

Guidance: conflict sensitivity interactions typology

The problem

Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities in countries affected by violent conflict impact the dynamics underpinning such conflict. It can do so either positively, addressing some issues that sustain conflict, or negatively, exacerbating its drivers. Nowadays, the interaction between programming and violent conflicts is widely accepted in the sector, but the problem of recognising this interaction remains. How can we identify how our work interacts with complex social, economic, political and historical dynamics that drive violent conflicts? PCI's experience doing this kind of assessments led us to develop the Conflict Sensitivity Interactions Typology.

What does this tool do?

This tool is designed to be used hand in hand with the **Conflict Sensitivity Matrix** to facilitate the identification of how your activities and programmes may affect the peace and conflict context where they take place. The Interactions Typology was elaborated drawing from Mary Anderson's **Do No Harm** book, and proposes eleven ways in which aid activities and peace and conflict context may interact, either positively or negatively. The list of possible interactions is not exhaustive, and the identification of possible risks and opportunities should not be limited to the typology. The typology is intended to facilitate the discussion, not limit it.

When to use this tool

The Conflict Sensitivity Interaction Typology tool serves as a guide for brainstorming or discussions

and may be used at any stage of programming. We suggest undertaking a comprehensive review in the design and inception phase of programmes, filling out a **conflict sensitivity matrix** and then updating it periodically throughout the project cycle.

How to use the tool

Read each interaction type and its description, then reflect on your activities and the stakeholders involved. Do you think the interaction could materialise in your case? We suggest to use PCI's **Conflict Sensitivity Matrix** to note down these interactions and think about the adaptations and monitoring strategies. This could be done during a regular team meeting, or in a workshop specific to this purpose.

The interaction

Distribution effect

Groups in conflict may perceive that the benefits of an activity are distributed differently between groups, in accordance with existing social, political or economic divisions or tensions. The benefits are both tangible and intangible. They can be material goods but also jobs, training opportunities, contracts or grants allocated to one group rather than another. These benefits may be a consequence of where infrastructures are built or where activities take place, who can access them and who is excluded.

Distribution effects may feed into pre-existing identities, inter-communal relations, and/or gender dynamics, strengthening existing inequalities, social tensions and political divisions. Distribution effects can reduce tensions between groups when activities are delivered in a collaborative manner, or where stakeholders that may be in conflict are encouraged to collaborate on common objectives.

We suggest carefully monitoring groups' perceptions towards your intervention, adapting the distribution based on the needs of the population and clearly communicating the criteria for the selection of beneficiaries.

After the occupation in Iraq, many NGOs in the West directed support to Christian communities in the north-west of the country with the aim of addressing actual and perceived historic marginalisation of those communities. While well-meaning, the impact of this was that Christian communities received significantly more assistance than other communities in the area. This led to tangible increases in inter-communal tension which periodically broke out into violence.

In Kenya, capacity-enhancing support provided solely to women without buy-in from the communities where the support takes place has at times been perceived by men as an external attempt to alter 'traditional' gender roles and, as a result, men have felt left out and disempowered. This undermined the legitimacy and reputation of the programmes and caused backlashes against women.

Recognition effect

Working with, or alongside, actors can give status, recognition and perceived legitimacy to those actors. In particular, working with or through authorities who are non-representative and non-inclusive, apply violent and exclusionary approaches, and/or promote restrictive or repressive gender norms, may empower such actors, excluding those who are already marginalised and are not part of patronage networks. This can give the impression that assistance providers support such approaches, exacerbating perceptions of marginalisation. Some actors may leverage support from the international community to increase their visibility and bolster their positions and influence.

On the other hand, working with actors based on the degree to which they operate in accordance with

defined political, administrative and legal processes and/or promote inclusive approaches and gender equality can strengthen the idea of peaceful political processes, the rule of law and equality amongst all societal groups. Aid activities may strengthen the position of inclusive, democratic and peaceful stakeholders.

Assistance providers should thoroughly understand the dynamics of the stakeholders present in the contexts where they operate: the power relations amongst them, as well as the perceptions of residents towards these stakeholders. When assistance providers need to cooperate with non-representative or illegitimate actors, they could clearly communicate the need to try to decrease their visibility or take other similar measures.

In Libya, there are currently two contested governments: an east-based government and a west-based government. While the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) recognises security actors in the east and other authorities, it does not recognise the east-based government. This lack of recognition deepened divisions and hindered peace processes attempted by UNSMIL because all east-based authorities would reject any dialogue initiatives due to their exclusion of the east-based government.

