

Building Institutional Capacity for Conflict-Sensitive Practice: The Case of International NGOs



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International Alert is an independent non-governmental organisation that works to help build just and lasting peace in areas of violent conflict. It seeks to identify and address root causes of conflict and contribute to the creation of sustainable peace through work with partner organisations in the Great Lakes region of Africa, West Africa, Eurasia, South and South East Asia and Latin America. To complement fieldwork, International Alert undertakes research and advocacy to influence policies and practices at the national, regional and international levels that impact on conflict. International Alert seeks to act as a catalyst for change by bringing the voices and perspectives of those affected by conflict to the international arena and creating spaces for dialogue.


The Development and Peacebuilding Programme aims to promote and enable development that contributes to conflict transformation and peacebuilding. We do this through work with a wide variety of institutions, from international and local NGOs to governments, bi- and multilateral agencies and inter-governmental organisations. The programme conducts applied research and analysis of the relationship between conflict and development, formulates policy and practice recommendations and supports the implementation of and capacity-building for 'conflict sensitive' approaches in close partnership with institutions impacting development. For further details, please contact the programme manager, Andrew Sherriff, by e-mail (asherriff@international-alert.org) or by mail to:

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Foreword



This paper forms part of an on-going project on conflict-sensitive humanitarian and development practice carried out by International Alert's Development and Peacebuilding Programme. The project's aim is to strengthen the capacity of agencies working in conflict-affected areas to make a positive contribution to peacebuilding and conflict transformation by providing recommendations for better policy and practice. The project is complementary to International Alert's engagement on conflict-sensitive approaches undertaken with partners in the UK, Kenya, Uganda and Sri Lanka.¹ Each project has informed and benefited from the other, but the latter project on conflict-sensitive approaches focuses on enabling conflict-sensitive practice across the fields of development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding, while International Alert's project focuses on development and humanitarian international NGOs (INGOs), engaging more at headquarter levels. The paper is based on research, including various internal documents, and confidential interviews with policy and operational staff from 12 large NGOs involved with international development. The purpose of these interviews was to identify and share agency learning and experiences regarding mainstreaming conflict-sensitive approaches. The scope of the research as compared to the size and organisational complexity of these agencies has not allowed a comprehensive mapping of current practice across all agencies. Instead, the paper reflects and shares agencies' experiences of incorporating a focus on conflict and peace issues and evolving lessons they have learned in this process. To respect the confidentiality of the interviews, the paper shares lessons in a non-agency-specific manner, except where explicit permission has been obtained to present more in-depth cases. While the research and interviews focused on large INGOs, initial feedback indicates that many of the lessons are equally relevant to other large organisations, such as donor and multilateral agencies.

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Executive Summary

In the post-Cold War period, the nature of conflicts has changed, with conflict moving closer to civilians as combatants, victims or (perceived) supporters of one or the other faction. International development and humanitarian NGOs that seek to address the needs of civilians have become operational in more war zones than ever before and, while conflict has always been a pervasive feature of their work in many areas of the world, they have become more aware of the inevitable two-way relationship between conflict and their programmes, staff and partners. Some have developed policies and operational guidelines to support the development of conflict-sensitive programmes. But less attention has so far been paid to building institutional capacity to apply these policies and tools, despite the significant impact of broader organisational development on the ability of INGOs to mainstream conflict sensitivity. The paper focuses on organisational issues rather than wider strategic concerns or the challenges of the external environment in which agencies operate, notably the 'War on Terror'.

Mainstreaming conflict sensitivity is a strategic choice that influences – and is influenced by – the organisation's norms, power structures and practice. The key to successful mainstreaming is establishing a close link between the organisation's mandate and conflict sensitivity, whether the focus is on peacebuilding or integrated programming.

1. Conflict Sensitivity Defined

Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding – A Resource Pack, defines 'conflict sensitivity' as the capacity of an organisation to:

- Understand the (conflict) context in which it operates;
- Understand the interaction between its operations and the (conflict) context; and
- Act upon the understanding of this interaction in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on the (conflict) context and the intervention.²

INGO staff interviewed for this paper saw 'sensitivity to conflict' as being primarily about:

- The quality of policy and context analysis, including conflict analysis and analysis with partners;
- Mechanisms for applying this analysis; and
- Mechanisms for learning across programmes and across organisations.

The terminology of working 'in', 'on' or 'around' conflict is not used in this paper, despite its contribution to putting conflict and peace issues on the agenda of development actors, because it risks blurring the connections between different programmes and does not highlight the need for all activities in, on or around a conflict-affected area to be conflict-sensitive. A poorly planned reconciliation project can end up exacerbating conflict and a conflict-sensitive development project may in some cases contribute more to addressing conflict than a dialogue or reconciliation project. Perceiving 'peacebuilding' as something distinct from development work is unhelpful, because it overlooks the important contribution that development activities can make to supporting sustainable peace.

Conflict sensitivity has implications for agencies' analysis, programming and advocacy. Agencies should carry out on-going, in-depth analysis of the conflict environment, based on the

perspectives of communities themselves, and use this analysis to inform every step of the programme cycle: planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Conflict analysis should also form the basis for advocacy to influence the policy parameters of international interventions and for guidance tools to inform decisions regarding the impact of advocacy on field access and security.

2. Organisational Development Theory

Learning from the mainstreaming of other issues, such as gender, indicates that organisational development for conflict sensitivity requires more than just developing appropriate policies and tools. Wider organisational capacity building to integrate conflict sensitivity at all levels of the organisation and across all programmes is necessary. This requires clarity on the goal and the practical instruments needed to achieve it. In particular, it is necessary to tackle five key components of the mainstreaming process: commitment and motivation, organisational culture, capacity building, accountability and the external environment. Political commitment and motivation, including financial support, can contribute to strengthening a conflict-sensitive organisational culture. However, NGO organisational culture, coupled with external barriers such as funding environment and donor emphasis on implementation over reflection, is seen by some observers as creating weak incentives and rewards for learning. Capacity-building measures in the form of training, methodology development etc. need to go hand in hand with appropriate systems of accountability that give space for learning as well as opportunities to apply it. In addition to internal organisational changes, conflict sensitivity needs to be mainstreamed across other actors in the agency's external environment, including donors and partners, both of who have significant impact on the conflict sensitivity of the wider response. Without this, the impact of the efforts of individual organisations is likely to be limited.

