

Conflict-sensitive implementation

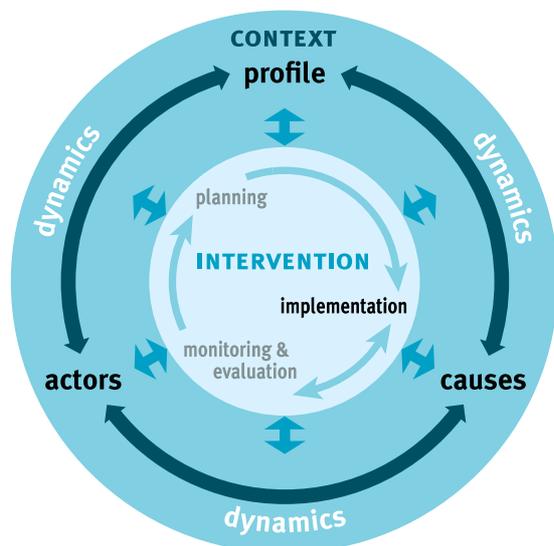
Purpose of module

To help ensure that project and programme implementation remains conflict-sensitive, through the understanding of key project management and implementation issues. This will help the reader to set up, implement, monitor and adjust the project and programme in a conflict-sensitive manner. (The intended audience includes donors: while they generally implement projects through other agencies, they often have a strong influence on a project or programme's implementation, and many of the large INGOs are themselves donors to smaller NGOs.)

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1. What is conflict-sensitive implementation?

Implementation is the process of achieving objectives by undertaking activities designed in the planning process. It involves regular progress reviews and adjustment of activities as required.

Conflict sensitive implementation additionally involves close scrutiny of the operational context through regularly updating the conflict analysis, linking this understanding of the context to the objective and process of achieving the activities, and adjusting these activities accordingly.

It builds on the conflict analysis and planning processes (see **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3 Module 1**). The key elements are to:

- sensitively *manage* the process of implementation (activities, staffing, information networks, finances etc)
- regularly *monitor* the operational context and the interaction between the intervention and the context, using the indicators defined in the conflict analysis and planning stages
- *adjust* the project in light of new information gathered through monitoring, focusing particularly on the objectives and the process of implementation.

BOX 1

Key elements of conflict-sensitive implementation

Management involves the ability to see the bigger picture: how all the elements of the intervention, its operational context and the interaction between the two, fit together. It involves supervising the entire process of implementation and making operational decisions.

Monitoring requires gathering, reviewing and analysing information in order to measure progress and change using the conflict indicators, project indicators, and interaction indicators described in **Modules 1** and **3**, and **Chapter 2**.

Adjustment means changing the plan in response to unforeseen changes of circumstance. The choices of *what*, *who*, *where*, and *when* may periodically require alteration and may change substantially. In certain situations more extreme measures may be required, such as fundamentally changing the project's implementation approach.

BOX 2**Failure to understand the context***Example 1 (violent conflict):*

Purchasing a vehicle may seem like an innocuous activity. However, even this relatively minor activity could be highly conflict insensitive. Purchasing the vehicle from a given supplier can support one group or actor over another. The funds received from the sale of the car could be diverted to the war economy, or be taxed by a conflict actor. It is not uncommon for INGO vehicles, bearing their organisation's logos to be taken and used by military or other conflict actors.

Example 2 (structural violence):

In rural Nepal, a development organisation implemented a project designed to empower members of the lower castes. As part of their education, the trainees learned that they enjoy equal rights to those of other castes within their community. One of the trainees chose to exercise his right at a subsequent village meeting by sitting on a chair alongside members of higher castes. The higher caste members – who themselves had not benefited from caste empowerment training – were upset by what they saw as an inappropriate action by the lower caste member, and physically assaulted him.

Understanding the context is crucial to conflict-sensitive implementation. As the two examples in Box 2 demonstrate, activities that may be well-intentioned, or even apparently unrelated to conflict dynamics, can unintentionally exacerbate conflict factors if the context is not well understood.