In Libya, community-led conflict management bodies called 'Social Peace Partnerships' (SPP) are supported to develop an approach to enabling women's participation in the SPP and their taking on roles in the political and civic sphere. By making it a mission of the whole SPP, men contribute to facilitating the process of gaining acceptance for women to step into a traditionally male-dominated space. Although this does not translate directly to meaningful influence for women, the recognition the women receive supports them to take that space while mitigating the risk of backlash, as politically and civically active women are often subjected to gender-based political violence and harassment.

Capacity effect

The way activities are delivered may affect existing structures or capacities for peace. The creation of new structures that lack local ownership or legitimacy may substitute and weaken existing structures. Such delivery may impact how state and non-state institutions function and/or relate to one another. Weak state institutions may be made weaker when basic services are delivered through NGOs, international agencies or other assistance providers rather than by those institutions themselves.

Assistance or services delivered through state institutions may make them more capable, affecting the existing power relationships between them and others, strengthening their capacity to deliver services in a responsive, gender-sensitive and inclusive manner, and ultimately contributing to consolidating the social contract between government institutions and citizens.

To manage the capacity effect, assistance providers should identify opportunities to leverage existing initiatives, networks, and knowledge. They should refrain from offering financial support to actors involved in illicit activities, human rights violations, and violence. In cases where assistance providers must engage with these actors due to their positions, they should prioritise raising awareness and conducting capacity-building activities that do not contribute to increasing their power or financial resources.

In Mozambique, the creation of peace committees by I/NGOs is sometimes replacing and weakening initiatives taking place at the grassroots level. These new committees exist alongside numerous other externally-imposed committees, leading to 'aid fatigue' in communities and undermining the peacebuilding effects of these initiatives.

In Libya, community-led conflict management bodies called 'Social Peace Partnerships' have often worked to support local government authorities to fill gaps in service delivery or to promote more inclusive and participatory models of decision making, conflict man-

agement and local governance. Cognisant of this risk, support from the Social Peace Partnerships was provided in a way that did not undermine Municipalities, but rather strengthened their role. This was achieved by ensuring that the mayor or members of the Municipality were part of the Partnership, clearly communicating respective roles and responsibilities to the public, and ensuring that Municipalities were encouraged (and were seen by communities) to contribute to the best of their capacity to solving the issues identified. Similarly, existing traditional bodies, such as Elders and the Shura Council, and local civil society organisations were brought in as members of the Partnerships; this ensured that their influence and social role were used advantageously, rather than undermined.

Economic market effect

Activities may affect economic markets by changing economic fundamentals, affecting supply streams, creating new markets, undermining existing ones. They may overwhelm local markets with goods, such as food aid, undermining the viability of licit economic activity and encouraging actors to engage in illicit activities which may be linked to conflict. On the other hand, activities could strengthen the local economy, either directly or indirectly, by supporting local businesses. This can contribute positively to economic stability and development, which can be conducive to peace. They may also build economic supply chains across conflict lines, encouraging positive economic interdependency. In conflict-affected areas, even smaller programmes or programmes not focused on economics (i.e. dialogue activities, trainings) should consider the potential consequences for the local economy. Hiring locally, trying to work with local companies and local partners, is often a good way to mitigate the risk.

The aid industry in northern Mozambique is highly dependent on the south of the country. Many of the national NGOs are based in the capital, Maputo – thousands of kilometres from where the aid is delivered – and many of the aid workers hired by international NGOs are from the south. This dynamic reinforces the inequalities between north and south: one of the rooted drivers of the violent conflict.

Theft effect

In conflict-affected environments characterised by the proliferation of armed groups and a lack of accountability, powerful actors may resort to stealing assistance for their own benefit. This often occurs with valuable assets such as machinery or trucks, which could be stolen by armed groups or other actors and politicians. These assets may be sold to bolster financial resources, thereby increasing the power and influence of the actors involved. Some people or groups, such as women-led households and marginalised groups, may be more vulnerable to theft and violence than others, and assistance actors need to consider this when delivering goods.

Although mitigating the theft effect directly may be challenging, assistance providers can work closely with local actors to understand the security situation and identify safe routes for aid delivery. Some organisations have implemented monitoring systems to track the movement of assistance and ensure its secure delivery.

Organisations providing assistance in the form of machinery, trucks, solar panels, etc. were sometimes subject to theft by armed groups in Libya. Even though this was not a common phenomenon, some organisations report that resources like solar panels were stolen after installation in some areas in Libya.

Diversion effect

The diversion effect occurs when stakeholders – often those with whom assistance providers collaborate – redirect aid to particular groups. The diversion typically serves to strengthen the positions of favoured social groups or allies and results in some groups receiving insufficient or no assistance, strengthening their marginalisation.

