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The utility and dilemmas of conflict sensitivity*

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1. Introduction

We would like to preface our article with a few words on how we understand conflict sensitivity. Essentially, this concept is about much more than tools – hence our reluctance to feature tools or extracts from tools in the following. We recognise that tools and methodologies are a very important tangible way in which one can make conflict sensitivity concrete, but when conflict sensitivity (or PCIA) is reduced to tools only, it is of very limited utility. Undue emphasis on complex tools, tables and methodologies seems to be a primarily Western approach that often has a limited resonance with many Southern organisations. Thus, a more encompassing approach is needed – and is slowly being adopted in practice by agencies. We wanted to illustrate that conflict sensitivity could best be achieved with a 'tools plus'-based approach, and that the principles of conflict sensitivity could be applied to a wider cross-section of activities than to those strictly in the humanitarian and development sphere.

2. Conflict sensitivity and PCIA – on the importance of process and the power of terminology

When asked what is needed to make their organisations conflict-sensitive, Kenyan and Ugandan participants in a workshop in Entebbe, 2003, described a vast array of actions – awareness raising; promoting leadership by

Box I – Project on 'Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding'

The two-year project, undertaken by a consortium of six Southern and Northern NGOs, drew together learning on good practice. The project built upon an extensive consultation process in Kenya, Uganda, Sri Lanka and beyond, and included a mapping of conflict-sensitive practice among development, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors from governments, donors and civil society. Learning from these consultations provided the basis for the conceptual development of conflict sensitivity, captured in the Resource Pack, various drafts of which were widely discussed among these same actors. Awareness raising and capacity development activities were developed from the Resource Pack, and continue at the time of writing.

Through creating bridges between North and South, the project has ensured that Southern agencies have themselves shaped the international conflict sensitivity agenda. The project was implemented by Africa Peace Forum (Kenya), Center for Conflict Resolution (Uganda), Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (Sri Lanka), Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (UK), International Alert (UK) and Saferworld (UK).

It was through the experience of implementing this project that the authors became increasingly aware of the utility of 'conflict sensitivity', although the catalysts promoting its utility were multiple (De La Haye and Moyroud 2003, 1-2).

The Resource Pack and more information about the project can be found on: www.conflictsensitivity.org

example; effective networking and communications; including conflict sensitivity in the mandate, vision and mission of their organisations; creating structures to enable decision making. These are all important contributions to building the vision of 'conflict sensitivity' as an approach that reaches much beyond the application of tools.

The phrase 'conflict-sensitive' or 'conflict sensitivity' has been at the margins of development practice since at least 1999. The idea of conflict sensitivity owes a great deal to diverse literature and thinking on Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA), though PCIA is not the only intellectual and, importantly, experiential source that has influenced the development of 'conflict-sensitive approaches' (CSA). Mary Anderson's 'Do No Harm' work; the macro conflict assessment work undertaken by DFID, USAID, the World Bank and other donors; the writings of Jonathan Goodhand; and over thirty years of peace and development academic discourse have also provided significant insight.

Depending on the view or definition of PCIA and CSA to which one subscribes, it is possible to see PCIA as either a method to achieve 'conflict sensitivity', or alternatively to see 'conflict sensitivity' as an aspect of PCIA. Clearly, all users and promoters of the various concepts and terminology have their own opinions.

We use the concept of conflict sensitivity as developed in *Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding: A Resource Pack* (2004, henceforth 'Resource Pack'). This specific understanding of the concept was developed through consultations with hundreds of individuals and agencies over a two-year period. In Kenya and Uganda, practitioners were particularly vocal in advocating for the use of the term 'conflict-sensitive' over a number of alternatives. We acknowledge that the concept is not static and will evolve over time as greater learning from practice is gathered. We certainly do not claim any explicit or implicit 'ownership' of the term. A slightly different interpretation of conflict sensitivity has been advanced by some NGOs (Lange 2004, 5) and the World Bank also noted the existence of various understandings of conflict sensitivity in its consultation with civil society in Bosnia (World Bank 2004). Acknowledging that these different understandings of CSA exist, this article uses the definition below.