Effectively monitoring, managing and adjusting an intervention requires efficient information networks. To effectively triangulate information (see **Chapter 2, Box 10**), these networks will be based on multiple sources and should be set up in the planning stage. Such information networks can prove particularly challenging in conflict-affected contexts, or situations at risk of violent conflict, as information that is politically sensitive may be difficult to obtain (see **Chapter 3 Module 1**). Equally important is the commitment to honest self-reflection and learning. Only through such commitment can changes be made to the objectives and process of implementation to ensure that an intervention remains conflict-sensitive.

2. Key steps to sensitise the implementation process

Most conflict sensitive implementation work is undertaken at the planning phase and through the conflict analysis. The four following steps then build on this prior work.

The four key steps in conflict sensitive implementation and management

Step 1: Refer back to the conflict analysis

Step 2: Set up the project

- a) Prepare and/or assess plans of operation
- b) Negotiate project contract issues and sites
- c) Co-ordination
- d) Define security procedures

Step 3: Implement, monitor and adjust the project

- a) Implement and monitor
- b) Adjust to the context and the interaction

Step 4: Conflict-sensitive project phase out

2.1 Step 1: Refer back to the conflict analysis

If time has elapsed between the planning and implementation stages, the conflict analysis should be reviewed and updated. This may require a revision of the decisions made during planning, such as the selection of partners and beneficiaries, the timing of the intervention, and even the objectives of the intervention. Some of the challenges presented by changing implementation modalities tied to donor funding are explored later in this module.

2.2 Step 2: Set up the project

2.2.1 Preparing and / or assessing plans of operation

It is good practice to engage all parties when developing operating plans, including seeking their input and feedback on the timing and contents of the plans. This engagement should begin in the planning stage, but continue during implementation as the plans become further fleshed out and operationalised. Contingency planning should also be reviewed. Maintain flexibility in the plans.

Bringing in donors, decision makers and implementing organisations at this preparatory stage will help them to understand the context better, and will help to generate a common understanding of the likelihood of changes of context and needs in the project areas.

2.2.2 Negotiating project contract issues and access to sites

Programmes are often implemented through a chain of subcontracting or cooperation agreements, and your organisation may have only peripheral contact with the affected populations. Partner selection has been addressed under planning, but it is important, when implementing, to monitor the sensitivity of partners and subcontractors. This can be achieved by regularly updating the actor analysis component of the conflict assessment through an active partnership approach, independent validations (eg evaluation visits), or regionally based information networks. Likewise, supply chain contracts for the provision of goods – such as construction materials, vehicles or foodstuffs – need to incorporate conflict sensitivity (see Box 3).

BOX 3

Supply chains and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

The Socio-Economic Development Organisation (SEDOT) needs rubble and sand to construct dwellings for displaced persons who are returning to their village. The sand and rubble are each sourced in rival communities. SEDOT hopes to turn the supply contracting of construction materials into a peacebuilding opportunity by capitalising on cross-community economic exchange to transform community conflict.

Provisions for conflict sensitivity can also be included when negotiating contracts and performance objectives with staff. This may mean a proactive capacity-building stance to ensure staff development (see **Chapter 5**).

Simply because of the nature of a given context, the administration of resources (as well as management of perceptions about how they are administered) can be a major source of tension and greatly exacerbate conflict or potential conflict. Field staff may not have access to banking facilities, thus the payment of wages can present challenges. Payment for goods can also be susceptible to corruption in some contexts, perhaps commending the use of purchase orders over cash payments. The choice of bank and signing authority can also convey certain messages.

BOX 4

Negotiating access or co-operation

The negotiation of access and of the intervention strategy can be a good first opportunity to set the ground rules of the relationship between donors, organisations and local authorities. In some cases, it can be beneficial to bring together as many interested parties as possible to remind all actors of everyone's obligation for proper accountability and quality.

Nevertheless, care is needed over the inclusion of parties who control or influence access, as their inclusion could result in the perceived or real legitimisation of their power, and increase their capacity to exert control, even over project activities. For instance in Somalia, following the 1992 military intervention, humanitarian assistance was severely disrupted by militias, whose ability to use violence prompted humanitarians to negotiate with them for access. These negotiations contributed to the legitimisation of the militias who were then able to gain an international audience.

