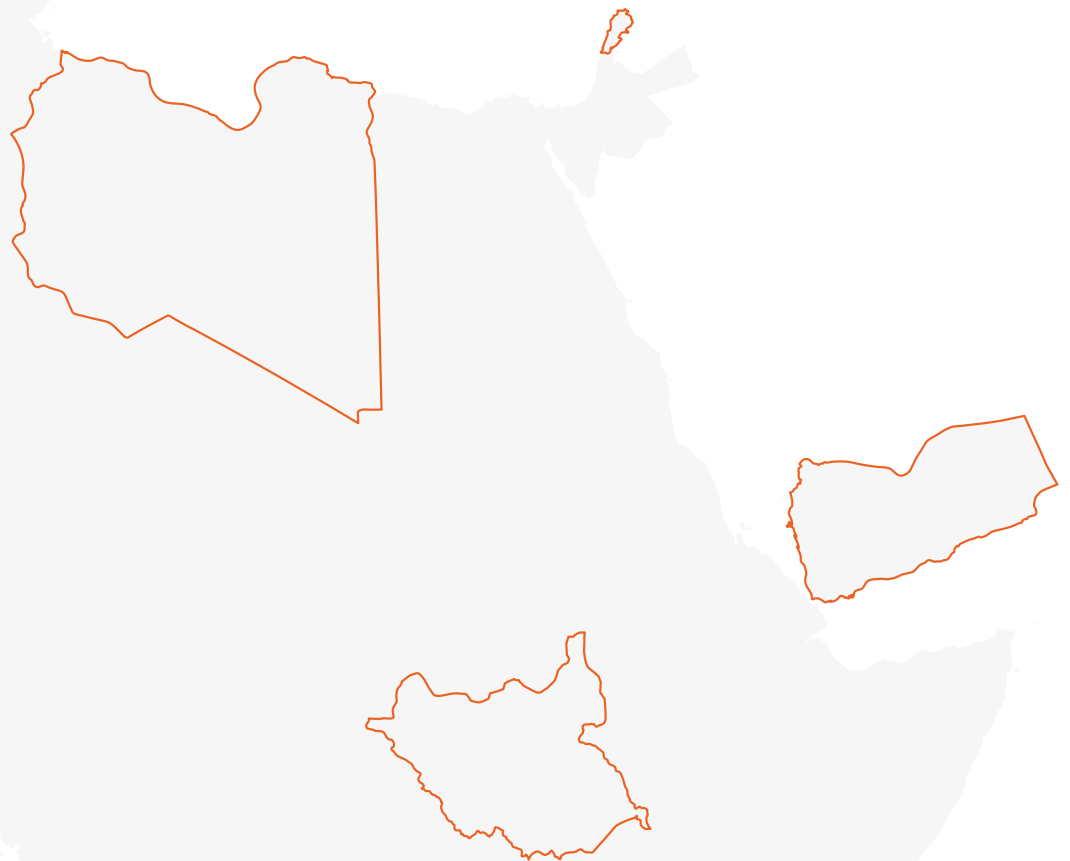




**CONFLICT
SENSITIVITY
COMMUNITY HUB**

Supporting conflict sensitivity through country-focused facilities

Lessons from Libya, Lebanon, South
Sudan and Yemen



CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	2
Executive summary	3
Introduction	6
I. The purpose of the country-focused CS facilities	9
II. Preparing the ground: how the facilities came into being	17
III. Facility structure and funding	19
IV. The importance of the CS facilities' positioning	22
V. Structuring and sequencing the work of the facilities	24
VI. Lessons from specific work areas	30
VII. Engaging with national actors	34
VIII. Adaptive management and measuring change	37
IX. What does the future look like for country-focused CS support?	42

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The case study was researched and written by Hesta Groenewald, Associate Consultant, PeaceNexus Foundation, with research support from Fynn Kaltenpoth, Associate Programme Officer, swisspeace, on behalf of the CSC Hub. The author would like to express her thanks to all the facilities' staff and partners for their time and candour in discussing the work of the facilities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international community has long recognised that aid can fuel conflict and has made important policy commitments to conflict-sensitive aid delivery. Yet operationalising these commitments remains challenging. Mechanisms such as helpdesks, framework agreements and internal efforts to support conflict sensitivity (CS) operationalisation have often been short-term, one-off or focused at the project and programme level without dealing with institutional blockages and challenges in the aid system itself.

In recent years, a number of country-focused CS facilities have been created as an innovative way to deepen and broaden country-focused CS support. This paper summarises the findings of a lessons review, led by the global Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub (CSC Hub), of three such mechanisms that are implemented by Hub members, namely:

- The Conflict Sensitive Assistance Forum (CSA Forum) on Libya, implemented by Peaceful Change initiative (PCi);
- The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRf) on South Sudan, implemented by Saferworld (lead) and swisspeace;
- The Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform (YCSP) on Yemen, implemented by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) (lead) and Seton Hall University (SHU).

It also references the Lebanon CS Forum (LCSF) – an informal initiative and the only one led by a national organisation, House of Peace (HOPE). Separate case studies were produced for each initiative and accompany this paper.

The lessons review found that donors and other aid actors clearly see the need for something like the CS facilities to support their work in conflict-affected contexts. The facilities fill gaps in the technical knowledge of donors and aid actors, and help mitigate some of the problems related to insufficient donor and implementer coordination by facilitating collective discussions and learning. In this sense, the facilities act as a “public good” and a mechanism to contribute to improved aid quality.

The following learning points emerged on four aspects of these country-focused, donor-funded CS facilities.

On their purpose and impacts and how they are operationalised:

- Individuals and bilateral efforts play an important role in creating donor interest for CS support / CS facilities, alongside push factors like a dramatic change in the conflict dynamics.

The facilities function best when they are able to interact freely - and preferably in person - with international aid agencies and are based in the same place to also allow for informal exchanges.

- Being hosted by an operational agency has been very useful for setting up operations in difficult contexts; but the relationship needs to be clarified to find the best balance between the facility's independence and the operational support of the host agency. (New facilities, for instance in Afghanistan, will not follow this model and are worth learning from.)
- It is crucial to find the right balance between the facilities being service providers of analysis and training; and them being critical friends, facilitators and confidants for the public good – and to communicate this clearly to the aid community in country.
- Consortia, if they function well, can be helpful to acquire the spread of necessary skills and draw on each partner's positioning and profile.
- Being too closely associated with one donor can undermine a CS facility's ability to fulfil its mandate effectively.

On the ways in which the facilities evolve and support change in aid practices:

- A best practice model has emerged for integrated support to CS uptake, which involves providing research and analysis about the conflict dynamics; building skills and capacities through training, tools, guidance documents and practical accompaniment; and facilitating collective conversations with the aim of influencing policy-level change and supporting collective CS learning and action.
- Successful CS uptake requires change at individual, project and organisational levels. Systemic change is probably unrealistic to expect from these facilities alone, although their work could be seen as one country-focused contribution to that bigger change.
- While iterative and non-linear, the facilities seem to achieve impacts by progressing through certain cumulative phases of activity: first general awareness-raising and creating interest in CS; then providing conflict analysis and training as a first benefit to participating agencies;

and then moving towards more in-depth accompaniment, guidance and tailored support. At the same time, new staff need to be included in activities on an ongoing basis; and collective action needs to happen throughout the phases and to evolve as the appetite and needs of participating agencies change.

On their specific work areas:

- **Conflict analysis and research:** Analysis and research are needed at multiple levels, packaged in written products in ways that help agencies integrate the knowledge into their policies and programmes, and without duplicating what already exists. Joint analysis between the facilities and partners seems to promote greater uptake and often increases the quality of analysis while reducing the risk of multiple overlapping research interventions.
- **Technical advice, training, guidance, accompaniment and problem-solving:** Training is often the beginning of helping to fill knowledge and capacity gaps on the context, and on CS concepts and practice. To embed CS practice, training needs to be followed up with targeted and more operational support, guidance and accompaniment, either by the facilities (recognising limited resources) and/or within agencies themselves.
- **Influencing high-level policies:** The facilities all recognise that change at implementer level is important but insufficient and that higher-level policy changes are also needed. In practice, they have had more success in influencing policies within specific agencies or across cohesive groups (such as coordination groups). Influencing policy change across the aid community is challenging and faces the same obstacles as general donor coordination efforts.
- **Supporting collective learning:** Collective learning and discussing CS dilemmas together is a valuable contribution of the facilities and needs to be accompanied by a concerted engagement strategy to keep the interest and relevance for participants and connect to the other work strands in a mutually reinforcing manner.
- **Adding up and sustaining momentum:** When done well and accompanied by thought-through engagement strategies, combining these activities within one initiative appears to add up to an effective, multi-pronged approach to change.