Box II – Defining conflict sensitivity

The Resource Pack (2004) defines conflict sensitivity as the capacity of an organisation to:

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

The term 'PCIA' is understood differently by members of the comparatively small group of people who use the terminology within the field of development and conflict (Hoffman 2003). Some see PCIA as "a means of anticipating and evaluating the impacts of development projects on both the structures and processes that promote peace and those that increase the prospects of violence" (Church and Shouldice 2002, 43). Others see it as a process of mutual learning that should be led by people from conflict zones, not aid agencies (Bush 2003b). Yet others see that the application of PCIA is primarily at the project and programme level, as opposed to more macro conflict assessments (Smith 2004, 45).

Box III – Different understandings, different analysis

Different understandings of key terms lead to very real problems in analysis. For example, if one were to ask the question "Has the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) developed its own PCIA capacity?" the answer would vary depending on how the term is understood. DFID has not developed specific project level or sectoral level conflict analysis tools. However, it has developed and used its own Strategic Conflict Assessment tool, which does not include much about 'impact'. It has also pushed for the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity within the World Bank, UNDP and in certain of its own country strategies. DFID has further built its own capacity in conflict-related issues by hiring more specialist advisors. However it is questionable to what extent DFID has adopted mutual learning or ownership with those directly affected by conflict in relation to its strategy and programming. Thus, it is possible, depending on the definition and understanding applied, to say that DFID has progressed significantly, in a limited fashion, or not at all, in relation to PCIA.

A number of tools have been developed during recent years, many of which are utilised by organisations (see for example those profiled in Chapter 2 of the Resource Pack). Indeed, from experts through practitioners the last few years have seen significant steps forward in not only the development of operational guidance (see for example Bush 2003a), but also the actual use of it. Many have also begun to refine these tools, or to question some of the assumptions underpinning them (Buckley-Zistel 2003). There is no doubt that some tools are more appropriate than others for particular tasks, and there is still a need to look at the theoretical assumptions on which they are based. Despite the fact that there is more utilisation than in the past, most humanitarian and development organisations in most settings still do not use any specific conflict-related tools. This is perhaps not surprising, as 'tools' to promote gender sensitivity or even the adoption of 'rights-based approaches' are still not widely utilised, even in organisations that have supposedly made an institutional commitment to their mainstreaming. For a tool to be effective, it has to be placed firmly within the wider context, both the particular geographical context as well as the institutional context. However tools are only one dimension of conflict sensitivity – applied on their own they will have little impact on better practice.

Despite the assertions by some prominent proponents of PCIA to the contrary, the term PCIA itself quickly leads to those unfamiliar with it thinking that it is merely a 'tool' or set of 'tools' (Shannon 2003/04). We acknowledge that the joint CSA project contributed to the perception of PCIA as a 'tool' by its initial subtitle of 'Tools for Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment'. Clarity over this matter really began to take hold during the implementation of the project. However, a tools-based approach has severe limitations, as is recognised in the literature (in particular works of Kenneth Bush, Manuela Leonhardt and Maria Lange). More importantly, the spirit and approach with which any tools are utilized determine their impact. The same tools can be used to promote learning and empowerment as well as in ways that control, distort and exclude. Walking this line is challenging, and we willingly admit that we have not always achieved balance in our own experiences.

In many circumstances, tools can be an important component of any approach to promote and enable reflection, learning and better practice. However, operational guidance for conflict sensitivity should not come in the form of a 'correct' one-size-fits-all 'tool', but rather as a menu of options and guidance which can be adapted, localised, and developed as the context and purpose demands. In our experience, the terms and concepts of 'conflict sensitivity' and 'conflict-sensitive

approaches' are less likely to be interpreted or understood as only a tool or set of tools. The word 'approach' indicates something broader: an entire ethos as to how organisations could strategise, plan, implement and evaluate their work.