3. Experiences and Learning

3.1 Commitment and Motivation

Agencies' motivation for conducting reviews of their work in conflict areas has both internal and external drivers. Drivers internal to the organisation include: experiences of staff on the ground who express a need for better policy and practical guidance; accountability and legitimacy concerns following specific crises (in particular Rwanda); and the increase in competition and specialisation amongst INGOs, which leads them to more explicitly articulate their mandates and expertise. External pressure from donor agencies that seek evidence of impact and effectiveness has also played a role, as has the changed ends and terms of an on-going politicisation of aid, whereby donor governments seek to use aid to further foreign-policy goals in conflict-affected countries. The most important motivating factor is, however, the link between conflict sensitivity and agency mandate and values. Faith-based agencies' emphasis on social justice and some secular agencies' focus on rights provide a rationale for engaging with conflict issues. Agencies' decisions on whether to engage in explicit peacebuilding activities should be informed by a judgement of how such activities fit their identity and aims, whether their involvement would be seen as legitimate, if they have the necessary skills and how such an involvement would impact on other work. While there is a need for senior management to ultimately buy into the mainstreaming process, it is important to engage staff on all organisational levels. This process may be particularly challenging in decentralised agencies, where there is an increased need for good cross-agency communication and strong, clear policy frameworks.

3.2 Organisational Culture(s)

An organisation's strategic approach and responsiveness to change is influenced by its culture. Many agencies experience staff resistance to mainstreaming conflict sensitivity on top of other issues that have yet to be fully integrated, and so it is important to link cross-cutting issues closely and avoid overburdening staff. As far as possible, conflict sensitivity should therefore be integrated into existing procedures and structures. The NGO sector as a whole, however, struggles with a host of disincentives to learning that hamper this integration. Some INGOs are characterised by organisational cultures that view learning as a distraction and lack the

means to analyse and make sense of large amounts of information. New technology does not necessarily solve this problem, but innovative solutions to enable learning in highly fluid contexts can be found, as evidenced by some agencies' efforts to strengthen cross-organisational and cross-regional learning. While external consultants can play an important role as facilitators of change and in providing specialist support, their input is not always adapted to the purpose and it can be easier to discredit their proposals as 'outsiders'. Agencies will therefore need to develop some capacity internally.

3.3 Capacity Building and Accountability

Individual skills and knowledge are central to achieving positive impact, including in conflict-affected areas, where social skills will be as important as technical ability, if not more so. Conflict-sensitive skills need to be included in staff training and incorporated into recruitment processes. While it will always be necessary to prioritise among different skills and types of experience, some central conflict-sensitive skills include understanding of the particular geographical area, knowledge of the relevant language(s), relationship-building and analytical skills, and the ability to deal with high stress levels. Despite recognition of the importance of contextual knowledge, few agencies interviewed include conflict- and peace-related skills in staff appraisals or reward staff for conflict-sensitive programming. Building the necessary capacity remains a problem that is exacerbated by high staff turnover and emphasis on implementation over analysis and planning. Many agencies do not consistently offer conflict-related training to either staff or partners. Though training is a low-cost mainstreaming instrument financially and poses few challenges to existing power dynamics, maximising its impact requires linking it to a wider package of measures, including structural change.

In terms of mainstreaming strategy, INGOs need to weigh the benefits and costs of establishing separate peacebuilding units versus integrating it on all levels. There is currently a worrying tendency of agencies with little or no prior experience of peacebuilding to establish separate peacebuilding programmes rather than mainstream conflict sensitivity, without reference to their development and humanitarian programming experience. This despite growing recognition that peacebuilding combined with socio-economic progress is often more effective. While establishing a central peacebuilding unit provides a clear focal point and signals commitment and priority, it risks becoming marginalised and needs to be well connected to the rest of the organisation and combined with other mechanisms for exchange and learning.

3.4 External Relationships

In addition to building internal organisational capacity, successful mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity demands conducive relationships with groups and actors that influence the conflict sensitivity of the wider response. This includes local partner organisations, donors, other INGOs, and national and international constituencies supporting the organisation. Conflict sensitivity is as much a question of inter-organisational capacity building and coordination as it is one of internal organisational development, and agencies should carry out joint analysis with other actors operating in the same or adjacent area.

Buy-in, participation and capacity of communities with whom agencies work are also of paramount importance. Conflict sensitivity requires an emphasis in partnership relations on long-term engagement and capacity building, rather than donor reporting and service delivery. While participatory approaches are already a feature of 'good development practice' in theory, achieving it on the ground is a more complex process. Heightened awareness of partners' local legitimacy and their positions in power structures and dynamics is important to avoid inadvertently supporting elements of society not committed to peaceful change. Participatory planning processes can also be used as a means of preventing conflict by enabling inter-community dialogue.

Finally, the ability of agencies to mainstream conflict sensitivity is influenced by their relationship with donors, as well as by the broader policy environment. More flexible funding modalities that enable mid-project changes and more emphasis on process and impact are necessary to enable conflict sensitivity. Donors should themselves mainstream conflict sensitivity and work in a supportive manner with implementing agencies to

promote institutional capacity building. INGOs in turn have an opportunity to seek to influence donor policies and to advocate for donor policy instruments to be sensitive to conflict.