On adaptive management and measuring change:

- CS facilities need to apply adaptive management themselves in order to function in volatile, conflict-affected contexts and remain responsive to the needs of a variety of partners. Administrative / grant arrangements need to support this type of management.
- Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and learning for this type of work is challenging as there are multiple pathways for change. Outcome harvesting shows important promise to help capture individual stories of change and cement ongoing dialogue with in-depth partners, but may not neatly fit into mainstream M&E frameworks or donor reporting systems.

While all the reviewed facilities have worked with a range of national actors, they were led by INGOs. Discussions have continued about how national NGOs could be more engaged or lead on such work and the risks involved (including for them) of doing so. Some of the new CS facilities are trying out different approaches, and in the context of the localisation agenda and discussions about the decolonisation of aid, this issue is set to remain firmly on the agenda.

The CS facilities have proven that they play a valuable role in supporting more efficient aid in conflict-affected contexts, even though it seems unlikely that they could address all the challenges of the aid system as a whole. Important good practices are emerging that should be heeded for new facilities and other efforts to establish CS as a core part of quality and responsible aid delivery.

INTRODUCTION

The international community has long recognised that aid can fuel conflict and has made important policy commitments to conflict-sensitive aid delivery. Yet operationalising these commitments remains challenging, particularly in protracted crisis situations.

Over the last 10 years, donors and implementing partners have channelled increasing energy and resources into supporting conflict-sensitive aid within their institutions and partners through mechanisms such as dedicated helpdesks; framework agreements for external conflict sensitivity (CS) support at headquarters level; appointment of conflict advisers in country

or in headquarters; and investment in conflict analysis, CS tools and training. Many of these efforts have been short-term or one-off, have exclusively focused at the project and programme levels, or have not sufficiently engaged with the operational realities facing aid donors, operating partners and the aid system as a whole.

The development and implementation of dedicated, country-focused CS facilities constitutes a different approach to supporting the operationalisation of CS commitments. The mechanisms reviewed in this paper have been multi-year, mostly involved more than one donor, targeted a range of stakeholders, offered a diverse set of CS support services and provided space for collective analysis and exchange. As such, they have increased the scale and depth of CS support in country and offer important learning.

This lessons paper is part of an initiative by the global Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub (CSC Hub)¹ to inform the efforts of donors and operational aid agencies who are already leading similar CS facilities or are considering creating such mechanisms. It draws together the experience of three of the first country-focused and donor-funded CS facilities, implemented by members of the Hub:

- The Conflict Sensitive Assistance Forum (CSA Forum) on Libya, implemented by Peaceful Change initiative (PCI);
- The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) on South Sudan, implemented by Saferworld (lead) and swisspeace;
- The Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform (YCSP) on Yemen, implemented by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) (lead) and Seton Hall University (SHU).

The lessons paper focuses primarily on these three funded facilities, that are comparable in structure, target audience and positioning. Separate case studies have been produced for each of the three facilities and accompany this paper.² In addition, a fourth short case study³ describes an informal

¹ www.conflictsensitivityhub.net

² Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (2021), *Case Study: Libya Conflict Sensitive Assistance Forum*; Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (2021), *Case Study: South Sudan Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility*; Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (2021), *Case Study: Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform*.

³ Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (2021), *Case Study: Lebanon Conflict Sensitivity Forum*.

initiative in Lebanon, the Lebanon CS Forum (LCSF), that is led by a national peacebuilding NGO and CSC Hub member, House of Peace (HOPE). The LCSF's experiences are presented in text boxes throughout this paper to prompt reflection on similarities and differences with the other facilities.

The paper and case studies are not evaluations of the CS facilities, but rather explorations of lessons emerging from their work. The paper summarises overall lessons, while more detailed facility-specific and operational examples and conclusions are captured in the case studies. The lessons paper and the case studies were discussed with the implementing organisations before being finalised.

The lessons paper is structured as follows:

- Section I reviews the purpose of the facilities, and how they understand CS.
- Section II briefly summarises how the facilities came into being.
- Section III offers some comparative reflections on the structures, funding and operationalisation of the facilities.
- Section IV deals with the delicate positioning of the facilities to fulfil their mandates.
- Section V delves into specific lessons regarding the facilities' work streams, and what has been learned about activity sequencing and evolution.
- Section VI presents some overall lessons, dilemmas and examples from each work area.
- Section VII discusses the question of how the facilities have engaged or could engage with national actors in future.
- Section VIII presents some lessons on adaptive management, M&E and learning.
- Section XI reflects on what the future may look like for these (and similar) facilities.

I. THE PURPOSE OF THE COUNTRY-FOCUSED CS FACILITIES

Donor support for the establishment of CS facilities confirms their awareness of the inherent problems and dilemmas involved in delivering international aid in conflict-affected contexts, and the risks of aid fuelling conflict and division. This is further evidenced by support for newer CS facilities in recent years (see [Box 1](#)). The CS facilities were thus described by some respondents to this review as a “public good”, in that they aim to support aid actors to more effectively achieve their objectives while also contributing to peace.

While integrating CS is still seen by many in the broader aid sector as a technical endeavour (applying a tool to a project), CS is fundamentally about improving the way that international aid interacts with conflict-affected contexts and people. This understanding of CS is shared across the respective facility teams (see [Box 2](#)). At the same time, some sectors of the aid community in all three contexts, particularly some humanitarian actors, remain nervous about engaging in CS for fear of politicising humanitarian assistance and compromising their impartiality. However, the current momentum behind the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus (HDP / Triple Nexus) has provided useful entry points for nuanced CS conversations.

Box 1: Additional recent CS facilities

Since 2019, further CS facilities have been established in a range of contexts. These include:

The Conflict Sensitivity Facility in Sudan (CSF Sudan)

Established in February 2021 following a three-month scoping period, and implemented by Saferworld, the CSF acts as a sister facility to the CSRF in South Sudan, providing targeted analysis, capacity development support and playing a convening role for aid agencies working across the country. The UK government has provided funding for an initial one-year pilot, with the intention of developing a multi-donor model.

The Afghanistan Conflict Sensitivity Mechanism (ACSM)

The ACSM was set up in June 2021, with the intention of allowing staff and partners working for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in Kabul to develop a stronger understanding of local conflict dynamics across Afghanistan, and their implications for aid actors. The ACSM is implemented by a consortium of Afghan research agencies, and managed by Saferworld and swisspeace.

The DRC Conflict Sensitivity Hub

The project is exploring the possibility of building a “short-term” CS Hub in the DRC and focuses on strengthening understanding, capacity in conflict sensitivity, and sustainable peace among development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding actors through increased technical capacity, effective knowledge-sharing, and stronger coordination. It is financed by the FCDO and provides these services to FCDO partners operating in Eastern DRC, implemented by International Alert. The project began in March 2021 for a duration of one year.

The Northern Triangle CS Facility

USAID is in the process of establishing a Hub to be based in Honduras, that will work with USAID Missions and implementing partners (initially in Honduras, with the aim of expanding across the Northern Triangle). The Hub will support analysis and knowledge creation, capacity building and accompaniment, piloting activities related to CS integration, and build an evidence base and learning on CS to enable more effective policy and programmatic interventions.

Box 2: Definitions of CS used by the CSA Forum, the CSRF and the YCSP

There is strong convergence between the three facilities on the definition of CS, drawing on the standard definition⁴ used in the aid sector, albeit with some nuances.

- » According to the CSA Forum, a conflict-sensitive approach involves “gaining a sound understanding of the two-way interaction between activities and context and acting to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts of intervention on conflict, within an organisation’s given priorities/objective”.⁵
- » The CSRF conceptualises CS as “understanding the context in which you are operating, understanding the interaction between your engagement and the context, and taking action to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict and stability”.⁶
- » For the YCSP, a conflict-sensitive approach “seeks to minimise risks that assistance inadvertently contributes to conflict dynamics and drivers, and to maximise opportunities (appropriate to an agency’s mandate) to contribute to peace and stability”.⁷

All three definitions understand CS to also contribute to peace. The YCSP goes further to define protracted social conflicts and what this type of conflict means for aid delivery. The CSA Forum and YCSP definitions also spell out the need to consider agencies’ mandates and objectives.