Box IV – Community empowerment

When understood as a tool, PCIAs can be participatory and empowering, depending on whether the process engages communities or is conducted in isolation by programme staff. In her Berghof article, *Toward a Unified Methodology: Reframing PCIA,* Manuela Leonhardt (2003) makes the point that, "PCIA could be empowering if it offers people living in conflict with the chance to voice their concerns on the conflict impact of certain development plans and jointly develop alternatives." The point here, which applies equally to conflict sensitivity, is that process needs to be paramount; people affected by violent conflict must be active participants in solutions to violent conflict. And it is no coincidence that their involvement in the resolution of their conflicts is an empowering experience.

Non-combative community members living in areas of violent conflict often see themselves as innocent victims of a political conflict operating at a national level. Their only relationship with this national conflict, as they understand it, is when it arbitrarily reaches into their community and visits untold hardship on self and loved ones. A conflict-sensitive approach must engage project participants or beneficiaries – at a minimum in the analysis and implementation phases – to ensure the intervention considers and addresses conflict in all its nuances and intricacies. Through so doing, community members begin to understand that their own actions towards people from other ethnic, religious, social, economic, cultural or linguistic communities have a direct bearing on what they formerly understood as a disconnected macro political issue.

Typically they react in two ways to this new understanding. First, with dismay at their own role in perpetuating violence through inadvertently supporting the structures of violence. Second, with excitement and empowerment as they understand that changing their own behaviour, and encouraging their friends and neighbours to do the same, will support peace and undermine violence. So the overall objective of conflict sensitivity is not empowerment, but empowerment can be an important and rewarding by-product of a conflict-sensitive approach.

3. New directions in conflict sensitivity

The thinking underpinning conflict-sensitive approaches is evolving and expanding, being applied to new areas and sectors. This section describes new ideas in mainstreaming conflict sensitivity and the developing application of conflict sensitivity to peacebuilding actors and the private sector.

3.1 Mainstreaming conflict sensitivity

3.1.1 Agency level

Transforming the behaviour of organisations working in conflict areas requires something more fundamental and encompassing than even the best adapted tool can deliver. Research indicates

that the positive impact of conflict sensitivity is limited if it is confined to technical activity, rather than understood as strategic and relevant to an entire organisation and its partners (Lange 2004). The development sector is suffering from initiative overload, having had the mainstreaming of environment, gender and rights-based approaches on the agenda over the past few years. Many people let out a collective groan at the idea of yet another 'mainstreaming' initiative. The legacy of past 'mainstreaming' that has been limited to top-down roll-outs is keenly felt, as are concerns that conflict sensitivity may politicise organisations, undermining their core mandates.

The six-agency conflict sensitivity project sought to find new ways to support mainstreaming and institutional learning on conflict sensitivity beyond what is often the default action of training. It proposed integrating the appropriate attitudes, approaches, tools and expertise into the organisation's culture, systems, processes and work, such that conflict sensitivity is applied not just to isolated projects but becomes an entire organisational ethos. In the Resource Pack (Chapter 5, Annex 1) a framework was developed to invite reflection on possible leverage points to introduce and strengthen capacity internally and externally – this has been much developed in Lange's work (2004). The five pillars of this framework are:

- Institutional commitment
- Willingness to make changes in organisational culture and institutional structures
- Support for capacity development
- Conducive external relationships
- Accountability mechanisms

Building capacity in conflict sensitivity requires strength in all five pillars. The failure of an organisation to form connections between the pillars will result in islands of conflict sensitivity within a sea of conflict-blind institutional practice. However, an incremental approach to mainstreaming may be all that most large operational organisations can cope with.