4. Conclusion

Conflict sensitivity is as much a question of strengthened relationships between different actors operating in the same country as it is one of organisational capacity building. A recent study of peacebuilding projects of four European governments used the term 'peacebuilding palette' to describe the inter-linked areas that need to be addressed, from security to socio-economic development, a sound political framework, and justice and reconciliation mechanisms. Conflict sensitivity can strengthen development and humanitarian INGOs' contribution to longer-term peace, but cannot replace coherent and concerted engagement by other actors within this larger picture. Key considerations that should inform the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity include the following:

1. Peacebuilding should be treated as a cross-cutting issue. International Alert's experience indicates that integrating peacebuilding principles and processes into the planning and implementation of development and humanitarian programmes can be more effective than treating peacebuilding as a technical activity. Furthermore, peacebuilding activities are not guaranteed to be conflict-sensitive simply because they are termed 'peacebuilding', unless they are planned, implemented, monitored and evaluated with their intended and unintended impacts on conflict dynamics in mind.
2. Developing good, flexible indicators for assessing impact on conflict, which is a challenge faced by all agencies, would enable organisations to demonstrate the usefulness of conflict sensitivity to internal and external stakeholders. Part of the problem with assessing impact is a lack of clear strategic objectives combined with the difficulty of measuring and isolating process and impact in different contexts. Some argue that attention should be redirected to assessing impact at the strategic level. This, however, should not entirely replace project-level assessment that takes into account unintended consequences and social/political impacts and emphasises downward accountability and learning.
3. If donors are serious about strengthening the conflict-sensitive capacity of INGOs, they need to be more willing to invest in organisational development. The goal, however, should be to build development and humanitarian INGOs' capacity to do what they do in a conflict-sensitive manner, not to turn them into specialist peacebuilding agencies.
4. Conflict-sensitive development and humanitarian programmes cannot in themselves lead to sustainable peace, but need to be linked to the wider efforts of other actors. Development and humanitarian INGOs need to work closer with research, advocacy and human-rights NGOs who can offer alternative perspectives on the wider context.
5. Addressing the built-in constraints to learning in the NGO sector is not the sole responsibility of agencies themselves, but involves amongst other things reforming the funding environment. However, agencies can seek innovative ways to promote learning, such as setting up mentoring schemes and making use of simulation exercises, as well as establishing forums for cross-regional learning and databases of evaluation and lessons-learned reports.

Introduction



Violent conflict is a long-term reality for development and humanitarian work in many areas of the world. Since the end of the Cold War, conflicts have increasingly taken place within – rather than between – states, exacerbated or fuelled by regional and inter-state dynamics. In this context, civilians have moved closer to the heart of conflicts – as combatants, victims and/or as (perceived or actual) supporters of one or another faction.³ As NGOs (national and international) struggle to address human needs arising from conflict, in the process becoming operational in more war zones than ever before, they have increasingly found themselves on the frontlines.

In general, international NGOs providing humanitarian and development assistance to affected populations have become more aware of the inevitable two-way relationship between violent conflict and their programmes, staff and partners. Consequently, many agencies have in recent years begun to undertake a more structured and conscious reflection on and review of their work in conflict-affected areas. The emphasis has so far primarily been on developing conflict-analysis tools and peacebuilding and conflict-reduction policies. But there are many constraints to mainstreaming a 'conflict-sensitive' approach, which relate to broader issues of organisational learning and development (see the definition of conflict sensitivity below). There has so far been less cross-agency learning on these issues than one may have expected. This is partly due to ever-increasing competition for scarce resources and other common constraints to joint learning, and partly because of the political sensitivity of the issue. Until fairly recently, many agencies saw conscious involvement in conflict/peace issues as being outside, of limited relevance to or as a potential threat to their core mandate. While integrating a conflict and peace focus does indeed need to be carefully thought through, many agencies now recognise that there is no necessary contradiction between addressing need and incorporating a conflict-sensitive approach. In fact, the two are inextricably linked. Many such agencies have started to engage consciously, yet cautiously, with conflict and peace issues and are asking how to not only avoid negative impacts on conflict, but also contribute positively to their resolution.

At the same time, there has in recent years been a stronger emphasis on results-based management and effective learning,⁴ which reflects increasing professionalism in the NGO sector. This is also reflected in a focus on assessing impact and more explicit articulation of core organisational values. Growth in the number and income of international NGOs over the past decade and, more recently, donors' emphasis on assessing the effectiveness of aid and peacebuilding programmes have contributed to these developments.

However, there are also blockages to conflict-sensitive practice that are beyond the immediate control of agencies, such as inappropriate or inflexible funding regimes, a current global political climate dominated by the 'War on Terror', and an increasing emphasis on 'hard' (i.e. military, national) security, which undermines attention to 'soft' security issues (including social and development issues). These trends risk significantly narrowing the space for peaceful resolution of violent conflict. While acknowledging the significant challenges of this external environment, these challenges have been amply discussed elsewhere⁵ and are therefore not explored in this paper. It is outside the scope of the paper to look at wider strategic issues of how and when humanitarian, development and peacebuilding interventions occur and how or if they address the structural causes of violent conflict. Issues at the strategic level such as these have been the subjects of intense debate by other observers.⁶

In light of the often parallel reflection processes within different agencies on conflict-related issues, this paper draws out cross-agency learning on building capacity for conflict-sensitive practice based on in-depth research and interviews with policy and operational staff in 12 international NGOs. Building on International Alert's long-standing engagement with development and humanitarian agencies,⁷ the paper aims to support and strengthen processes of review and reflection within and between agencies by providing recommendations for institutional capacity building.

Conflict-sensitivity mainstreaming, however, cannot be reduced to a purely technical endeavour. Firstly, it is linked to global policy trends of seeking to use aid as a default political instrument in areas of little strategic interest to Western governments. While the use of aid for political ends is not in itself new, the ends and terms of that use have changed. Secondly, it is intimately connected to organisational political issues, as change brought on by mainstreaming will inevitably challenge existing power dynamics. This is not to argue that development and humanitarian organisations should avoid conflict sensitivity as a politically tainted or organisationally unviable concept. On the contrary, they should embark on the process of mainstreaming with their eyes open to the political and wider strategic implications. Mainstreaming a conflict-sensitive approach is ultimately a strategic choice that will – in one way or another – impact on and in turn be influenced by the organisations' norms, structures and practice on all levels. Only by being aware of the strategic reasons for and implications of this choice, if not from the outset then as the process gets underway, can organisations ensure that the different components of the process connect and contribute to better practice in conflict-affected areas. Establishing a strong link between conflict sensitivity and the organisation's mandate and engaging a wide cross-section of the organisation's members in this debate are the keys to providing focus and direction to the mainstreaming process. This includes deciding whether to focus mainly on limiting negative, unintended impacts on conflict or on explicitly addressing conflict dynamics through integrated and/or peacebuilding programming.