-
- 4 Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012), *How To Guide to Conflict Sensitivity*, London: The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/how-to-guide-to-conflict-sensitivity/>, accessed on 13 August 2021; and before that APFO, CECORE, CHA, FEWER, International Alert and Saferworld (2004), *Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding: A Resource Pack*, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/conflict-sensitive-approaches-to-development-humanitarian-assistance-and-peacebuilding-a-resource-pack/>, accessed on 12 October 2021.
- 5 Peaceful Change initiative (n.d.), ‘Project proposal to the EU for the project “Embedding social peace and conflict transformation during the transition in Libya”’, p. 20.
- 6 CSRF (2019), ‘Strengthening institutional capability to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches: Five lessons from the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in South Sudan, 2016-2018’, p. 4.
- 7 YCSP (n.d.), ‘Framing paper: Annex’, YCSP, p. 5.

The reviewed facilities⁸ build on previous learning about the challenges of CS operationalisation by providing multi-faceted support (training, research, convening, etc.) while also bringing together diverse stakeholders to discuss common challenges and share learning. They further benefit from targeted, multi-year donor funding and are implemented by international peacebuilding NGOs who are specialists on CS and already work in the target countries. The facilities focus strongly on the international aid community, and particularly on influencing country-specific aid policies and practices to be more contextually-aware, adaptive and responsive to local realities as a means to contribute to more effective aid. In this way, the facilities are a more ambitious response that go well beyond other short-term, single modality, project-focused and bilateral CS support efforts. [Box 3](#) provides more information on what each facility does.

⁸ Here referring to the ones on Libya, South Sudan and Yemen, not the new ones outlined in [Box 1](#) or other more informal initiatives such as the regional CS initiative in West Africa (see [Box 5](#)).

Box 3: Snapshot of the CS facilities on Libya, South Sudan and Yemen

Libya CSA Forum (created 2012)

Target audience:

International donors;
international aid agencies

Funders: Government of
Switzerland and the EU

Main activities (2019-2022)

- » Update a peace and conflict context analysis on an ongoing basis, and share with international assistance providers operating in Libya.
- » Half-day CS forum meetings for 30-40 staff of international assistance providers.
- » Detailed research conducted on specific topics, and shared and discussed with international assistance providers.
- » Leadership Group meetings for ambassadors, agency heads or deputies to consider specific policy responses to major CS issues.
- » Workshops held to explore CS in particular locations, with international assistance providers operating there.
- » Develop and deliver Libya-specific CS manual and accompanying training curriculum.
- » Provide ad hoc advice to EU programmes regarding specific CS priorities.⁹

⁹ Peaceful Change initiative (January 2019), 'Project Document: Strengthening international and civil society capacity to build stability and peace in Libya', p. 28-30.

South Sudan CSRF (created 2016)	
<p>Target audience: International donors; international aid agencies; national NGOs</p> <p>Funders: Governments of Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK</p>	<p>Main activity areas (2019-2023)¹⁰</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Institutional support and capacity-building: introductory training on CS; bespoke and advanced trainings on CS (e.g. on gender, MEL, proposal development); targeted institutional support; NNGO mentoring programme; ad hoc technical assistance and accompaniment. » Knowledge generation to improve access to and usage of information: research; thematic and contextual analysis; introduction to South Sudan context courses; online research repository and COVID-19 hub; monthly research updates via email; county profiles. » Outreach and convening to promote shared understanding and relationships that stimulate collective action: briefings; consultations; Better Aid Forum roundtables; reflection and problem-solving workshops. » Management and learning for the CSRF to promote adaptive organisational practices: outcome harvesting and reflection workshops; adaptive delivery approach; activity-focused M&E; peer learning.

¹⁰ These CSRF activities reflect the approach taken during the post-pilot period between January 2019 and September 2021.

Yemen YCSP (created 2019, ended 2021)	
<p>Target audience: International donors; international aid agencies</p> <p>Funders: Government of the UK</p>	<p>Main activity areas (2019-2021)</p> <p>Lesson sharing and learning: Through a Technical Working Group (TWG) comprised of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding INGOs and UN agencies working in Yemen, to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Discuss key trends in the operational context and share common CS challenges and learning; » Enable collective CS responses, by identifying and providing space to plan collective responses. <p>Individual capacity-building: Through the Capacity Support Mechanism (CSM) that targets INGOs, UN agencies, and national organisations and partners with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Standard CS Training Programme (introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels); » Online Resource Centre (ORC) that hosts CS resources, learning and training material specific to Yemen; » Draw-down CS facility for agencies wanting individualised support, mentoring, and bespoke assistance. <p>Advice to aid policymakers: Through the Donor Advisory Group (DAG) that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Asks the YCSP to provide analysis and recommendations on emerging CS challenges as the basis for agreeing collective responses; » Promotes and encourages CS practice among aid delivery agencies and coordination fora.

All the facilities also integrate gender into their work, ranging from trying to make sure that facility activities (especially training activities) include women as well as men, through to providing training or technical advice on integrating gender and conflict sensitivity at the same time. However, gender is often one of many cross-cutting issues that aid agencies have to work on, making progress on integrated gender- and conflict sensitivity more challenging.

In addition to these activities, the experience of the facilities shows the importance of developing influencing strategies to enable change to occur. Given the careful positioning of the facilities as critical friends, methodology advisers, knowledge brokers and collaboration facilitators, this influencing is usually subtle and behind the scenes, rather than through critical public advocacy. Still, trade-offs often need to be made between being supportive and being critical; and between influencing from the inside and building multi-agency momentum for change on a particular issue.

The expectations of these facilities also vary. In all three contexts, some donors and agencies initially saw the facilities as service providers of conflict analysis and CS training. However, the facilities and their donors developed a productive combination of targeted support to implementing agencies and donors, and playing a critical friend role, such as convening bilateral and collective discussions about the CS dilemmas aid agencies face, highlighting particular CS risks when important context changes happen, and facilitating peer review-style learning conversations.

Donors were also keen to see the facilities impact aid policies. While all the facilities have contributed to policy change within individual agencies or specific groups of agencies (e.g. a sector-specific coordination group), getting all aid actors in a country to, for instance, apply common engagement principles or other significant, coordinated responses has proven far more difficult. This should be no surprise given the nature of the incentives in the aid system as a whole, including the focus on spending, showing success (even in short-term, complex initiatives), short staff contracts in country and the accompanying difficulties for donor coordination and coherence. Nevertheless, using CS as an entry point, all the facilities have tried to stimulate such change (see [Section VI](#)) to varying degrees of success.

Lebanon experience

The LCSF is not funded as a stand-alone project. Instead, its activities are covered by several mid-sized grants from INGOs¹¹ (rather than government donors) for HOPE's broader programmatic work. Its donors are therefore very different from those of the other facilities as they do not bring the same governmental / political agendas and some of them are operational or have a presence in Lebanon. The LCSF donors have not been involved in shaping the initiative and only occasionally participate in LCSF activities. The vision and mission of the LCSF were drafted with the members, who are all international and national NGOs. The forum provides a facilitated space for its members to raise and discuss issues of concern and to share experiences on operationalising CS in their programmes. The LCSF uses the same CS definition as the CSA Forum and the CSRF in terms of understanding the context, understanding the interaction between interventions and the context and enhancing positive impacts while mitigating negative ones.

II. PREPARING THE GROUND: HOW THE FACILITIES CAME INTO BEING

For all three facilities, there were months or years of informal preparatory work that increased interest in the importance of and need for CS in complex contexts. This involved in-country consultations between donors and INGOs championing CS as well as important internal work by donor staff championing the agenda. For instance, before the creation of the CSRF and the YCSP in South Sudan and Yemen respectively, different agencies and individuals had undertaken CS reflection or training activities, or provided technical CS advice to one or more donors. In Libya, PCi initiated a round of consultations to convince donors and others of the need for this work. In all cases, individuals from both INGO and donor agencies who were involved in the initial conversations and activities were also involved in establishing the facilities.

¹¹ These include: Secours Catholique / Caritas France, CAFOD, Caritas Canada, forumZFD, Porticus.

In addition, the context in Libya and South Sudan was a clear trigger for donor interest in a dedicated facility to help them and their partners navigate the complexities of delivering aid in these contexts. In Libya, the trigger was the overthrow of General Ghaddafi, while in South Sudan it was the renewed outbreak of armed conflict at the end of 2013.