3.1.2 *International Organisations*

International players, particularly bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies, need to recognise their role in conflict-sensitive or conflict-blind practice. The strategies of donors and other in-country representatives of international agencies are influenced by policies and approaches taken by the agencies' headquarters. The approach a World Bank office takes in any given country is heavily influenced by the policies and procedures – including reporting requirements – determined in Washington. Guidance related to applying conflict sensitivity to macro processes such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) is emerging, and experience in application is developing (see the Resource Pack, Chapters 4 and 5, Annex 1).

3.1.3 *Governments*

With a few notable exceptions, the debate and implementation experience around conflict sensitivity and PCIA has predominately been focused on international agencies and national civil society. Some of the exceptions are the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) project on 'Building African Capacity in Conflict Management' and some of the CSA joint project work with government officials in Kenya, Uganda and, to a lesser extent, Sri Lanka. Governments are significant socio-economic as well as political actors, articulating national development frameworks such as PRSPs. Yet, because of their size, complexity, dysfunctionality, corruption, or complicity in violent conflict, national governments are often overlooked as stakeholders in the application of conflict sensitivity. Engaging politicians, government departments and public officials in conflict sensitivity is therefore extremely important despite the inherent risks

and moral challenges. A sense of realism and clear ethical guidance must always be maintained in dealing with any parties to a conflict and/or powerful actors within it.

Box V – Ethical guidance in conflict transformation

In response to both good and bad experiences in its peacebuilding work, International Alert developed a code of conduct to guide its actions (International Alert 1998). The code of conduct provides an ethical framework for conflict transformation work, and consists of guiding principles for the organisation and the development of policies on human rights, impartiality and working partnerships.

There is undoubtedly concern amongst some agencies about the value of putting limited resources into engaging the government bureaucracy which is often so reform resistant. Our own experience shows that framing discussion as conflict-sensitive development is one way in which constructive engagement can be approached, whereas 'conflict transformation' or 'promoting peace' can be seen as too esoteric or 'political'.

Box VI – Conflict sensitivity training with government officials in Kenya

Based on the Resource Pack, the Africa Peace Forum, Center for Conflict Resolution and Saferworld have conducted CSA awareness-raising and training workshops in 2003 and 2004 with provincial administration officials from conflict-prone districts in Kenya. The district commissioners and district officers are responsible for all government projects (whether development, humanitarian assistance or peacebuilding) in their geographical areas. Their work potentially impacts hugely on the conflict dynamics in the communities where they work, yet they are given no training on conflict issues. It clearly emerged from these workshops how big the need is for more skills and capacity on understanding conflict and responses to conflict.

3.2 Conflict-sensitive business practice

The negative impact that the private sector can have on conflict dynamics is well documented. However, if applied in good faith, learning from conflict sensitivity and PCIA could assist the private sector to make better informed choices about avoiding negative impacts and enhancing possible positive impacts on violent conflict.

Drawing on the experience of the development and humanitarian sectors in conflict sensitivity, International Alert has developed 'Conflict-Sensitive Business Practice: Guidance for Extractive Industries'. This methodology provides a framework and tools to enable companies to anticipate, monitor and assess business interactions with conflict, and to design strategies to contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The methodology is closely linked to the operational lifecycle of oil, gas and mining ventures, from initial geological investigations, through exploration and production, to closure and withdrawal. Conflict-Sensitive Business Practice relates to all areas of business operation and influence – core business, social investment, and policy dialogue – and seeks strategies that not only aim to avoid contributing to conflict, but also to find practical and legitimate steps to contribute to peace. The development of the methodology has been guided by a multi-stakeholder steering group comprising industry, government and civil society

representatives, and has been discussed in detail with civil society representation in Colombia and at a mining site in Indonesia.[2]

4. Our experience in Sri Lanka – a case study

Just because an activity is labelled as peacebuilding does not automatically mean that it has a positive impact on conflict. Much of the focus in the development of thinking and practice has been aimed at the potential conflict insensitivity of humanitarian and development action. However, activities that promote dialogue, peace education, or reconciliation can also have negative impacts on conflict dynamics. The Resource Pack project found that peacebuilding actors found this a particularly difficult message to hear.