The basis of any mainstreaming process, whatever the subject matter, is a clear understanding of and agreement around basic concepts. Agencies define the goal differently, depending on their mandates, histories and the nature of their work. It is therefore useful to begin by outlining the core concept of 'conflict sensitivity' in chapter one. Chapter two then summarises some useful learning drawn from organisational development theory. Lessons from gender mainstreaming are included throughout chapter three, which provides a synthesis of agency learning and experiences regarding mainstreaming a conflict-sensitive approach. It is important to note that all the agencies interviewed are large and complex organisations. This paper therefore does not attempt a comprehensive mapping, but draws on learning from individual field and policy staff members whose views and experiences may or may not reflect those of their organisation as a whole. Also, what is right for one organisation in terms of mainstreaming conflict sensitivity may be wrong for another. Chapter three builds on learning drawn from the 12 interviewed agencies to provide recommendations for conflict-sensitivity mainstreaming in relation to four key areas:

1. Commitment and motivation;
2. Organisational culture(s);
3. Capacity building and accountability; and
4. External relationships.

Chapter four sums up key considerations that should inform conflict-sensitivity mainstreaming.

CHAPTER 1: Conflict Sensitivity Defined



The recent increase in the number of agencies undertaking comprehensive reviews of their work in countries affected by conflict is driven in part by changing funding climates, with donors increasingly seeking evidence of impact and prioritising ‘integrated responses’.⁸ However, the agencies interviewed for this paper also stressed hard-learned lessons from interventions in places such as Rwanda, Kosovo and Somalia, and growing recognition of their potential to contribute to conflict transformation and peacebuilding in a way that facilitates the achievement of their core mandates.⁹ It is clear, however, that realising this potential requires both advocating for changes to the often conflict-blind political frameworks that define the overall parameters of agencies’ work and systematic incorporation of conflict sensitivity into agencies’ **entire** programming cycle – from analysis and planning to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. These are all integral and complementary parts of a conflict-sensitive approach that enables agencies to support community-level peacebuilding in countries affected by conflict.

Drawing on *Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding – A Resource Pack*, produced by the Forum for Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER), Saferworld, International Alert, the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CECORE) in Uganda, Africa Peace Forum (APFO) in Kenya and the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) in Sri Lanka,¹⁰ ‘conflict sensitivity’ is here defined as the capacity of an organisation to:

- Understand the (conflict) context in which it operates;
- Understand the interaction between its operations and the (conflict) context; and
- Act upon the understanding of this interaction in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on the (conflict) context and the intervention.

Agency staff interviewed for this paper saw ‘sensitivity to conflict’ as being less about making huge changes to what their agency does and more about describing and thinking about programmes differently, i.e. as a question of mind-set and lens. ‘Sensitivity’ to conflict dynamics was felt to be primarily about:

- The quality of policy and context analysis, including conflict analysis and analysis with partners;
- Mechanisms for applying this analysis; and
- Mechanisms for learning across programmes and across organisations.

The implications of conflict sensitivity for the way one uses the terms working ‘in’, ‘on’ or ‘around’ conflict are outlined in box 1, below.

BOX 1. CONFLICT SENSITIVITY AND WORKING 'IN', 'ON' OR 'AROUND' CONFLICT

Many agencies use the terminology of working 'in', 'on' and 'around' conflict. Drawing on Goodhand and Atkinson (2001), working 'around' conflict is most often used to mean avoiding the issue of conflict or treating it as a negative externality. Working 'in' conflict is usually described as recognising the need to be more sensitive to conflict and adjusting programmes and policies accordingly, while working 'on' conflict entails (re)focusing programmes to address root causes of conflict.¹¹ This terminology has contributed to a stronger focus on the inter-linkages between aid and conflict and has in this way helped thinking around these issues to progress. However, we avoid using the terms in this paper because they blur the strong connections among different types of programmes. The terms also do not highlight the fact that **all** activities that are carried out in a conflict-affected area, whether they are described as taking place in, on or around conflict, need to be sensitive to conflict, including explicit 'peacebuilding' activities. In some cases, a more traditional development project that is carried out in a conflict-sensitive manner may contribute more to addressing conflict than a reconciliation or dialogue project. Conversely, a poorly planned reconciliation project can end up exacerbating conflict. Agencies can seek to address conflict through conflict-sensitive relief, reconstruction and/or development programmes that address key structural conflict issues identified through a comprehensive assessment or through explicit conflict-resolution and peacebuilding programmes. Different agencies, however, will emphasise different ways of addressing conflict. Some perceive 'peacebuilding projects' to be distinct from their development work. This way of thinking is unhelpful, as agencies run the risk of overlooking the very important contribution that development activities can make to supporting sustainable peace. Introducing the term 'conflict sensitivity' draws attention to this contribution and the importance of seeing and treating conflict sensitivity as a cross-cutting lens that applies to every activity in, on or around a conflict-affected area, including peacebuilding programmes.

The implications of conflict sensitivity for agencies' analysis, programming and advocacy are outlined below.

1.1 Conflict Analysis

There is broad agreement amongst agencies that aid programmes cannot be properly designed nor effectively delivered without an understanding of their context.¹² Where the situation is characterised by latent or overt conflict, this requires on-going analysis of the conflict environment, namely the actors, profile and causes of the conflict and the dynamic among these.¹³ This should be shared analysis, involving local community perspectives, as well as those of donor agencies, other INGOs and other stakeholders. Conflict analysis can be used to inform programme planning and implementation or it can be an integral part of the conflict-transformation process, providing a framework for communities to think about joint problems and solutions. Different types of organisations will use conflict analysis in different ways, according to their aims.