As with all aspects of project implementation, the conflict analysis is key in understanding who these potential negotiating parties are, what dynamics could be fuelled, and how to cope with any problems.

The location an organisation chooses for its headquarters or regional head offices can imply stronger relationships with one group over another – be it rural / urban or divided communities in different locations. Physical separation from beneficiaries may also undermine your ability to monitor and manage interventions, and potentially strain relations between field and headquarters. In some circumstances, negotiating access to specific areas or communities can present specific challenges (see Box 4).

2.2.3 Co-ordination

Co-ordination between organisations in any given area is important to:

- optimise sharing of information and analysis
- avoid overlap in activities, and rationalise use of resources
- avoid situations where interveners are trying to carve out a niche for themselves
- avoid counter-productive programming.

At certain levels of conflict, it can become imperative to negotiate with other organisations or groups to develop a common set of guidelines or rules of engagement. For instance, in Sri Lanka, a group of donors and organisations came together to co-ordinate their work and define common perspectives and principles of operation in conflict-affected areas. And in Northern Uganda, a consortium of INGOs under World Vision leadership is conducting a joint conflict analysis. **Annex 1** to this module

summarises an example from Sri Lanka of the principles that can be applied when operating in conflict prone or – affected areas. Note that such co-ordinating principles are not conflict-sensitive unless they are respected and implemented effectively. Experience with Operation Lifeline Sudan shows that this does not always happen.

2.2.4 Defining security procedures

In situations of violent conflict, the implementation strategy of the project may inadvertently pose a serious threat to the safety of staff, beneficiaries and partners. Different approaches are usually adopted with the objective of ensuring their safety:

- contingency planning must contain security procedures. These should be defined in the planning phase (see **Chapter 3 Module 1**) and contain pre-determined plans of action. The monitoring process should feed into this
- codes of conduct and guidelines, such as Amnesty International's, can incorporate security procedures (see Box 5)
- staff safety can be increased and control systems implemented through the use of specialised advisers (for example the network of security consultants operated by the UN security office, UNSECOORD). Many publications focus on these increased staff safety and control systems, such as Save the Children's "Safety First" guidelines¹
- staff negotiating and analytical skills can usually be improved through training
- an image of transparency and impartiality can be cultivated by encouraging open communication and participation and avoiding any threatening conduct.

BOX 5

Security guidelines

Amnesty International has developed a series of guidelines for human rights activists in the field. These relate to staff procedures, and include specific advice regarding security of staff, of those providing information, and of those about whom the information is concerned. It details the accountability of staff for their own and others' security, and defines the procedures the organisation will take if staff, providers of information or those whose rights have been violated, are put at risk.

2.3 Step 3: Implement, monitor and adjust the project

2.3.1 Implement and monitor

Having set up the operational aspects of the project, the next step is to begin implementation.

Potential or actual conflict is inherently dynamic, and the operating environment will change over time as profile, causes, actors, and their dynamic interactions change and evolve. Central to ensuring a conflict sensitive process is to monitor (and periodically evaluate) the context and the interaction of the intervention with that context; to re-assess the appropriateness of project parameters (such as the choice of beneficiaries, the timing of the intervention) in light of changes; and to adjust accordingly. Monitoring is discussed in the planning module (**Chapter 3, Module 1**), and in more detail in the module on monitoring and evaluation (**Chapter 3, Module 3**).

2.3.2 Adjusting to the context and the interaction

A balance must be struck between the flexibility necessary to be conflict sensitive, and the commitment to existing plans. Understanding the role of the intervention in the changing context is key to determining the appropriate reaction to the situation. Some of the most common forms of adjustment are set out below:

Adjust programming Ensuring that the intervention remains relevant depends on timely adjustments of project parameters according to a consistent self-assessment. Thus the choice of in *what way*, with *whom*, *where*, and *when* the intervention is implemented may require review and change.

Adjust contingency plans Monitoring procedures may reveal unforeseen circumstances for which contingency plans will need to be adjusted.