The extent to which donors collaborated in formally initiating the facilities differs between contexts. In Libya, PCi received funding for the CSA Forum as part of its overall programme of work in the country, first from the Government of Switzerland and then also from the EU. Building on its initial consultations, PCi was then able to engage most of the Western and multilateral donors as participants in its CSA Forum meetings, with Switzerland more or less continuously playing a supportive, co-convening role.

In South Sudan, the governments of the UK and Switzerland initiated the conversations and, in consultation with other donor governments, commissioned a design study to investigate what an independent CS facility could look like. Led by the UK, this process was seen as useful in identifying existing needs, crafting a common vision for a CS support facility, and creating a collective discussion space for interested donors. Although not all the involved donors continued to fund the CSRF, the governments of Canada and the Netherlands joined¹² and Switzerland played a convening role around some of the research dissemination and outreach activities in-country.

In Yemen the YCSP was funded as a stand-alone project by the UK government, with strong engagement from other donors, including the World Bank who co-chaired the YCSP's Donor Advisory Group activities. This process of creating broader interest was initiated by the YCSP as part of its 6-month inception phase (an approach subsequently followed for the facilities in Sudan and the DRC). While the intention was to get other donors on board formally, this did not materialise and the YCSP's funding and work was ended after the pilot phase.

The multi-donor support for these facilities is seen as important to their success, but it clearly requires time to create interest and bring on board a broader cohort of donors – whether through informal awareness-raising, collaborative design processes, or during the inception phase of facility implementation.

¹² Canada joined from the start while the Netherlands came on board about a year later.

Lebanon experience

The LCSF was initiated by HOPE, in 2019, who identified the need to have conversations about conflict-sensitive aid in the country. This was triggered in part by the ongoing Syrian refugee emergency and the deepening economic and political crisis in Lebanon that saw worsening relations between host communities and refugees about access to aid and livelihood opportunities. Due to its existing experience, since 2015, of providing CS trainings to humanitarian and development agencies, HOPE was able to draw on its network of “friends” from both international and national agencies in initiating a conversation about how to approach the crisis in a more CS manner and create the LCSF. It also drew on its membership of the global CSC Hub to reach out to the already existing facilities in South Sudan and Libya and to build on their lessons in designing the LCSF.

III. FACILITY STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

The CSRF and YCSP were both set up as stand-alone projects that were institutionally hosted by the lead organisations in country, respectively Saferworld and SFCG. The Libya CSA Forum is one component of PCI’s overall programme of work in Libya with a productive yet independent relationship between the CSA-dedicated and other Libya-focused staff. For PCI, its CSA Forum work is actually better known among international actors than the rest of its Libya programme.

Being hosted by an operational agency has proven crucial for all three facilities and enabled them to get going more quickly. The CSRF was co-located with Saferworld’s office in Juba, and is the only facility based in the country of its focus. The YCSP worked out of Amman (where most of the international aid community is based), but also engaged aid agencies in northern and southern Yemen with some staff based in country – with all the political and security challenges this entails. The YCSP also experienced some challenges in finding the right balance between being independent and benefiting from SFCG’s institutional support, notably on M&E capacity, which led to the eventual appointment of a YCSP M&E lead. The CSA

Forum started in Libya, but followed the international aid agencies to Tunis when the context became too insecure in order to maintain close contact with them. At the same time, PCi remains engaged in Libya through its other programme strands and is able to draw on in-country networks and knowledge. The broader work of the hosting organisations therefore provides opportunities to strengthen the work of the facilities (especially those based outside of the focus country). At the same time, all three facility teams proactively manage any risk that working closely with donor agencies could be perceived as, or constitute, a conflict of interest between their facilitation and influencing roles and the advocacy, programmatic and funding aims of the implementing partners.

The CSRF and YCSP facilities are implemented in consortia, with each partner contributing particular skills and resources – notably between more operational work, and more research-oriented credentials. In the case of the YCSP, the division of roles also helped mitigate political challenges, with SHU able to more openly engage on sensitive issues than SFCG, who is operational in country.

All three facilities have full-time staff who are based in or near the focus country, in addition to part-time advisers and partners who are based in headquarter or regional offices. The YCSP and the CSRF were comparable in staff size, while the CSA Forum has a much smaller team (see [Table 1](#)). Both the CSRF and the CSA Forum increased their teams as they evolved; while the YCSP created sub-teams to work on parallel work streams and thus speed up the facility's activities after a slower inception phase. The CSRF and YCSP have had sufficient resources to appoint dedicated facility senior managers; while the CSA Forum is managed by a senior adviser who also has other responsibilities.

Despite the significant time and resources required to get the CS facilities off the ground, the funding for two of the three facilities has been relatively short-term. The CSA Forum has continued over almost a decade, but has been funded through consecutive, small two- to three-year project grants from two separate donors; while the YCSP was only funded for a two-year pilot, with no follow-on resources secured to date. The CSRF benefited from significant funding for a two-year pilot, followed by a five-year implementation phase. This has clearly enabled the CSRF team to go deeper and broader in scope than the other two facilities, and to allocate more significant resources to learning and outreach activities (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1

	Facility		
	Libya CSA Forum	South Sudan CSRF	Yemen YCSP
Implementing organisation/s	<u>PCi</u>	<u>Saferworld, swisspeace</u>	<u>SFCG, SHU</u>
Overall budget and years	<u>9 years; most recent budget (2019-2022) of EUR 774,000</u>	<u>GBP 10.5 million over 7 years</u>	<u>GBP 1.477 million over 2 years</u>
# of staff	<u>2 full-time, 1 part-time</u>	<u>7 full time, 5 part-time</u>	<u>12 full-time, 2 part-time</u>
Location of facility staff	<u>Tunisia, UK</u>	<u>South Sudan, UK</u>	<u>Jordan, Yemen, US</u>
Donors for facility	<u>Switzerland, EU</u>	<u>UK, Switzerland, Canada, Netherlands</u>	<u>UK</u>

The CSA Forum has had the same two donors for many years, but managed as separate grants, which may have reduced the opportunity for joint strategizing with both donors. The CSRF's donors have channelled their funding through the UK, which has generated some administrative challenges between the donors, but reduced the administrative cost for the CSRF's reporting. Having a joint funding mechanism may have prevented other donors from joining who could not yield control of their administrative autonomy. But the joint funding mechanism also created a space for the donors to discuss common approaches and provide more coherent support for the CSRF. It may also have helped sustain the UK's commitment to the facility by cementing its lead role in a collaborative initiative. All three facilities have actively managed the risk of being perceived as the mouthpiece of their donors, which has been particularly delicate for the YCSP given that its sole donor, the UK, is an important political actor in Yemen.

Both donor and facility staff emphasised the importance of taking time before the establishment of the facilities and/or during the inception and pilot phases to convince donors to collaborate on the initiative; develop a collective vision among facility implementers and donors for what the facility should focus on and achieve; and develop the right positioning and

collaborative relationships for the facilities to function successfully (an ongoing process throughout the facility's lifetime).

Lebanon experience

There is no permanent structure for the LCSF. Instead, it is convened by HOPE staff, three of whom spend 15-20% of their time on this initiative, depending on the scheduled activities. Funding for activities, which remains limited to covering the expenditures for meetings, is primarily drawn from HOPE's grants for other programmes, in which the LCSF is mentioned as a component.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CS FACILITIES' POSITIONING

The facilities could easily be seen as the "CS police" and need to build up the trust of donor and implementing agencies alike. Longer-term funding is clearly helpful as it allows time for the facilities to develop nuanced and relevant support, build relationships with potential partners, and show the value they add. But the facilities need to clearly articulate what they do and constantly and carefully monitor how they are perceived.

This involves finding the best balance between being critical in their engagements with international aid actors – for instance by questioning conflict-blind assumptions or (constructively) pointing out conflict-fuelling interventions or policies – and doing what agencies ask them to do. This balance can be delicate as being critical could damage relationships with the partner or donor involved; while solely providing bespoke services on demand (that some donors suggest the facilities should charge fees for) may miss opportunities for critical reflection and adaptation or result in agencies outsourcing CS to the facilities. Nevertheless, experience to date clearly shows that both functions are necessary and complementary.

Alongside its tailormade work with agencies, the facilities have also protected their independence in order to gain and retain trust that they

strengthen the conflict sensitivity of aid as a “public good”, and so that they can facilitate discussions bilaterally and collectively on sensitive issues and problems. Retaining this critical eye and flagging issues that are important to the entire aid sector in a country remains an important role for such facilities. This careful positioning can be summarised as a set of characteristics of successful CS facilities (see [Box 4](#)).