Conflict analysis goes beyond determining levels and patterns of violence; defining conflict actors, their areas of influence and control; and the structural vulnerability of legitimate governance mechanisms. It is important that donors and international NGOs also have a common understanding of the sources of tension and conflict that prompt different groups to use violence to promote and protect their interests. The relationship of a broad cross-section of actors (not just combatants) to underlying themes like governance and power, the economy, human security and social/cultural identity is an essential factor in that understanding.¹⁴ The central elements of a conflict analysis are the political and socio-economic profile of the conflict; the goals, interests and capacities of the conflict's actors; the (structural and proximate) causes of conflict; and its dynamic history and pattern, i.e. the interaction among actors, profile and causes.¹⁵

However, adequate conflict analysis takes time. Where diverse political considerations are at play and the media play a crucial role in creating public awareness of a crisis, donors may feel an overriding need to be seen to act swiftly. This can prevent their carrying out adequate analysis of conflict dynamics before large-scale humanitarian assistance is launched. However, in some cases, such as in Sudan, Liberia and the

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), more or less 'permanent emergencies' exist and agencies do have a long-term presence, which allows for carrying out comprehensive conflict analyses. As conflicts are dynamic and fast-changing, analysis should be an **on-going** feature of all external aid interventions, informing the planning and (re)adjustment of programmes.

BOX 2. KEY POINTS ON CONFLICT ANALYSIS

Conflict analysis is the core of conflict-sensitive programming and includes:

- In-depth analysis of the conflict environment (actors, profile, causes and dynamics), informed by the perspectives of the communities themselves. This is a delicate process that requires high sensitivity to traumas and on-going grievances of the affected population;
- On-going mapping and (re)analysis of the conflict as the programme unfolds. This includes awareness of linkages among community, national, regional and international levels of conflict; and
- Ensuring that the knowledge gained from this analysis informs the different steps of the programme, from planning to implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

1.2 The Programme Cycle

Having analysed the conflict environment, agencies can situate their country (and regional) strategies and project/programme(s) within the analysis and assess the estimated impact on conflict dynamics and vice versa. This enables staff to identify areas where the risk of increased violence is greatest, to see how they may prevent fuelling any further tension and to identify opportunities to contribute to reconciliation and peace objectives. Importantly, this type of assessment addresses the wider political reality and is not limited to identifying actors and activities that have a direct influence on conflict dynamics ('connectors' and 'dividers' in the terminology of Do No Harm¹⁶).

Conflict analysis and assessment tools should be used as programmatic tools throughout the programme cycle, including monitoring and evaluating impact on conflict in order to (re)design projects. Furthermore, this monitoring and evaluation process can contribute to enhancing the transparency of aid programming and strengthening downward and upward accountability. Aside from applying common better-practice principles,¹⁷ conflict-sensitive monitoring and evaluation are characterised by an explicit articulation of the link between the goals and implementation of the programme and the two-way effect on the wider conflict environment. The emphasis is on understanding the context as it changes over time and measuring the interaction between the project and the context.¹⁸ This is more process-focused than classical achievement (input/output) methodologies. Furthermore, it has an empowering potential because it can be used as an accountability tool by Southern civil society organisations as part of capacity building in management and advocacy.¹⁹ Recommendations arising from conflict-sensitive monitoring and evaluation may challenge an organisation's understanding of what constitutes 'success' and require it to think differently about how it measures impact.²⁰ This highlights the need to link changes in programme-cycle management to institutional capacity building for conflict sensitivity.

BOX 3. KEY POINTS ON CONFLICT-SENSITIVE PROGRAMMING²¹

The aim of conflict-sensitive **planning** is explicitly and continuously to link information on the programme to the conflict environment by, for example:

- Incorporating peacebuilding and conflict-transformation principles into agencies' strategic policies;
- Linking conflict analysis with the objectives of the project in the project design;
- Ensuring all planning processes themselves are conflict-sensitive; and
- Sacrificing some speed of delivery to ensure adequate conflict-sensitive planning.

Conflict-sensitive **implementation** involves:

- Using conflict-sensitive tools and methodologies;
- Investing in developing, disseminating and providing training in these;
- Hiring specialist, experienced and trained conflict advisors to support field and HQ staff;
- Cooperating closely with local partners in identifying and addressing conflict dynamics; and
- Anticipating changing dynamics and developing contingency plans.

Key principles for conflict-sensitive **monitoring and evaluation** include:

- Monitoring and evaluating programmes according to their impact on conflict and peace and vice versa;
- Setting flexible indicators that cover the process and outcomes of the programme as well as its outputs; and
- Conducting joint monitoring and evaluation with local partners and communities.

1.3 Advocacy

Agencies have a wide range of advocacy roles to play that may contribute to creating an environment where peacebuilding is possible. Development and humanitarian organisations that analyse conflict can provide a first-hand understanding of the causes of suffering and a valuable perspective on what works in terms of remedying those causes. They are therefore well-positioned to seek to influence the design of appropriate responses by other actors.²² While public advocacy may pose very real risks in terms of negative effects on staff security and access, in-depth awareness of the conflict dynamics can help agencies determine how to carry out advocacy in a way that is most likely to have positive consequences for the situation on the ground. Advocating on issues relating to conflict may be particularly difficult for individual agencies. Therefore, groups of agencies can come together to support advocacy on critical grassroots conflict issues, which may be more problematic for individual agencies to address on their own.²³ The use of 'indirect' advocacy – bringing conflict issues to the attention of other agencies that have the mandate, network and contacts with relevant policymakers – is another way of discreetly seeking to influence change while minimising risks.

Many agencies are increasingly engaging in advocacy and some have developed guidance tools to minimise negative impacts of their policy and advocacy activities on the security of their staff on the ground.²⁴ Grounded advocacy, in the form of convincing policy messages based on on-going conflict analysis carried out with local partners, is also a valid response to the trend towards increasingly politicised bilateral funding of aid agencies.²⁵

BOX 4. KEY POINTS ON CONFLICT-SENSITIVE ADVOCACY

Conflict-sensitive advocacy seeks a positive impact on peacebuilding by feeding lessons learned back into national, regional and international policy-making forums. Key principles include:

- Prioritising advocacy aimed at influencing the policy parameters for international interventions and at addressing underlying and proximate causes of conflict;
- Basing advocacy efforts on conflict analysis carried out with local communities and partners;
- Using guidance tools based on this analysis to inform decisions regarding the impact of policy and advocacy activities on staff security or access, partners and communities; and
- Building the advocacy capacity of local partners.