Likewise, just because an activity is designed to promote conflict sensitivity, does not mean that it is automatically conflict-sensitive in itself. A few examples are offered in the following section, which traces briefly the six-organisation conflict sensitivity project (described in Box I) as it was implemented in Sri Lanka. It provides insights into the extensive experience of conflict sensitivity documented by the project, indicating how conceptual development was driven by indigenous practice in the South.

4.1 Insights and Learning from Sri Lanka

Interviews, workshops and training events convened across Sri Lanka from 2002 to 2003 formed a major plank in the learning on practice and challenges in conflict sensitivity for the six-organisation project, alongside similar work in Kenya and Uganda, and other experiences in Nepal, Guatemala and beyond. The Sri Lankan experience involved the government of Sri Lanka, local and international NGOs as well as donors engaging in development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding programming. The project focussed on conflict sensitivity as a practical approach, in order to simplify the concept and promote its application, and thus framed it in terms of 'how to' rather than as an academic discussion. This generated not only a considerable body of knowledge on conflict sensitivity as practiced in Sri Lanka but also contributed to the development of conflict-sensitive practice in Sri Lanka as well as the project team's own learning.

As anticipated, the project team quickly discovered that conflict sensitivity is not new to Sri Lanka – many organisations were conflict aware, incorporating some form of conflict sensitivity within the framework of their interventions, although this was often ad hoc, intuitive and geographically uneven in application (particularly apparent was the gap between Colombo and the rest of the country). Few actors however, had embedded conflict sensitivity throughout their project lifecycle (i.e. were conflict-sensitive), although a handful of agencies, including AHIMSA (the 'Centre for Conflict Resolution and Peace', a Sri Lankan NGO based in Colombo), CARE, Oxfam, Helvetas (a Swiss development NGO based in Colombo) and DFID were on the leading edge in the application of conflict sensitivity in Sri Lanka. 'Do No Harm' is being used extensively in Sri Lanka and several agencies have developed their own tools to both sensitise programming and build capacity (internally and of partners). At the other end of the spectrum are those who were conflict blind, who did not use conflict analysis tools nor understood the links between their interventions and conflict. This was particularly concerning in certain conflict flashpoint rural communities that were also the sites of considerable development programming undertaken by civil society and the state.

2 The full set of documents comprising the Conflict-Sensitive Business Practice methodology is available on www.international-alert.org.

Not all implementation of the project in Sri Lanka went smoothly; we learnt some lessons the hard way. An initial lack of awareness of the local context by the international staff of the project team meant that we were not always as sensitive to the context as we should have been, nor made enough of the impressive cross-section of participants that attended organised events. More importantly, a dedicated conflict analysis was not undertaken at the start of the project, and the international partners were thus obliged to rely too heavily on the local partner for detailed context knowledge. As the project team came to recognise this crucial gap, a more methodical approach was taken, thus the emergent framework of linking conflict analysis to project planning and implementation was piloted in the ongoing Sri Lankan work. The project team recognised that there is a key need to demonstrate a willingness to learn in promoting conflict sensitivity.

4.2 Key outcomes of the work in Sri Lanka

The mapping process engaged numerous indigenous and international organisations, drawing the learning from the grassroots into the Resource Pack, and simultaneously helping to progress their understanding of conflict sensitivity. The concepts and terms of conflict sensitivity have been adopted widely in Sri Lanka, with considerable resonance and value attributed to them in key institutions. Indigenous technical expertise and self-sustaining training capacity has been supported and enhanced, and the project's partner organisation is driving domestic application with a strong sense of ownership.

It is impossible to capture here the wealth of conceptual development that was drawn from the organisations and individuals engaged in the Resource Pack project. Nevertheless two concepts warrant particular attention: linking conflict analyses with needs assessments, and developing indicators for conflict-sensitive monitoring and evaluation.