Adopt an advocacy role The advocacy role gives priority to the non-confrontational presentation of complaints and queries to responsible authorities in a manner acceptable to those authorities. This approach implies a degree of confidentiality and trust, based on constant verification of the limits to acceptable behaviour, and on the avoidance of any form of coercion. It requires continual presence on location, and a high degree of tolerance to conflict instigators.

Adopt a support role In situations where the authorities are weak or simply dysfunctional, but social order still prevails, the support role mobilises energies from a wide range of sources for the achievement of certain life-saving actions. This role is predominant, for example, with NGOs working around or with 'failed state' administrations, and when conditions lead to chronic human rights violations.

Re-negotiate ground rules Ground rules and terms of access have been noted in Box 4 and **Annex 1**. In the event of a breach of agreement, these ground rules may need to be re-affirmed or re-negotiated.

Freeze operations Where a programme or project is found to be unexpectedly negatively impacting on the context, or the context is negatively impacting on the

intervention, it may be necessary to *temporarily* place implementation on hold until a more conflict-sensitive approach can be developed. The period for freezing implementation must be kept to an absolute minimum so beneficiaries, suppliers and staff do not suffer additional hardships. Further, the intervention must adjust to meet the newly developing context – waiting for the context to change such that it meets the intervention’s implementation plan is simply not conflict-sensitive.

Denunciation This approach places a greater price on respect for values than on the continuation of programmes, and was the founding principle of Médecins Sans Frontières which prefers to withdraw from an area rather than continue to provide assistance that could prolong a destructive status quo. Denunciation may place personnel under considerable pressure, even insecurity, and must be built on an ability to pull out easily. For peacebuilders, the principle of impartiality and the need to maintain relationships with all actors effectively preclude denunciation.

Abandonment Even though the criteria for the exceptional decision to suddenly terminate a project should be defined from the start, conflict-sensitive implementation must leave open the way for substantial adjustments to fit the evolving context. A decision to withdraw should be seen as a last resort, and taken only if a careful review of the context (see ‘freezing operations’ above) reveals that the intervention cannot be adjusted to interact positively with its context.

If a decision to abandon an intervention is taken, conflict sensitivity becomes particularly important. Proper exit management will consider first the safety of everyone involved (not only project staff) and will also put in place adequate mechanisms for the preservation of the project’s impact. More than ever, for a conflict-sensitive withdrawal, there is a need to review the conflict analysis to understand the consequences of different termination strategies and how each approach to abandonment will affect actors and dynamics of conflict.

UNHCR in Burundi has resorted to building less capital intensive structures in provinces from which it might have to withdraw, and to investing more in training and social mobilisation. Many agencies still struggle during the preparation phase to define the minimum space required for implementation in highly volatile environments. Options and methods for withdrawing conflict-sensitively – and more importantly, for adjusting implementation to reflect an evolving context – become clearer during implementation when monitoring can be used to regularly update the conflict analysis.

2.4 Step 4: Conflict-sensitive project phase out

At the conclusion of the project, the plans for conflict-sensitive phase out are implemented. These have been discussed in the planning module (see **Chapter 3 Module 1**).

3.

Challenges for conflict-sensitive implementation

3.1 Being flexible

Being flexible is crucial to conflict sensitivity, and nowhere is this more important than in the implementation phase. The volatility of conflict dynamics regularly results in the unexpected. A constant dialogue with all parties and regularly updating the conflict analysis will minimise the number (and degree) of surprises. The process of adjusting programming has been discussed under **step 2.2.2** above. However, to enable such flexibility on the part of implementers also requires flexibility on the part of funders.

Sound administrative and financial systems normally demand rigorous expenditure planning, monthly closing and reconciling of accounts, periodic budget audits, and several other rather rigid requirements. As a conflict or potential conflict unfolds, these requirements can greatly constrain implementers’ flexibility and easily threaten the life or impact of the intervention. However, both implementer and funder bear an equal responsibility for the finances and the successful implementation of the project. Most funding schemes and implementation strategies can be adjusted if the parties agree with the need for changes.