Chapter 2: Organisational-Development Theory

Progress in conflict-sensitive planning and programming, like all forms of organisational development, requires investment in building capacity beyond tools and policy frameworks. While policies and tools are important drivers for mainstreaming conflict sensitivity, their use is often blocked by a number of internal organisational constraints.²⁶ 'Conflict-sensitivity mainstreaming' is a comprehensive, yet incremental process of integrating sensitivity to conflict throughout the entire programming cycle at all levels of the organisation and across **all** programmes. This includes programming from five-year organisational plans to one-to-two-year country strategies etc. It covers both 'traditional' humanitarian and development programmes in conflict-affected areas, integrated conflict transformation/development programmes and peacebuilding projects. As such, it is a long-term and ultimately time- and resource-consuming process.

Basic requirements for successful mainstreaming are, firstly, clarity on the goal, i.e. a clear policy with clearly formulated concepts and strong organisational commitment, and secondly, clarity on how to achieve this, i.e. practical instruments.²⁷ The internal blockages facing conflict-sensitivity mainstreaming are reminiscent of the challenges of mainstreaming an environmental or gender-sensitive approach. As with gender, mainstreaming conflict sensitivity is a profoundly political process in an organisation, because it challenges existing authority and resource allocations, structures, cultures and norms.²⁸ On another level, both conflict-sensitive and gender frameworks should be seen as means to long-lasting transformation and, as such, should not be treated as purely technical frameworks.²⁹ Five key components of mainstreaming can be identified:

1. Commitment and motivation;
2. Organisational culture;
3. Capacity building;
4. Accountability;³⁰ and
5. External environment.

The mobilisation of **commitment** based on strong **motivation** is an indispensable driving force. This includes leadership support, the development of conflict-sensitive policies, putting appropriate decision-making systems/structures in place and committing staff time and financial resources that contribute to strengthening a conflict-sensitive **organisational culture**. In most of the agencies interviewed for this paper, however, this is not purely a top-down process, as leadership commitment is informed by lessons from past and current engagements in conflict-affected areas and influenced by the awareness-raising efforts of committed staff. Indeed, cross-organisational buy-in, participation and ownership are prerequisites for a conflict-sensitive organisational culture to take hold and expand.

Mainstreaming a conflict-sensitive approach also necessitates maintaining open communication channels on and between all levels of the organisation and facilitating the flow of knowledge and learning. This poses particular problems for the NGO sector, where external and internal environments are often averse to efficient learning.³¹ Some observers have gone so far as to diagnose the organisational culture of humanitarian organisations as defensive and disillusioned and consequently as an impediment to both learning and innovation.³² Edwards has identified some of the

main internal barriers to organisational learning in NGOs, including the following:

- Weak incentives and rewards for learning, as part of a 'risk-averse' culture, lead to defensiveness and a tendency to disguise and punish failures. Job insecurity and short-term contracts also make staff less amenable to learning.
- Inability to deal with learning that threatens consensus or short-term institutional interests is a problem common to all large bureaucracies.
- Project 'tunnel vision' impedes learning and discourages experimentation.
- The activist culture of many NGOs sees learning as a costly and unnecessary 'extra' that distracts attention from the 'real' work.³³

In addition, the inherent difficulty of measuring 'impact' and organisational performance in the field of development work (particularly in relation to conflict/peace impact) makes it difficult for organisations to recognise the relevant lessons to be learned.³⁴ The attitude of senior management also has significant bearing on the value an organisation attaches to learning. Overcoming internal barriers to learning involves addressing both personal and psychological barriers, identifying the benefits of learning to the organisation and assessing the organisation's learning capacities.³⁵ However, it is important to note that there are also significant external barriers, such as competition for funding, low donor prioritisation of learning and pressure to keep overheads to a minimum.

As the process of organisational change gathers momentum, there is a need for **capacity-building** measures, including tool/methodology development, staff training and adoption of conflict-sensitive evaluation mechanisms and procedures. Managing this organisational-change process necessitates strong systems of **accountability**, in particular appropriate appraisal and incentives systems that encourage conflict-sensitive planning and programming and balance individual accountability with the need for learning. This includes documenting and disseminating better practice and rewarding progress to create a positive energy for moving forward.³⁶ Recognising the impact of agencies' external relationships (with donors, partners and communities) on mainstreaming processes, a fifth component to be explored is the **external environment** within which agencies implement their policies and approaches. Organisational development requires authority, resources (both human and financial) and an enabling environment.³⁷ This 'enabling environment' is of key importance and the change process will be affected by external factors such as the domestic and international policy environments, funding constraints and partnership relations. The up- and downstreaming of conflict sensitivity to other actors is necessary to strengthen the conflict sensitivity of the wider development and humanitarian response.

Although any successful mainstreaming process would address, to some degree, all of these components, the characteristics and dynamics of change will vary according to the mandate, history and *modus operandi* of a particular agency. For example, different founding principles, societal norms, external relationships and internal integration mechanisms will all influence agencies' organisational cultures.³⁸ However, more than any one stage in the change process, what matters is how they come together. For example, putting in place a sophisticated planning system will not make an organisation conflict-sensitive unless staff and partners applying the tool feel ownership of it, know how to use it and are given support to do so.³⁹

The following chapter summarises agencies' experiences and learning from on-going mainstreaming processes with regard to commitment and motivation, organisational culture, capacity building and accountability, and the external environment. Based on these experiences, recommendations for the mainstreaming of conflict-sensitive approaches are provided.