4.2.1 *Linking conflict analysis with needs assessment*

The foundation of conflict-sensitive practice is a thorough and regularly updated conflict analysis; it is the base rock to which all project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation should be linked. These linkages had previously not been clearly articulated and the work in Sri Lanka provided important examples of how to create such linkages between conflict analyses and needs assessments (Resource Pack, Chapter 3, Module 1, Section 2). Al Quraish Social Development Society (a Sri Lankan NGO based in Akkaraipattu), for example, uses a linked process: a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) that maps social welfare and identifies particular problems, supplemented by a conflict analysis to explore the root causes of such problems, mapping out a 'problem jungle'. This linked analysis expands the household focus of PRA to a more systemic understanding of problems and their causes. For instance, one PRA identified that school drop-out rates were contributing to poverty. Further analysis using a conflict tree (Responding to Conflict 2000) revealed that frequent displacement, destroyed and missing identity documents and orphan status were key causal factors of this.

Other organisations, such as AHIMSA and Helvetas use an integrated process. Helvetas incorporates components of conflict analysis tools into their PRA process, supplementing the individual perspective of the needs assessment with an analysis of the interests and strategies of conflict actors. For instance, a PRA revealed some unusually distant relations between sections of a community. Incorporating elements of the Attitudes, Behaviours and Context Triangle (Responding to Conflict 2000) enabled an understanding of why these relationships were distant. Another organisation, AHAM (a Sri Lankan NGO consortium, based in Trincomalee), uses a conflict analysis as a statement of need, such that the conflict analysis itself defines the intervention without an

additional needs assessment process. In a process facilitated by AHAM staff, representatives of the conflicting parties undertake a shared analysis and propose project interventions, which they then explain and discuss with their constituent communities.

4.2.2 *Developing indicators for conflict-sensitive monitoring and evaluation*

The development of indicators to measure the interaction between a project and its (conflict) context was of considerable interest to many Sri Lankan-based organisations. The Resource Pack promotes the use of perception-based indicators in addition to objective indicators to capture the more intangible impacts of programming, for example whether a respondent feels more or less safe (perception-based indicator) compared to the recorded number of incidents of violence (objective indicator). This approach drew on Oxfam Sri Lanka's ground-breaking work in devising indicators to evaluate their peacebuilding work. Oxfam's relationship building programme, which seeks to build relationships across communities divided by the conflict, involves inter-community exchange activities. A series of innovative indicators were developed by the beneficiaries and cross-checked by Oxfam, including:

- The existence of communications taking place above and beyond those organised by the project (including inter-group marriages)
- The form of visiting during organised encounters (Do people behave as relatives or strangers? What kinds of gifts do they bring?)
- Actions of those not directly involved in the organised encounters (for example, a Buddhist Monk who was not directly involved in the programme activities allowing announcements to be made in Tamil from the Buddhist Temple, when the Tamil language is not normally used by Buddhists).

These insights only scratch the surface of extensive and high calibre indigenous practices of conflict sensitivity, not only from Sri Lanka but also Kenya, Uganda and beyond.

5. The future of conflict sensitivity

There are a number of new sectors and areas to which the concepts and ideas underpinning conflict sensitivity could usefully be applied, as well as suggestions for the evolution of the concept.

5.1 Coherence with macro peace strategies and cooperation with other actors

As with PCIAs, conflict sensitivity is rooted in the belief that by improving the ability of development projects to avoid negative and maximise positive impacts, appropriately designed and implemented projects will contribute to sustainable peace (Bush 1998, 7; Gaigals with Leonhardt 2001, 23). However, because it remains extremely difficult to determine impact in peacebuilding, it cannot be said with any sort of confidence that a conflict-sensitive project will, *a priori*, contribute to the consolidation of peace. In other words, the maturation of conflict sensitivity requires an examination of the assumption that 'avoiding harm' and 'doing some good' necessarily builds peace. Two complementary avenues for such maturation are explored here: linking up conflict-sensitive projects with a broader peace strategy, and collaboration.