Diversion often occurs subtly. Stakeholders may justify their actions in positive terms, framing them as serving the greater good, making its detection challenging for organisations unaware of local dynamics. To address the diversion effect, assistance providers should invest in understanding the social dynamics, relationships, and affiliations of stakeholders on the ground. This may involve hiring local staff who possess insight into local dynamics and who can provide valuable context. Clear communication regarding the purpose of aid and its targeted communities, coupled with robust monitoring mechanisms, can help ensure that assistance reaches its intended recipients.

In Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region, formal and informal authorities hold a tight grip on international and national NGOs' activities, directing them to particular areas, groups or individuals. Formal authorities at the provincial level often direct aid towards aligned municipalities while excluding ones controlled by the opposition. At the local level, formal and informal authorities grant access in their areas to NGOs in exchange for the inclusion of people in their social circle in the activities. Therefore, aid is used as a weapon against the opposition and as a prize for allies. There are reports that local leaders have sexually exploited women in exchange for humanitarian assistance.

Position and behaviour effect

The position and behaviour effect occurs when who we are, who we represent and our behaviours affect the stakeholders we deal with, and influence the context and our understanding of it. If assistance

providers fail to ensure the internalisation of the values they promote – such as gender equality, human rights, local leadership – within their own staff and organisational structures, they could lose the trust of key constituencies and therefore reduce their ability to have a positive impact. For example, an organisation that advocates for inclusion and equality but only has white European men leading it loses legitimacy, replicates the power dynamics it says it challenges, and strengthens resistance to positive change.

On the other hand, activities that are delivered in a way that encourages inclusive and participatory processes, by an organisation that lives its values, are more likely to effectively recognise and address structural conflict drivers such as marginalisation and inequality.

Organisations and their staff should ensure that they are continually reflecting on and mindful of their identities and privileges and how these may unintentionally replicate and strengthen unequal and harmful power dynamics, either at a local level, or within the international aid system.¹

Embassies and implementers working in northern Mozambique often commission international consultants to deliver conflict analysis or programming recommendations. This model usually involves consultants who are unfamiliar with the context and do not speak local languages flying in for a short period and speaking to a limited number of stakeholders. Experienced local researchers report that such consultants are often unable to ask the right questions and yet have significant influence over funding and programming decisions.

Social contract effect

Activities may bring social groups together more frequently or in different ways to normal interactions. In direct engagements, the intention is often

¹ For further discussion of structural racism and harmful power imbalances in the international aid system, see Peace Direct (2021) *Time to Decolonise Aid*, accessible at [PD-Decolonising-Aid_Second-Edition.pdf](#).

to mediate tensions and foster reconciliation. However, if conducted prematurely or without proper facilitation, such efforts can backfire and exacerbate existing grievances. Indirect interactions often occur during aid distribution, where tensions can escalate when different groups are present in the same location.

When done properly with an agreement from all parties, social contact can foster relationships and strengthen social cohesion. In some cases, social dialogue leads to political agreements, ceasefires, and many other positive outcomes. A gender analysis can reveal how in a given context different genders may have preferential or easier access to spaces that allow for cross-divide dialogue, before, during and after 'official' dialogue efforts are conducted. To manage this interaction, it is crucial to understand the social dynamics and relationships among groups in the area. When facilitating dialogues between groups in conflict, for example, it's essential to assess whether they are ready and willing to engage in good faith.

A humanitarian organisation was delivering monthly food assistance in a town in Libya, where different communities had experienced tension. The food distribution process required recipients to stand in line to receive their packages. By requiring people from different communities, which experienced tension, to stand in line together, opportunities for arguments and disagreements increased, leading to some incidents of inter-communal tension. In response, the organisation put in place alternative distribution arrangements across the country, establishing different distribution points for different communities or distributing to different communities on different days.

In Ubari, southern Libya, Tuareg and Tebu women used to conduct joint activities, entertain social relations, and share public spaces, before violent conflict between the two communities led to divisions and put a stop to such interactions. After the war, because of their community management role, wom-

en from the two community groups were able to re-establish communication channels and, through personal ties, mend relations that had been damaged due to the war. In some areas, women could access neighbourhoods where other community groups live that were considered off-limits for men. Using their influence on family members, particularly men, women used these entry points for re-establishing contact and contributing to making the peace agreement hold.

Environmental resource effect

Activities can change the way communities engage with, or have access to, environmental resources, such as land, water or minerals. Encouraging unsustainable use of resources such as water and electricity in the areas where we operate may lead to limited access to these vital resources in the long term. This can have a disproportionate impact on women and interact with gendered drivers of conflict.