Chapter 3: Experiences and Learning

While studying other mainstreaming processes, such as mainstreaming gender awareness, can provide valuable general learning, conflict sensitivity poses very distinct challenges, due to the complexities and sensitivities of the relationship between relief/development and conflict resolution/peacebuilding.⁴⁰ International political developments such as the 'War on Terror' have only strengthened the sense of complexity.⁴¹ However, as an increasing number of agencies undertake internal reviews and evaluations of programmes in conflict-affected areas, the need for – and indeed availability of – shared lessons becomes more keenly felt. Based on interviews and research, this chapter synthesises and shares experiences and learning regarding developing organisational capacity for conflict sensitivity. The mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity is very much an on-going effort, so the lessons discussed here are not final, but reflect the evolving and dynamic collective experience of a broad cross-section of multi-mandated INGOs.

3.1 Commitment and Motivation

Mobilising commitment to organisational change is critical. While organisational commitment is often tentative at first and may develop in an incremental manner as the benefits of a conflict-sensitive approach are revealed, it will eventually need to be made explicit to justify resource allocations and structural changes. Most of the agencies interviewed for this paper have conducted their own different forms of review. These have in some cases strengthened the organisational commitment to developing policies, tools, staff-training programmes etc. for programming in conflict-affected areas. Reflecting on the origin and drive of this process, interviewees mentioned a combination of interrelated internal and external drivers. Internal organisational drivers typically include the following:

- Accountability and legitimacy concerns prompted by the experiences of agencies in conflict-affected areas (for example, Rwanda) and further fuelled by external public pressure and negative media coverage;
- Experiences and concerns of field staff who face the daily pressures and challenges of planning and implementing programmes in areas affected by conflict and who express a need for better policy and practical guidance; and
- An increase in INGO competition and specialisation, which makes it necessary for agencies to be more explicit about their expertise and profile – including on conflict-related matters – than they have been in the past.

The primary external driver for agencies' efforts to review their work in conflict-areas is increasing donor concerns about (and funding to explore) the impact and effectiveness of aid in general and in conflict-affected areas in particular. While donors' motivation for this no doubt varies greatly, it reflects both an effort to improve taxpayer accountability (particularly following public pressures in the wake of the Rwandan refugee crisis) and a genuine wish to contribute most effectively to peace and development in conflict-affected areas. However, this external driver is also connected to a general trend towards the 'politicisation of aid', with donor governments increasingly seek to use aid as a foreign policy tool in countries where there is insufficient political will to respond.⁴² While the use of aid for political ends is in itself not a recent phenomenon, the particular ends and terms of this politicisation have changed. However, internal drivers were clearly felt by most interviewees to have had a more decisive impact on agencies' motivations than changing donor policies.

A key factor in generating political will and motivation is linking conflict sensitivity to the agency's mandate and values. For example, an agency that focuses on short-term relief, emphasising traditional humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality, may find it more difficult to incorporate analysis of conflict dynamics in programming. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), for example, uses advocacy (*'témoignage'*) to raise awareness of causes of human suffering, which is a very politically sensitive process, but its classical humanitarian ethos means that formalised analysis of conflict and political issues generally does not inform actual **operational** programming.⁴³ Looking at the compatibility of mandates and vision with a focus on conflict, distinct differences appear between Christian and secular approaches. Religiously grounded social-justice norms form part of the mandate and vision of many Christian agencies. Such norms, which emphasise equality, freedom and peace, provide a natural in-road for these organisations to see peace and conflict issues as part of their mandates. One interviewee argued that Christian staff would also be likely to identify personally with the social-justice approach. While no Islamic relief or development agency was interviewed for this paper, it is likely that religious-justice norms would also influence Islamic organisations' view and treatment of conflict and peace issues. Not unsurprisingly, secular agencies tend to view conflict sensitivity as more of an extension of a commitment to human rights and a rights-based approach to international humanitarian law.⁴⁴ This tallies with experience from the gender field, as gender-sensitive approaches have often been integrated in agency policy via rights-based frameworks, for example in Oxfam.⁴⁵ Box 5, below, provides an example of how ActionAid has sought to integrate a conflict resolution/peacebuilding approach in a rights-based framework.

BOX 5. ACTIONAID'S CONFLICT REVIEW

ActionAid's (AA) conflict work focuses mainly on the thematic areas of youth and education, the role of women, traditional authority and communication in relation to peacebuilding. With the introduction of a rights-based approach in 1999, a policy workshop on conflict and humanitarian issues in 2000, in which nine AA country members participated, helped to clarify country-specific policy/advocacy objectives and to identify national, regional and international partners.

By 2003, while significant lessons had been learned from field engagements, there had been no in-depth cross-organisational discussion of AA's conflict work or incorporation of new approaches and issues, and it was felt that there was a need to review the link between conflict work and a rights-based approach. In addition, marked differences between approaches in Africa, focusing on community-based peacebuilding, and other areas, including South Asia, were noted. Consequently, a process was set in motion to review and clarify AA policy and strategy on conflict. A collation of AA's experiences in conflict was put together, and an external consultant was hired to prepare a concept paper and an outline conflict-analysis framework. This framework draws on the Department for International Development's (DFID) strategic conflict-assessment methodology and links AA's conflict approach with its policies and ethos, i.e. a rights-based, gender-sensitive, decentralised, people-centred and participatory approach. The concept of 'human security' was chosen as a way of integrating conflict into AA (rights-based) strategy, and a workshop was held that brought together AA staff from around the world. The review and workshop was the start of a process that will lead to an AA policy and strategy on conflict,⁴⁶ allowing the organisation to base its conflict work on a comprehensive understanding of conflict in a country, linking the local level with the national, regional and international levels.⁴⁷

Linking conflict sensitivity to an agency's mandate requires developing an organisational understanding of the differences and links between development and conflict transformation, peacebuilding etc. Some agencies will be involved in development-oriented and dialogue/reconciliation programmes simultaneously, sometimes in the same

geographical context. Where this is the case, the agency needs to ensure that the relationship between these programmes is explicitly articulated and linked to a clear overall country and regional strategy. As one interviewee stated: 'Working in conflict-affected areas does not necessarily mean you are doing conflict resolution, nor do you necessarily have to do conflict resolution in conflict-affected areas.' A number of the interviewees felt that their organisation had a poor understanding of this distinction. At the same time, it was felt that integrating lessons from peacebuilding and conflict resolution into other areas of work, and internally, is crucial, as 'Peacebuilding work cannot be isolated from other work ... it has implications for how the whole organisation works, including how it treats staff and deals with internal conflict.'⁴⁸ Agencies need to find an understanding of the relationship between development and peacebuilding that is both informed by their experiences on the ground and that suits their organisational culture, mandate and *modus operandi*. Some questions to consider when deciding whether to engage in explicit peacebuilding activities would include the following.

