Fairaction International Pty Ltd.
- Fairtrade Australia New Zealand
- Family Planning New South Wales
- FemiliPNG Australia
- Foresight (Overseas Aid and Prevention of Blindness)
- FreO2 Foundation Australia \*
- Global EverGreening Alliance
- Global Mission Partners
- Good Neighbours Australia Inc
- Good Return
- GraceWorks Myanmar
- Habitat for Humanity Australia
- Hagar Australia
- Health Equity Matters (formally AFAO)
- HealthServe Australia
- Hope for Children
- indigo foundation
- International Justice Mission Australia
- International Needs Australia
- International Nepal Fellowship (Aust) Ltd.
- International Women's Development Agency
- Interplast Australia & New Zealand
- Islamic Relief Australia
- KTF (Kokoda Track Foundation)
- Kyeema Foundation
- LiteHaus International
- Live & Learn Environmental Education
- Lotus Outreach Australia \*
- Love Mercy Foundation
- MAA International (Muslim Aid Australia)
- MAF International
- Mahboba's Promise Australia
- Mary MacKillop Today
- Mary Ward International Australia



- Melanie Jewson Foundation \*
- Mercy Ships Australia
- Mercy Works Ltd.
- Mission World Aid Inc.
- MIT Group Foundation
- MSI Asia Pacific
- Murdoch Children's Research Institute
- OCI Foundation \*
- Opportunity International Australia
- Orthopaedic Outreach Fund Incorporated
- Our Rainbow House
- Oxfam Australia
- Pacific Assist
- Palmera Projects
- Partners in Aid
- People With Disability Australia
- Plan International Australia
- Pollinate Group
- Project Rozana
- Quaker Service Australia
- RedR Australia
- Reledev Australia
- Rotary Australia World Community Service Ltd (RAWCS)
- Royal Australasian College of Surgeons
- Salesian Missions
- Salvation Army International Development
- Save the Children Australia
- School for Life Foundation
- SeeBeyondBorders
- ShelterBox Australia
- Sight For All
- Sisters Of The Good Samaritan Foundation (Good Sams)
- So They Can
- St John of God Outreach Services
- SurfAid International
- SUSTAIN Projects Myanmar
- Symbiosis International
- Taking Paediatrics Abroad Ltd.
- Tearfund Australia
- The Fred Hollows Foundation
- The Hunger Project Australia
- The Leprosy Mission Australia
- The Nusatenggara Association (NTA), Inc
- This Life
- Transform Aid International (incorporating Baptist World Aid)
- Transparency International Australia\*
- UNICEF Australia
- Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA
- UnitingWorld
- Water for a Village
- WaterAid Australia
- World Vision Australia
- WorldShare Australia
- WWF-Australia
- YWAM Medical Ships

### **Affiliate Members**

- Australian Global Health Alliance
- Australian National University - Development Policy Centre
- Deakin University - Centre for Humanitarian Leadership
- Global Citizen
- Institute for Economics and Peace
- La Trobe University - Institute of Human Security and Social Change
- Monash University - Monash Sustainable Development Institute
- Nossal Institute for Global Health
- Refugee Council of Australia
- RESULTS International (Australia) Inc.
- Sydney Children's Hospitals Network
- United Nations Association of Australia
- UNSW Institute of Global Development
- UTS - Institute for Sustainable Futures
- Vision 2020 Australia
- Western Sydney University- School of Social Sciences and Psychology
- Women's Plans Foundation