Box 4: What are the characteristics of a successful country-focused CS facility?

- » Be independent and not seen as a mouthpiece of one or more donor agendas...
- » ...yet benefit from the operational support and networks in the target context of the implementing partner/s.
- » Have necessary firewalls or procedures in place to avoid conflicts of interest (or perceptions thereof) between the facility and its implementing partners' other work.
- » Continuously communicate its role as critical friend and facilitator, not having all the answers or being the “CS police”.
- » Be transparent about its mandate, its target audience, what it does and does not do and why.
- » Be discreet and trustworthy with sensitive information.
- » Be connected to local civil society and other context and technical experts that can be drawn on for the facility's work.
- » Be responsive to changes in context and changing and varied needs among the donors and agencies it supports.
- » Bring relevant expertise to support CS uptake in the context.
- » Resist being pushed into being a service provider to whom CS thinking and activities are ‘outsourced’ – work on genuine, institutional change partnerships instead.

Lebanon experience

HOPE has to date focused on facilitating a collective, practice-oriented conversation within the LCSF space, with CS trainings and follow-up targeted CS support being conducted by HOPE rather than the LCSF. In this regard, the LCSF is not clearly demarcated from HOPE's other activities. This has not caused any concerns for HOPE or for organisations participating in the LCSF.

V. STRUCTURING AND SEQUENCING THE WORK OF THE FACILITIES

Best practice for CS support areas

All the facilities broadly engage on three areas of work: providing conflict analysis and research (generating knowledge); building skills and capacities through training, tools, guidance documents and practical accompaniment; and facilitating collective conversations with the aim of influencing policy-level change and supporting collective CS action.

Each facility packages these areas slightly differently. For instance, on the analysis and research work, the YCSP fed the information into two specific groups – one for senior donor leadership and one for implementing organisations. The CSA Forum has used its conflict analysis as an important pillar of collectively engaging international agencies at senior level. The CSRF has coupled its research and analysis work with an outreach and engagement strategy with donors, international agencies and coordination fora across the board, instead of creating a specific group. (See the case studies for more detail and [Box 3](#).)

The consistency of the three overall work areas, and the fact that they mirror and build on extensive experience from other initiatives,¹³ suggest that this combination of elements has become best practice for the

¹³ For instance, the work of the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium project that produced Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012).

overall structuring of CS support and uptake. **In other words, for CS to ‘stick’, progress needs to be made on information and knowledge (through analysis and research), skills and capacities (through training, guidance, tools, mentoring, accompaniment) and decision-making and organisational practices (policies, practices, standards, incentives).**

Hosting these functions within the same facility appears to be helpful in ‘adding up’ to more than the sum of its parts (see *Progression of change*, below). Furthermore, experience shows that only limited progress can be made on sustainable CS uptake if this remains at the project level – policy, organisational and ultimately systemic change is needed for more conflict-sensitive aid.

In addition, the reviewed facilities illustrate that working with multiple stakeholders is important, as progress by one agency or donor could still be undermined by conflict-blind actions or policies of another. The facilities therefore need to constantly balance their resource allocation between engaging more deeply with organisations to help them embed and operationalise CS; and working on collective, multi-stakeholder CS action that would have a broader, systemic impact.

Contributing to multi-level change

From the experience so far, the facilities are clearly able to contribute to change at individual, project/programme and organisational levels. For instance, the CSRF and CSA Forum in South Sudan and Libya respectively have been credited by external reviews with creating a shared narrative across the aid community and an awareness and commitment to talking and thinking about the conflict context and about CS practices. There are also examples of organisations changing their practices in all three contexts, and of some coordination groups or networks adopting shared principles, including CS into their policies and undertaking joint conflict analysis or CS assessments for groups of agencies. (See the case studies for more detail and examples.¹⁴)

In addition, all of the facilities have created collective spaces for sharing analysis of the context, reflecting on the CS challenges and emerging opportunities, and really grappling with the dilemmas that aid organisations and staff need to navigate on a daily basis. This has been universally cited as useful across the facilities’ target audiences. Importantly, the experience

¹⁴ Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (2021), *Case Study: Libya Conflict Sensitive Assistance Forum*; Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (2021), *Case Study: South Sudan Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility*; Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (2021), *Case Study: Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform*.

of the three facilities also shows that this work needs a clear engagement strategy and cannot be based on assumed commitment from aid organisations to participate and change their own practices.

Contributing to change at the systemic level has however, proven very difficult, and expectations around this have varied. Most of the facility donors expected policy change, including collective policy change for instance across UN agencies or INGOs, while others hoped for larger systemic change across the aid system in-country.

If systemic change is understood as changing the attitudes, knowledge and practices of most or all of the individuals, organisations and policymakers in a given system, then the facilities have certainly contributed to establishing CS as a prominent agenda across aid agencies in their respective contexts. Changing the practices and policies of the majority of aid agencies has, however, been much more challenging and opinions are divided about the extent to which this type of systemic change is realistic for such facilities to achieve.

What is clear, however, is that two change axes are important: in-depth and sustainable change within a large group of aid actors in country to generate a critical mass; and change in the policies and decisions of those with the most power over how the aid system functions in country, such as the donors. Yet there are many obstacles to CS practice for donor agencies, such as the risk that progress at the policy level in country is undermined by headquarter decisions or other organisation-wide policies (e.g. procurement, recruitment, financial control) or overridden by foreign policy priorities. For instance, the facilities found an example where a donor policy of zero-tolerance for aid diversion has led to implementing partners not reporting instances of diversion, because they find it impossible to avoid, but are fearful of the repercussions of discussing this with their donors. Promising initiatives in-country can also be lost when senior donor staff change – a contributing factor in the common principles for CS aid in Libya becoming less relevant.

Positively, the experience of the three facilities also shows that policy change can occur if there is a thought-through and well-executed change strategy for helping agencies move from understanding the context better, to taking action and changing their practices and eventually their policies to be more conflict sensitive. Achieving and evidencing policy change thus remains possible but challenging for the CS facilities, who ultimately focus only on the country-level elements of the aid system.

Broader changes in the overall aid system will likely take a long time to mature, and would be difficult to measure, but there are multiple work strands outside of the country-focused facilities that could help stimulate

such change. This includes working ‘upstream’ on global and headquarter policies (which all three of the lead implementing agencies do outside of the facility work); spreading of CS tools and practices to multiple country offices of a donor or operational agency; and staff who rotate out to other roles, taking their CS knowledge with them. In addition, the CSRF has considered developing regional level analysis as a way to influence some of the more systemic and political reasons for conflict-fuelling aid in South Sudan. However, this was not pursued further due to the risk to its South Sudan-based staff, the presence of other agencies already doing such analysis, and the need for the CSRF to focus on CS humanitarian action. In an emerging, informal CS network in West Africa, regionally-focused analysis has helped open up discussions that were too sensitive to have at the regional level (see [Box 5](#)).¹⁵

Progression of change

While no prescribed, sequential pathway for change emerges, a broad progression of change phases can be distilled from the facilities’ experience:

1. Generating interest among donors and aid agencies

The first step is to generate interest in CS among donors and aid agencies and not assume that they will engage automatically. This was a particular challenge in Yemen, where agencies feared the security and operational implications of CS work after one organisation was shut down for doing a conflict analysis. All three facilities therefore undertook some consultations and meetings to explain the need for and benefits of CS work and reassure participants on sensitivities.

2. Collective conflict analysis for donors and aid agencies

The initial phases of all three initiatives included compiling existing conflict analysis materials and/or producing conflict analysis. This played to the interest of aid practitioners who sought more information but either did not produce this type of analysis internally or could not access it otherwise. Many of the early collective conversations of the three facilities were convened around such analysis.

3. Training for aid agency staff

A third element that worked well as an early activity is the provision of training. For South Sudan and Yemen this was part of the initial design of the work, whereas in Libya it came later as the process and relationships around the collective conflict analysis work matured. Generic trainings proved useful as a way to engage aid staff on the concepts of CS and get their interest in delving deeper. The CSRF made this available to any aid

¹⁵ Feedback from PeaceNexus Foundation staff who are supporting the West Africa process.

staff from international and national organisations in South Sudan, while the CSA Forum and YCSP focused on those already active in its collective conversations. All of the facilities developed their training offer over time to focus on different levels of knowledge on CS as well as specific applications (e.g. to a particular sector, or a function like procurement). This enabled the training to become progressively more ‘applied’, while still allowing for newcomers who need the entry-level support. For instance, the CSA Forum put together a level-based training package that culminates in coached, agency-specific sessions dubbed “CS Master Classes”. It also allowed the facility implementers to learn more about the operational challenges and dilemmas facing aid agencies who operate in each context, and to build this knowledge back into the facilities’ strategies and work plans.