On the contrary, promoting sustainable practices for resource utilisation can play a crucial role in addressing resource-based drivers of conflict. By advocating for and supporting sustainable methods of resource management, assistance providers can help communities build resilience and reduce tensions over resource access and usage.

The consequences of this interaction may affect communities in the long term and be less visible than other types of effects. When thinking about mitigations and responses, considering both short-term and long-term consequences is useful for ensuring the sustainability of the intervention. It is important to assess the resources of the context and carefully plan ways of utilising these resources and/or promoting sustainable ways of utilising them.

Green energy projects implemented by governments with the support of international partners as part of global initiatives to foster climate change mitigation can negatively impact rural communities by threatening livelihoods and reducing access to natural

resources, leading to conflict. In Morocco, solar plants have been concentrated in arid rural areas where farmers and pastoralists depend on already-scarce resources. Here, the state appropriated collective land and used local water resources to operate the plants, impacting communities' access to livelihood activities such as grazing goats and collecting firewood, as well as availability of water resources. This led to social unrest against the government, with local communities lamenting the lack of job opportunities or economic benefit from these investments. In contexts in which rights to land and productive assets are primarily or exclusively held by men, compensation from governments for land expropriation can inadvertently exclude women, thus having a disproportionate social and economic impact on women.

Attention effect

Attention on a particular issue, event or dynamic – such as media focus, communication, diplomatic pressure or the work of activists – may change the way stakeholders behave. Attention on an issue, such as economic inequality or gender inequality, and its relationship to peace and conflict, may increase commitment to addressing it as a structural factor among donors, international and national actors and the public.

On the other hand, attention on a specific issue can lead stakeholders to exert greater pressure on activists or organisations to suppress their efforts and expose them to safety risks. In some cases, politicians may exploit the cause to further their own political agendas or advance their positions without taking tangible steps to address the underlying issue.

It is important to understand the context, the policies of stakeholders, and the belief systems of residents. When working on sensitive issues such as gender equality, human rights or the empowerment of minorities, it is important to undertake joint risk assessments with local activists, work with powerful champions who can provide legitimacy and have

leverage over other stakeholders, and to use local cultural references, language and symbols in communication rather than global and ‘Western’ approaches.

In Libya, the word ‘gender’ has been declared ‘haram’ (forbidden) by some religious authorities as it is associated with LGBTQ+ agendas and alleged attempts by Western organisations to impose values that are contrary to Islamic and Libyan tradition. This strengthens groups who do not have an inclusive vision of peace and also presents reputational and safety risks for project participants who are involved in such activities. PCi has supported peace activists in Libya to design locally-led approaches to Gender, Peace and Security by using cultural references that draw on Libyan and Islamic history. This has allowed significant buy-in and ownership for adopting inclusive peacebuilding models that champion the inclusion and leadership of women without threatening local values. PCi has also adapted its approaches and language, avoiding the word ‘gender’ to mitigate the risk of backlash and instrumentalisation from security and government actors.

Investing in understanding the local context and community priorities is essential.

In Serbia and Kosovo, project-based funding reduced the ability of organisations to develop a mission-based approach to their work, which then reduced their ability to build legitimacy with their own constituencies and, as a consequence, had a negative impact on community trust towards civil society. This is particularly problematic where the stated intent of international support for civil society in peacebuilding processes is to bring in authentic voices that reflect community interests and that might cut across dominant, position-based political narratives.

In Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Yemen, donors and INGOs inadvertently hindered the work of women’s rights organisations (WROs) by exerting a disproportionate influence on their priorities, particularly in situations of conflict and crisis. WROs were pushed to deliver humanitarian response programmes and deprioritise work addressing the structural causes of gender inequality.²

Prioritisation effect

The prioritisation choices of national government, donors and assistance providers can increase or decrease capacities to reduce conflict and promote peace and affect trust. Shifting donor priorities in response to a crisis, such as away from longer-term projects towards immediate humanitarian response, may mean that key issues affecting peace and conflict may no longer be addressed. Prioritising issues that are not perceived as priorities by the communities may lead to waning interest and commitment from residents toward the intervention. It can also have a disproportionate impact across genders; for example, through the de-prioritisation of issues that address the needs of one gender or the other.

On the other hand, having long-term approaches and understanding the priorities of the communities is key for peacebuilding, as well as for establishing long-lasting relationships with local communities.

² See Anderson, K. and Myrntinen, H. (2017) [Now is the time: research on gender justice, conflict and fragility in the Middle East and North Africa](#) | Oxfam International.