The Utstein Study of Peacebuilding identifies what Dan Smith calls a "strategic deficit" in peacebuilding. The majority of the peacebuilding projects analysed in the study did not have a clear connection to a country or regional peace strategy, also a pervasive problem for development

and humanitarian assistance (Smith 2004, 10). Just as better development practice should link development and humanitarian assistance projects to a broader country development strategy, projects should also be linked to a country-level peace strategy. Building such links is fundamental to deconstructing the assumption that conflict sensitivity will automatically contribute to peace. As Anderson and Olson point out, "people will say, 'I have to assume that, over time, all of our different activities will add up.' But the evidence shows that without explicit efforts to add it up, this does not automatically or inevitably occur" (Anderson and Olson 2003, 54). Linking conflict-sensitive projects to a country-level strategy would challenge practitioners to question assumptions, to understand the role and activities of other actors, and to ensure some level of collaboration and complementarity. More importantly, better understanding country-level implications for community-level projects would encourage practitioners to make the connections between their work and the macro conflict context.

Another important aspect of the strategic deficit is coordination both within agencies and with other complementary organisations. As Smith argues, agencies working in a "beneficiary country need all to be pulling in the same direction" (Smith 2004, 57). Calls for coordination amongst development, humanitarian and peacebuilding agencies are not new, and continue to be frustratingly evasive for a variety of reasons, including high staff workloads and the perceptions and reality of inter-agency competition. As Thania Paffenholz has said "everybody wants to coordinate, but nobody wants to be coordinated!" (Paffenholz 2004, 163). Conflict sensitivity provides two important mechanisms for coordination. First, joint conflict analyses – good practice in conflict sensitivity – help agencies to see how they can complement each other's efforts and ensure that the collective whole is more than the sum of its parts by providing a commonality of purpose. As Jeroen de Zeeuw puts it, "The lack of international consensus is […] linked to the absence of identified objectives and priorities for peace-building" (De Zeeuw 2001, 16). Second, understanding a context from a conflict-sensitive perspective helps agencies to understand that their own positive contributions to mitigating violence can easily be frustrated by carelessness from a conflict-blind or conflict-insensitive organisation operating in the same area. This realisation encourages organisations that wish to be conflict-sensitive to strategically engage with organisations they might otherwise choose not to engage with.

Box VII – Cross-agency collaboration in the Caucasus

In the three South Caucasian countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, for example, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has been working with a wide range of national and international development NGOs to raise conflict sensitivity awareness and capacity. By bringing representatives from both national and international NGOs together in joint workshops and training sessions, CRS has successfully encouraged cross-agency collaboration within and across the national and international divides. Agencies that have participated in the CRS activities have shown a strong desire to work together on joint conflict analyses and joint conflict-sensitive development projects. However, questions still remain as to how this initiative is explicitly linked to addressing macro conflict dynamics in the region.

Bringing a more strategic approach to conflict sensitivity also opens a new opportunity for measuring impact. Because of the existence of significant external factors, the peacebuilding field has struggled with measuring project impact. Conflict sensitivity faces similar problems with impact measurement, although there have been some recent advances (as outlined in Section 4.2.2 above, and Resource Pack Chapter 3, Module 3). Better understanding the interconnections between country-level macro

conflicts and community-level projects provides another opportunity for measuring impact, although significant and challenging questions do remain regarding how to measure the interaction and ascribe attribution.

New questions are also emerging. For example, with regards to stakeholders, can linking interventions to a country-level strategy and coordinating with other interventions produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? The application of conflict sensitivity at the project level typically identifies stakeholders in development, peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance projects as community members (beneficiaries and their neighbours) and development actors (Community Based Organisations, local and international NGOs, and donors). While these two categorisations of stakeholders are important, it is generally prohibitively difficult to determine how effecting positive change amongst them will support the consolidation of peace at the macro political level.