Progressing this conflict analysis and training work thus contributed to widespread awareness-raising, helped establish the facilities as useful actors in the aid landscape, and built relationships between the facilities and the aid agencies.

4. Tailored support to agencies

The next phase of this work focused on more targeted engagements. For instance, the CSRF and the CSA Forum moved towards specific work with agencies. The CSRF developed an institutional assessment methodology that led to organisational action plans for partners to implement CS and is actively followed up, including through quarterly outcome harvesting sessions. The CSA Forum added informal coffee sessions to its collective work and has used its CS Master Class as a way to help agencies develop an action plan that is followed up 6 months later. The YCSP did not quite progress that far in creating in-depth support relationships.

However, all three facilities offered a draw-down facility for agency-specific support – the CSRF and YCSP had this programmed in from the start while the CSA Forum added this component later on. This usually involves organisations who are genuinely interested and who reach out for support, mostly after an initial engagement with the facilities that helps build trust. This type of support clearly has higher potential for CS uptake in practice – but these engagements are also resource-intensive for the facilities, meaning that demand often outstrips supply, and at times, expectations of what the facilities could deliver are unrealistic.

5. Collective engagement

All three facilities built in collective elements from the start, but the nature of their collective engagements needed to evolve in order to remain relevant and impactful. Initially, participants were active in discussing conflict dynamics; but quite quickly they wanted the facilities to provide more input on what this analysis means for their decisions and programmes. The three

facilities have responded to this in different ways, including by providing more targeted research (e.g. on specific issues or sectors), developing context-specific operational guidance and tools, and facilitating efforts towards more coordinated or joint policy positions on specific issues.

6. 'Adding up' and sustaining momentum

At this stage of the facilities' work, the potential for the work strands to add up to more than the sum of their parts becomes much higher. There are, however, still obstacles to this happening, for instance, staff turnover within international agencies undermines relationships as well as institutional commitment to the CS work. For this reason, the CSRF and the CSA Forum have both developed activities targeting newly deployed staff. The CSRF offers staff induction trainings on the context; whereas the CSA Forum includes a conflict and peace driver summary at each of its meetings and an introduction to the concepts of CS at every second meeting.

Clearly, it takes time to build up the different areas of work and the relationships to enable change – both in individual agencies and across the aid community. And it is then important to adjust to the context and the needs of aid agencies in order to remain relevant and sustain the change momentum (see also [Section VI](#) below). Furthermore, stitching together these work areas with an engagement and change strategy is important to get the most impact out of the process.

Lebanon experience

The LCSF has focused to date on sharing analysis of the context and discussing topics related to CS that are important for the operational humanitarian and development agencies active in the country, in a collective space. These topics have included for instance CS and volunteerism, and CS and COVID-19. HOPE has provided training and tailored support bilaterally before and after the establishment of the LCSF, which has helped generate interest in CS concepts and support the development of a network of interested agencies. A few tailored support opportunities have flowed from this initiative, but were taken up as HOPE rather than through the LCSF. Nevertheless, the fact that the donors to LCSF activities are INGOs – some of whom are operational in Lebanon – shows some level of buy-in from participating members.

VI. LESSONS FROM SPECIFIC WORK AREAS

Over the lifetime of these facilities to date (9 years for the CSA Forum, 5 years for the CSRF and 2 years for the YCSP), much has been achieved and many lessons identified. This section highlights some of the key observations for each work area.

Conflict analysis and research

The first reflection relates to the level of analysis that proves most useful to support CS practice. For the CSA Forum, a national level analysis was a strong starting point for the facility as international agencies did not know or understand the Libyan context well. This analysis has been captured in an online tool and consistently updated and shared. The YCSP also produced national-level conflict monitoring, focusing on how key conflict dynamics interact with aid, for the Donor Advisory Group, whose members are mostly based outside Yemen and find it hard to obtain accurate contextual information. For South Sudan, much analysis and research already existed and perhaps it made a difference that most aid agencies were based in country (barring security-related evacuations). The CSRF therefore collated existing analysis in an online repository, that has received strong positive feedback, and focused its new research pieces on specific themes or pertinent topics, while drawing on participatory research methods.

Over time, all three facilities supported sub-national or area-specific analysis to delve into more localised dynamics, support the work of specific agencies or groups of agencies, and to help mitigate the duplication of analyses in the same areas. Some project-level conflict analysis or CS assessment work was done or accompanied as well to directly inform the operationalisation of CS for specific projects and agencies.

The second reflection relates to who should do the analysis. The facilities found that they were often expected to do the analysis, but they also felt it was important to encourage at least collaborative analysis or, if possible, for partner agencies to do this themselves with the facilities' support if needed. Experience from the CSRF suggests that joint analysis between the facilities and partners was more influential than if the CSRF conducted the analysis for the partner. However, all the facilities acted as knowledge brokers, and usually have good capacities and resources to produce conflict analysis (except at the very local level, where the multiplicity of analysis needs is significantly greater). Respondents across facilities also noted that not all agencies are able to produce good quality analysis; and there is a

risk that agencies undertake multiple competing analyses in the same areas, which is both extractive towards local populations and an inefficient use of resources. In this sense, it is helpful when the facilities conduct good quality analyses and share and/or facilitate sharing and discussion of analysis among organisations.

This discussion however, highlights the challenges related to improving the quality and the institutionalisation of aid agencies' conflict analysis, and of agencies not being willing to share the analysis they produce, leading to duplication of work and extractive practices. The facilities continue to grapple with these issues by accompanying analyses and providing tools and training; and by convening collective analysis conversations as a bridge to sharing knowledge.

Thirdly, the format of the analysis is important. The CSA Forum's online conflict analysis tool is accessible to all Forum participants. PCi reports that while the use of the online tool waxes and wanes, it remains a valuable resource that captures conflict and peace drivers over almost a decade. The YCSP has learned that the longer, detailed conflict analysis studies they produced were less appreciated than shorter, quicker inputs that could inform decision-making in a crisis. And the CSRF has diversified its publications to have a stronger impact, but also connected analysis and research to collective discussions with an accompanying engagement strategy, for instance helping to change how so-called "intra-communal violence" was understood across the aid community in South Sudan.

All three facilities use their research and analysis work to engage with donors and aid agencies, whether collectively or individually, and to help inform specific accompaniment support and guidance to operationalise CS.

Technical advice, training, guidance, accompaniment and problem-solving

In order to operationalise CS, agencies need certain skills and knowledge. The facilities have learned that training provides some of this, but is often the beginning of a process. One-off inductions on the context, such as provided by the CSRF and the CSA Forum, or introductory trainings on CS concepts have a strong impact in helping new aid agency staff situate themselves and have the confidence to ask the right questions. But to take forward CS skills in people's work in a more sustained manner usually needs training events to be followed by opportunities for participants to apply what they learned and deepen their knowledge. For this reason, the CSA Forum designed a package of consecutive trainings that participants can take and some organisations have reached out for further support as they took this forward. The YCSP also designed its training offer as multi-level but was criticised that follow-up support was limited. The CSRF could not follow

up all trainees either, but built on acquired learning through its institutional partnerships and mentoring for national NGOs. Facilities therefore need to plan for what follows from the training to help embed the learning, while recognising that they will likely only have capacity to follow up in depth with selected partners.

This has led all the facilities to become engaged in two further types of activities: producing specific guidance and tools that agencies can use in their day-to-day work; and devising ways to continue hands-on support for using the tools. In addition, all three facilities recognise that they do not have the answers to all the CS dilemmas that arise. Rather, their role is to help surface dilemmas and suggest ways in which they may be mitigated, or how decisions about trade-offs and sub-optimal choices could be made. This type of support was included in activities like practical accompaniment (CSRF), informal coffee sessions or calls (CSA Forum) and draw-down facilities (all three).

In the case of the CSRF, the donors initially nominated which partners they wanted the facility to work with, but the partners were not always ready or willing to engage. The CSRF therefore had to overcome initial resistance or fears that the partner's mistakes would be exposed or reported to the donor. Engaging with partners in this more in-depth way therefore needs careful relationship- and trust-building, and agreement on the purpose of the collaboration with the facility as well as on how information will be handled. In this, the facilities' impartial positioning and reputation is crucial.