- *Founding values/principles and mandate*: Does it fit our identity and overarching aims?
- *Partner relations and in-country working relationships*: Would our involvement be seen to be legitimate (as well as fulfilling needs)?
- *Skills and expertise*: Are we qualified (skills, experience, niche) to work on peacebuilding? Or could we perhaps contribute more through partnerships with 'specialised' agencies and integrating sensitivity to conflict in our development programmes?
- *Impact on other work*: Would an involvement in explicit peacebuilding activities compromise our other work in the same area? How can the one support the other?

Another recurrent issue is achieving both sufficient management support for the process, without which necessary resources (time and funds) will not be committed, and adequate buy-in and involvement from a critical mass of staff on all organisational levels. In addition, the agency needs buy-in from partners, without whom policies and strategies will not be implemented, invested resources may be wasted and the agency's own conflict sensitivity may be undermined.

In most agencies interviewed for this paper, field and programme staff, i.e. those who are closest to the work on the ground, are driving the process more than senior management. This is not surprising, as senior management usually have multiple roles and tend to focus more on broad questions of impact, income and overall performance. In some cases, misunderstanding of conflict sensitivity by senior management leads them to believe that it may create heightened levels of risk. However, there are also instances where strong senior-management push, sometimes motivated by the perceived potential for organisational growth, comes up against resistance from the field. Mainstreaming conflict sensitivity is only possible where people on several different levels of an organisation provide the driving force, from top to bottom. This is of even greater importance in large, decentralised agencies. While senior management will ultimately need to buy into the process, in the absence of initial higher-level support, 'internal advocates' for conflict sensitivity can use their particular forms and levels of leverage to slowly build organisational commitment.

Some of the agencies interviewed for this paper are simultaneously engaged in policy review and formulation regarding conflict, and going through a comprehensive decentralisation process. While experience shows that decentralisation has both high costs and high returns, reconciling it with mainstreaming is particularly challenging, because a frequent drawback of decentralisation is lack of integration and coordination.⁴⁹ A comprehensive exploration of these complex issues, which has been provided by others,⁵⁰ is beyond the scope of this paper. But some very general tips on how to make decentralisation work for conflict-sensitivity mainstreaming include:

- Ensuring good cross-agency communications (both face-to-face and electronic) and improving two-way information flows and mechanisms for learning, disseminating knowledge and implementing lessons learned;
- Providing field staff with headquarter counterparts to strengthen institutional identity and facilitate access to services and exchange of information; and
- Establishing a clear policy framework, a strong centre and an appropriate human-resource management system.⁵¹

Key Points

Recommendations for building political will and cross-agency commitment based on the above lessons and experiences include the following points.

- ▶ Ensure staff ownership through engaging in a participatory and consultative internal review process to inform adoption or change in conflict policies and methodologies.
- ▶ Involve a cross-section of headquarter and field staff as well as local partners in the testing and piloting of any methodologies/tools and ensure that everyone involved can easily provide comments and insights.
- ▶ Clarify the relative emphasis on conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding in policies and strategies. Some agencies will be involved in both peacebuilding and development programming simultaneously, sometimes in the same geographical context. They need to ensure that the relationship between these programmes is explicitly articulated and linked to the overall country and regional strategy.

3.2 Organisational Culture(s)

A firm link between organisational mandate/ethos and conflict sensitivity underpins and strengthens organisational commitment to mainstreaming and provides a basis for necessary changes to organisational culture(s) and structures. Organisational cultures (and sub-cultures) are influenced by a number of things, including:

- Founding principles;
- (Remembered) history and symbolism that socialise staff, build loyalty and legitimise practice;
- Institutionalised arrangements and structures; and
- Social structures, i.e. formal and informal relations.

Organisational culture(s) and norms provide a lens that influences strategic choices⁵² and contribute to determining an organisation's responsiveness to change. Organisational culture usually only changes very slowly and it is often difficult to demonstrate immediate impact. Lack of demonstrable impact can frustrate those within an organisation advocating for change and for resources to enable it. Many agencies also experience staff resistance to new issues being mainstreamed on top of older ones, such as gender and rights. In some cases, staffs do not feel that they have had time to absorb the policies and frameworks of previous cross-cutting initiatives, and so conflict sensitivity risks being seen as just one more thing to mainstream, rather than simplifying existing procedures. Box 6, below, outlines key points on organisational culture based on a review of CARE's conflict work.

BOX 6. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE IN CARE

In early 2003, CARE commissioned a global review of its work in conflict-affected environments with a view to assisting in its policy development and improving its programmes. The review was motivated by a number of factors, including a strong interest from field staff; demand for technical support; a lack of clear institutional mechanisms for learning from experiences in conflict-affected countries; developments in the wider NGO field, with agencies beginning to hire conflict advisors etc.; and changing donor policies and institutions. Amongst other things, the review found a strong resistance from field staff to 'yet another' initiative being rolled out on top of previous ones that were still being processed. This indicated a need to tread softly and to introduce peacebuilding and conflict transformation step-by-step, identifying opportunities for integrating them into the organisation's on-going activities. The report's recommendations for organisational development on conflict are informed by staff perceptions of CARE's organisational culture. For example, it recommends cooperating more with other agencies rather than attempting to develop in-house expertise on every issue, which is consistent with CARE's current emphasis on partnerships and the adoption of a more outward-looking and collaborative organisational culture.



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