From the beginning, implementers should look for acceptable adjustments of normal budget requirements to support the specific context of the operation. They should have a good understanding of the mechanisms (funding systems, contract management rules, conceptual and implementing alternatives, etc) available and plan for regular reviews over the duration of the project. Finally, implementers should maintain a fluid dialogue between donor and implementing agency (including during the financial planning stage and about possible contingency budget modifications).

Donors are also partners, with equal responsibility to see a project to completion. The relationship between implementers and donors requires transparency and trust, such that honest progress updates can be made even when implementation is altered by the context. Likewise, when implementers find that the intervention is having a negative impact on the context, a frank and honest exchange with donors on how to become more conflict sensitive should be facilitated. Frequent and honest dialogue between donor and implementer improves knowledge and learning on both sides and enables better project implementation.

3.2 Learning lessons

The processes of monitoring and adjusting (steps 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 above) provide substantial opportunities for learning lessons. Interventions in an ongoing conflict or potential conflict situation have added responsibility of higher accountability for impact and depend on applying good practices and lessons learned as an effective way of contributing to that impact. Actively reflecting on practices that have been incorporated as part of the project objective and developing a learning culture will also help contribute to a positive impact. Implementers should also consider bringing the communities into the analysis and evaluation processes, using an ongoing conflict analysis to identify key conflict environments and actors, and integrating them into existing information systems.

3.3 Building and maintaining relationships

During implementation, the project becomes not only a systemic part of the context but also a dynamic element of it as a result of the different relations and interactions with other actors (eg communities, implementing organisations, donors, authorities).

Constructive conflict management should form a common goal across a spectrum of actors, both within and beyond the project area. Use this goal as the starting point of every negotiation or activity as it will generate a greater capacity to discover common solutions, and be strategic about the relationships you develop. The actor analysis undertaken during the conflict analysis will help.

Project participants: Trust and participation

To gain trust and participation from beneficiaries requires commitment and hard work. Seek to:

- engage the communities in as many planning and reviewing activities as possible and actively seek their input (this engagement will require the introduction of specific systems that will ensure the effective participation of communities and avoid the risk of unbalanced involvement)

- avoid behaviour that may be misinterpreted by local actors
- maximise participation at all levels of the project to build mutual trust – project success may depend not only on the trust beneficiaries have in interveners, but also in how much interveners trust beneficiaries
- plan a constructive engagement with beneficiaries to positively influence the context.

Project staff: Internal dialogue and safety

Conflicts and potential conflicts usually have an important impact on project staff. Be sure to:

- reinforce constructive messages and nurture an atmosphere of dialogue
- enable staff to perform their activities without endangering their safety
- make staff feel respected for their work in difficult conditions
- ensure management systems do not affect conflict dynamics in a negative manner
- be mindful of implicit messages that could damage capacity to constructively address conflict dynamics through the ethnic or caste composition of staff, suspicion, unnecessary security measures that increase anxiety, salary policies, gender biases, and other management practices inconsistent with the context.

Partners: Transparency and accountability

Transparency and accountability should guide the deepening of relationships.

- use basic (but strict) rules of partnership
- be mindful of unequal relations between powerful institutions and local smaller structures of civil society as this inequality may undermine the ability to develop an open dialogue
- negotiate basic rules of accountability and independence that can help ensure an equitable relationship.

It is common practice to implement through local partners. If accountability is ensured, this is usually a positive approach as this process can itself support the strengthening of civil society in cases where conflict dynamics have undermined the social fabric. The selection of partners can provide an important opportunity to foster dialogue and trust within the local civil society. Do No Harm analyses have revealed that by setting up committees where all local actors participate using transparent rules of selection, the process can result in the identification of appropriate partner agencies. Equally importantly, the committees can set an example and space for trust and dialogue that may have previously been absent.

4. Endnotes

¹Mark Cutts and Alan Dingle, “Safety First: Protecting NGO employees who work in areas of conflict” 2nd Edition, Save the Children, 1998.

Annex 1

Draft principles of operation for agencies providing humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka (abridged)

1. Humanitarian imperative

Agencies recognize that the right to receive humanitarian assistance, and to offer it, is a fundamental humanitarian principle that should be enjoyed by all citizens of all countries. Our primary motivation for working is to improve the human condition and alleviate human suffering, facilitating the returnee process with different communities taking into consideration their security and their rights.