Influencing high-level policies and decisions, and supporting collective learning

It is important to be clear on what is expected – and what is realistic – in terms of policy changes that the facilities can help trigger at the higher level of aid institutions. While all three facilities had made some contributions to changing policies, it proved easier to change institutional policies within specific agencies than getting agreement on common policy positions or principles across multiple agencies. This mirrors the challenges of donor coordination and the experience of previous efforts to promote collective donor accountability for CS, which found that while everybody agrees such mechanisms would be useful, they almost never work in practice.¹⁶ The CSA Forum successfully created shared principles for international engagement at a time when a coherent donor group had been formed who saw the need for such principles. However, as time went by, these principles were no longer used. In South Sudan, two concerted attempts were made at different

¹⁶ Bayne, S. and Goldwyn, R. (2015), *Donor Conflict Sensitivity Monitoring Mechanism Feasibility and Scoping Study*, PeaceNexus Foundation.

points to create shared principles but both failed, because specific principles were hard to formulate in a way that satisfied everybody, and more general principles were too broad to be meaningful.

In addition, the value of well-facilitated collective spaces cannot be overstated. In Libya and South Sudan, once the role of the facilities was understood and activities got going, interest remained high in discussing the context and its challenges collectively, and grappling with the dilemmas of operationalising CS. In Yemen, initial interest was high, but as this was still a young process when the COVID-19 pandemic forced everything online, interest declined and had to be reinvigorated by the YCSP. The CSA Forum and the YCSP developed structures at different tiers, separating the high-level decision- and policymakers from the more operational and implementing staff. This enabled more tailored agendas for each group, but also required additional work to ensure the agendas connect between levels. The CSRF team did not set up specific groups, but convenes donor and other aid agencies around the launch of new research pieces, and engages with donor and humanitarian coordination groups and other fora on specific topics. All facilities found that engaging with the CS realities of the COVID-19 situation was important to remain relevant and responsive.

What is clear is that these processes do not just run by themselves – they need a concerted engagement strategy that involves participants in agenda-setting, includes active follow-up and preparation between meetings or across collective spaces, and is at the same time not too time-consuming for participants. This is a difficult balance to get right, and requires particular outreach, communications and engagement skills. The collective engagements also need to be anchored in products that have concrete – and sometimes immediate – policy or operational applications to ensure the continued relevance of the work. Maintaining a visible profile for the facility, such as e-mail research updates and newsletters, has also proved helpful for the CSRF (see [Box 1](#)).

Lebanon experience

The LCSF has thus far facilitated joint conflict analysis discussions and has produced some tools for CS practice, but has not yet engaged in influencing high-level policies and decision-making. Its activities have included a component of collective learning among the international and national humanitarian and development agencies involved in the LCSF, but have not included institutional donors to date. It remains to be seen how this will evolve and what, if any, difference it will make that the convening agency, HOPE, is a national rather than an international peacebuilding NGO.

VII. ENGAGING WITH NATIONAL ACTORS

The primary target audiences for the facilities have been international aid agencies, including donors, INGO implementing partners and UN agencies. However, all three facilities in Libya, South Sudan and Yemen have also engaged with a variety of national actors, including national staff members of international organisations, national and sub-national NGOs (including implementing partners of international organisations) and researchers and activists who are from the context. The facilities therefore pursue a range of aims in their engagements with national actors, which can be summarised as follows:

- To help national or sub-national NGOs be conflict-sensitive as they deliver internationally-funded aid interventions;
- To draw on the context knowledge of national NGOs, national civil society activists and researchers to help inform international aid actors' policies and programmes;
- To provide national actors with opportunities to influence international aid actors (e.g. through presenting or leading on research and analysis products);

- To support national staff of international agencies to become internal change agents on CS and holders of institutional knowledge on this agenda (and counter international staff turnover).

In addition, the CSRF has conducted research, analysis and roundtables on what the localisation of aid in South Sudan could look like and plans to continue this work.

The facilities have registered some successes and challenges on these engagements. What is clear, however, is that none of the facilities are currently set up or mandated to provide targeted support to national NGOs with the aim of them leading on shaping international aid. In other words, while there is some clear overlap between CS aid interventions and principles and the decolonisation¹⁷ and localisation of aid, the facilities in Libya, South Sudan and Yemen are not currently designed to take this forward with national and sub-national organisations.

It is, however, a topic that remains a live discussion in all three facilities and one that they would like to engage on more deeply, since relationships between international aid providers and national / sub-national organisations are an important element of CS practice. In addition, the new CS facilities are reframing their work to place national organisations more firmly in the lead, even if the contracting arrangements are still through Saferworld (for Sudan and Afghanistan) and International Alert (for DRC) respectively (see [Box 1](#)). There are also emerging groups of mixed international and national civil society organisations who have started doing work on CS together, but not yet as a formalised structure, such as the West Africa Hub (see [Box 5](#)).

¹⁷ Peace Direct (2021), *Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and lessons from a global consultation, Full Report*, Peace Direct; and the work of Conducive Space for Peace, www.conducivespace.org

Box 5: Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub West Africa and the Sahel (CSC-Hub WA)¹⁸

The CSC-Hub WA was initiated in 2019 following requests from international NGOs, regional networks, local CSOs and aid recipient government agencies to exchange practice and learning on CS, focused on the region and in French. World Vision, Islamic Relief, Oxfam and the PeaceNexus Foundation hosted a first Do no Harm training, which gathered participants from 13 organisations and 6 countries. Subsequently, participants gradually developed an informal regional CS network, with new members joining and existing members changing roles to bring in new institutions, such as UN OCHA. In 2020, members did joint analysis on how to respond conflict-sensitively to COVID-19 and defined the group's vision and road map, with an initial focus on providing coaching on CS in relation to gender and land issues. Today the Hub counts 92 active members, from 39 organisations and 7 West African countries.

The CSC-Hub WA is therefore a peer-learning and support network that has also initiated capacity-building and convening activities, but does not work on policy alignment. Its focus is on the regional level and aid recipient government agencies (but not aid donors) participate in the network. The lead agencies are mostly multi-mandate rather than peacebuilding INGOs. While the Hub does not have dedicated project funding, coordinating organisations have contributed a small amount of financial support and the PeaceNexus Foundation has played a facilitation role for the process.

All interviewees agree that national NGO staff, activists and researchers have important knowledge and perspectives on the context dynamics that international staff do not have. At the same time, there are many considerations to take into account if national organisations were to lead such CS facilities without the involvement of international organisations (see [Section XI](#)). This includes concerns over: the safety of national actors engaged in such work; the political positioning in local conflict dynamics of any lead national organisations; the need to retain a safe space for international aid agencies to air their concerns and honestly discuss

¹⁸ Inputs from PeaceNexus Foundation

where they think they are doing harm (which they may not do with national organisations in the room). There are no easy answers to these dilemmas and some assumptions about international agencies that also need to be challenged, such as their assumed political impartiality. This issue is therefore set to remain on the table for existing and new CS facilities.

Lebanon experience

The LCSF is led by a national organisation, with international and national members. So far, HOPE has not experienced any problems in terms of risks to the organisation or staff for convening CS conversations. They ascribe this to focusing the LCSF discussions at the programmatic level, thus avoiding more sensitive, political discussions – which is in keeping with its focus on humanitarian actors. HOPE is keen to institutionalise the LCSF further so that it can develop collective influencing or advocacy work towards aid donors and fundraise for the platform's activities.

VIII. ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT AND MEASURING CHANGE

CS best practice includes the need to be responsive to the context, and ready and able to adapt one's work to deal with any CS challenges or exploit peace opportunities. The CS facilities require the same approach as they operate in volatile contexts while catering for the needs of many agencies with different mandates, policies, institutional cultures and ways of working.

All three facilities benefited from donors who understood the need for flexible and adaptive management – particularly with the added complication of the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, the three facilities were able to make changes to their planned activities, although in the case of the CSA Forum and the YCSP, this required budget revisions and changes to logframes, results and indicators. The CSRF has a slightly simpler arrangement as its contract has been structured around outcome milestones under which specific activities are jointly agreed between the CSRF and

its donors every quarter. This means that activity changes do not trigger changes across the CSRF's results areas or the milestones that are the basis for contract payments.

In terms of M&E and learning (MEL), it can be challenging for these facilities to provide evidence of the changes they are contributing to, because it may take a long time for agencies to change a particular project or policy after engaging with the facilities; and because there are multiple pathways to how this change might occur. A robust Theory of Change (ToC) is an important starting point to spell out the change logic and assumptions, and help shape what should be monitored. The ToCs of the three facilities have been found by external reviews to be relevant and appropriate for their contexts (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2: ToCs of the three facilities

Libya CSA Forum		
If...	Then...	Because...
<p>International assistance providers operating in Libya are well-informed about conflict dynamics and the interactions between international assistance and the peace and conflict context (through increased access to information, research and analysis focusing at national and local levels);</p> <p>Their technical skills and expertise are strengthened (through trainings, advice, guidance and awareness)</p> <p>They do joint reflection and peer learning in facilitated spaces with other international (and sometimes local) actors (through their participation in the CSA Forum meetings and other facilitated CSA discussions)</p> <p>Decision-making within their organisations starts taking into account CS considerations</p>	<p>They will be able to adjust their assistance in Libya to be more appropriate to the context, to minimise conflict sensitivity risks and maximise positive contributions to peace.</p>	

South Sudan CSRF		
If...	Then...	Because...
<p>The CSRF can help improve the skills on conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity of individual aid workers and the capability of organisations in South Sudan to allow for deeper understanding and integration of local conflict and power dynamics into their management systems and decision making;</p> <p>The CSRF can improve aid workers and organisations' access to and usage of information about conflict power dynamics in South Sudan to inform decision-making;</p> <p>The CSRF can strengthen relationships between aid workers, organisations and other stakeholders in the aid system to stimulate interest, shared understanding and collective action to promote the uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches in South Sudan;</p> <p>The CSRF donors support the project's ability to adopt organisational practices that promote ongoing reflection and adaptation, and identify and share entry points for CSRF to pursue emerging opportunities for change.</p>	<p>Aid workers, donors and implementing agencies will change their attitudes, behaviours, relationships and policies in ways that mitigate the risk of deepening drivers of violent conflict and increase the likelihood of making positive contributions towards peace in South Sudan.</p>	<p>The large scale and long duration of international aid means it has played, and continues to play, a significant role in shaping the conflict, politics, economy and culture of South Sudan at different levels;</p> <p>A high turnover of senior organisational decisionmakers (international) leads to a lack of awareness of relevant information, weak organisational capability, and inter-organisational fragmentation in the aid system, that are obstacles to turning knowledge and analysis into understanding, and subsequently, into practice.</p>

Yemen YCSP		
If...	Then...	Because...
<p>Agencies, policymakers, and donors have the necessary skills and resources to deploy programs, policies, and strategies that are conflict-sensitive and feed into the development of a humanitarian-peacebuilding-development nexus,</p> <p>Their efforts are better coordinated and better informed about local contexts</p>	<p>Assistance interventions in Yemen are more likely to avoid exacerbating existing tensions, to feed into stabilisation efforts, promote more peaceful management of existing conflicts, and prevent further conflicts</p>	<p>Assistance interventions are more sensitive to conflict drivers in local areas, better adapted to mitigate conflict drivers, and better able to support the development of peace infrastructure.</p>

The facilities have taken different approaches to MEL. All three have used tools like surveys and formal feedback mechanisms on activities. In addition, the CSA Forum does informal follow-up with participants to get a sense of how they have used what they learned. The YCSP has been criticised for not having a strong MEL strategy and appropriate capacities in place, although this improved towards the end of the project. It faced a challenge of changing project design and indicators several times, and then not having enough time (as a two-year pilot project) to catch up and measure longer-term change. Nevertheless, towards the end of the project, the YCSP conducted an outcome harvesting exercise they found quite useful.

The CSRF has had the most time and resources to develop robust MEL strategies and systems, having benefited during the pilot phase from a MEL-focused partner, and in the implementation phase from a dedicated learning adviser and active MEL engagement across the team. The CSRF developed a detailed MEL plan and, in addition to activity-focused feedback, conducts quarterly outcome harvesting exercises with its partners. This has enabled ongoing engagement and the ability to capture the elements of potential stories of change for each institution. This approach seems particularly fruitful for such facilities, although may not fit neatly into standard donor reporting or M&E frameworks.

IX. WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE FOR COUNTRY-FOCUSED CS SUPPORT?

Creating dedicated conflict analysis and CS support mechanisms appears to be useful as a way to fill the gaps in how the international aid system engages with conflict-affected contexts. While ideally, aid organisations should become conflict-sensitive as part of accepted quality aid delivery, it remains challenging to embed CS in this way.¹⁹ Rather, engaging agencies to operationalise CS appears to be an iterative process, where some progress is made, then key staff or priority changes push it further down the agenda, and a few years later it resurfaces. Moreover, the incentives in the aid system itself often do not support CS practices.

For this reason, facilities such as these need to continue playing a dual role: on the one hand filling a gap by providing country-focused CS support; while on the other, working to change aid agencies to take on CS as a core way of working as part of a contribution to changing the aid system overall.

Interest is currently high in these types of facilities, notably from the UK Government, who has funded several, as sole donor or in collaboration with others. At the same time, the UK and other government officials question whether these facilities should remain donor-funded and are putting pressure on the facilities to fund themselves in other ways.

This begs the question what other funding models could look like for such facilities. The experience of the reviewed facilities shows that they need to work independently and serve as a "public good", have space to be critical, be grounded in the context (including through others), be able to convene aid actors around sensitive issues, and have particular skills for conflict analysis, research, capacity-building and effective communication and engagement. They also need to understand how donors and international aid agencies work, and be able to support policy alignment between them. While this appears to be a tall order, the experience of the reviewed facilities has shown that it is possible with the right agencies and individuals in place; and is a cost-effective and strategic way to get dedicated and country-focused expertise and support for aid actors. The ultimate aim is still for aid agencies – and ultimately the system as a whole – to integrate CS as a minimum standard for aid provision. But until that is achieved, this type of facility appears to be an effective way to help push forward CS integration.

¹⁹ See for instance Goldwyn, R. (2016), *Conflict Sensitivity Integration Review*, produced on behalf of MSI and CDA Collaborative Learning for USAID, p. 16-17.

If donors did not fund facilities like these, one alternative could be for the facilities to charge for their services. This seems most likely to work in relation to conducting and delivering conflict analysis pieces or bespoke training and capacity-building for aid agencies and donors. However, the already highlighted challenges would come into play, of agencies not taking the responsibility of developing analysis capacities themselves; and of putting at risk the space the facilities would have to be a critical friend and collective space convenor, if they become a “service provider”.

Another option could be to require all humanitarian and development agencies to integrate CS into their work. However, the cost of the additional capacities and resources would be added to their budgets and still paid for by donor funds and the benefits of the collective efforts and learning that the facilities offer would be lost. Not being CS in aid delivery also has costs – risks to staff, destroyed project resources, or reversal of important gains in health, nutrition, economic development, governance and other aid sectors.

Moreover, there are no obvious proposals for who else could lead on such facilities. Respondents in this review felt that donor governments could not take this on themselves, as their national agendas would always trump any other priorities in country. The UN’s positioning was similarly seen as problematic for this type of function, given its close working relationship with the government/s in conflict-affected countries, and its bureaucratic processes that would make delivering such CS support less responsive and potentially more expensive (while still funded by donors).

The more promising discussion is perhaps whether such facilities could be provided by a combination of international and national civil society, including NGOs, think tanks, research institutions and others. This may enable a relevant mix of knowledge and insight into the context, the workings of international donor bureaucracies, the impacts of international aid, technical expertise of CS, and grant and operational management of the facility itself (inside or outside of the context). There is a question about whether the different functions, currently provided by the CS facilities under one roof, could be provided by separate organisations. However, the experience of the three reviewed facilities suggests that the different types of CS support build on each other to progress towards change. Even where different partners lead on different elements, it has been important to collaborate closely in order to remain collectively strategic. Splitting the CS support tasks between different agencies may therefore lose the added value of the combined activities.

The safety of national and international staff will remain important, as will careful assessment to ensure that the facility is not in fact – or not seen to be – politically captured or representative of only some parts of the local

political and conflict landscape. There is also a question about whether these facilities should continue to prioritise a safe space for donors and international actors to discuss the dilemmas and challenges they face, without local actors in the room. And how best to open more space for local actors to influence the international community.

The reviewed facilities have provided a certain model for CS support, and other models are worth testing. Upcoming experiences from the newer facilities in Sudan, Afghanistan, the DRC and Honduras, the expansion of the Lebanon facility or the work of the CSC-Hub WA may provide more learning on alternative approaches to context-specific CS support.



conflictsensitivityhub.net