2. Non-discrimination

Agencies follow a policy of non-discrimination regarding ethnic origin, sex, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, political orientation, marital status or age in regard to the target populations with whom we work.

3. Respect for culture and custom

Agencies respect the local culture, religions and traditions of the people of Sri Lanka.

4. Independence

- Agencies function independently from all governments, government controlled / organized bodies, political parties.
- Agencies set independent policies, design their own programmes and use implementation strategies which they believe are in the best interests of the humanitarian needs of individuals, families, and communities of the target population and ultimately in the best long-term interests of the people.
- Select where they work, select beneficiaries, select the most appropriate form of intervention based on their organizational mandate, their independent assessment of need and organizational capacity.

- Do not knowingly gather information of a political, military or economically sensitive nature for governments or other bodies that may serve purposes other than those purposes that are strictly humanitarian.
- Provide funds and project materials directly to project beneficiaries. Agencies do not provide funds or materials directly or indirectly to government departments or parastatal organizations for project implementation.
- Humanitarian Agencies should have unimpeded access to the population of potential beneficiaries.
- International humanitarian organizations must have unimpeded access to local partners who have the capacity to implement projects efficiently and with accountability.

5. Monitoring and accountability

- Agencies are accountable to donors and beneficiaries and adopt and implement necessary monitoring mechanisms to ensure all assistance reaches the intended targeted beneficiaries.
- Humanitarian agencies must be able to freely monitor the implementation of projects implemented with designated funds sourced for the said purpose.

5.1 Financial accountability

- Agencies consider themselves stewards of donors' funds and accept that responsibility with the utmost seriousness and have control systems in place to ensure that financial resources and assets are used solely by and for their intended project beneficiaries and are not diverted by the government or any other party.

5.2. Accessibility

Agencies work directly with and have direct access to project beneficiaries and their communities to assess, evaluate and monitor projects.

6. Transportation / Taxation

- Persons engaged in humanitarian assistance, their transport and supplies shall be respected and protected. They shall not be the object of attack or other acts of violence.
- Based on the principle that donated funds designated by the donors for specific purposes should be used fully for the said purposes, such funds or materials, or labour secured by such funds, should not be subject to taxation in any form.

7. Rights-based programming and advocacy

Agencies respect fundamental human rights as defined by the United Nations and our programmes take a constructive proactive approach to advocate for rights of

individuals as consistent with programme objectives in the communities where we work.

- The fundamental right of all IDPs to return voluntarily to their homes in condition of safety and dignity must be fully respected. The establishment of their conditions is primarily the responsibility of those who are governing the said areas. This must be recognized as an essential prerequisite to material intervention by humanitarian agencies.
- The rights of beneficiaries, in particular women, to fully participate in the design of projects planned for implementation in their communities must be respected.

8. Capacity building

Agencies seek to operate in a way that supports civil society and builds the capacity of human resources in the country.

9. Sustainability

Agencies employ a diverse set of strategies with a long-term goal of achieving a suitable impact in their programming. Sustainability can be defined in a number of different ways, including the long-term impact of specific intervention following the closure of a project, continued financial viability of an institution, or capacity built within the community, within local community-based organizations or among staff members. Different agencies may employ different definitions and different methods, but all consider sustainability of paramount importance and strive to achieve it.

10. INGO co-operation

- Agencies exercise mutual respect for each agency's mandate methodology, independence and self-determination.
- Agencies practice transparency and confidentiality in engaging in a regular dialogue with one another regarding these principles and encourage one another to maintain the highest possible level of ethical programming.
- Agencies encourage and support additional agencies entering the country to develop and undertake responsible ethical programming to provide needed humanitarian assistance.

11. Local NGO Participation

The situation is now conducive for local NGOs to be made knowledgeable of humanitarian principles and to implement activities more effectively and efficiently. Therefore we consider it as an opportunity for humanitarian agencies to invite them to participate in training and capacity building programmes, in planning, monitoring and evaluating activities targeting the population in need, and linking them with both government and NGOs.