In terms of engaging with stakeholders, conflict sensitivity is quite clear about the need to work beyond one's own organisation, and even beyond partner organisations (Resource Pack, Chapter 4, 5). Bush (2003b) expresses concern that PCIA was seized from the field by bilateral and multilateral donors. It is therefore important that conflict sensitivity apply to – and be understood by – a wide range of stakeholders. For reasons of practicality and efficiency, the application of conflict sensitivity often leads organisations to work with other like-minded organisations and to advocate for change amongst those most amenable to change. To ensure that conflict-sensitive development, peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance projects do in fact contribute to the consolidation of peace, more work is required to effect change amongst agencies that are either uninterested or antagonistic to engaging constructively in conflict transformation.

5.2 Post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding

As with the unproven assumption that conflict-sensitive community-level projects will naturally contribute to peace, there is also a prevalent assumption that post-conflict reconstruction is inherently pro-peace. Some seem to think that there is no need to consider the risk of violence in post-conflict reconstruction because the conflict has been resolved (CSIS/ AUSA 2002, 2). Yet as US President Harry S. Truman said, "the absence of war is not peace".

Two aspects of post-conflict reconstruction illuminate the opportunity (and need) for the application of conflict sensitivity: First, democratisation, and second, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants. Timing is critical for both, not only to ensure they are understood as a long-term transition from emergency assistance to development, but also that they correspond to local realities and needs, rather than the political agendas of donor countries.

5.2.1 Democratisation

Many practitioners believe that democratisation *prima facie* contributes to peace (De Zeeuw 2001, 19). However, as a recent SIDA publication highlights, "democratisation in its first stages *increases* the likelihood of armed conflict" (Söderberg and Ohlson 2003, 1; emphasis added). Democratic governance, political party development, citizen education and particularly elections all have the potential to exacerbate societal tensions. The challenge is to support a societal shift from negative peace to positive peace without inadvertently increasing the likelihood of violent conflict.

Many post-conflict reconstruction interventions focus on democratisation processes and, more problematically, on the 'trappings' of democracy, the most celebrated of these being the multi-party election. The logic appears to be that by holding elections early, democracy will naturally follow. Or perhaps, more disingenuously, that the completion of an election offers positive proof of the existence of democracy in a particular country. In relation to the Palestinian elections, for

example, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair said "it was important to support the elections because it was the first opportunity for democracy to take hold on the Palestinian side" (Jones 2004, 1). In reality, elections in weak or conflict-affected countries are unlikely to be successful and unlikely to support either peace or democratisation processes. First, in even the most stable countries, elections are inherently about a struggle for power. In unstable countries this struggle can be "highly destabilising", encourage "ethnification" and sometimes lead to "political violence or armed conflict" (Söderberg and Ohlson 2003, 26). Second, elections in conflict-affected countries are "likely to lead to sedimentation of the existing power structures through a 'premature closure' of the process of democratisation" (Söderberg and Ohlson 2003, 26).

We are not aware of any processes undertaken to date that can be considered even an earnest attempt at 'conflict-sensitive democratisation'. Nevertheless, a picture is beginning to emerge of what such a process might look like. First, as indicated above, there is a need to de-emphasise democratic *mechanisms* and focus instead on the full breadth of democratic *culture* that includes the acceptance of norms such as transparency, accountability and responsiveness of institutions to public interest. In some fragile states and difficult partnerships we are now seeing a shift by the international community from supporting governments to supporting governance. This is a welcome shift because it recognizes that effective governance and democracy – particularly in conflict-affected contexts – require a change in culture, and not just improving or building new structures and processes.

So we can imagine that a conflict-sensitive approach to democratisation would involve building on a detailed understanding of existing indigenous governance norms and approaches to ensure that new approaches and interventions actually serve to consolidate peace, and do not entrench existing inequitable or unjust power structures. Clearly much work remains to be done on this issue.

5.2.2 *Demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR)*

Demobilising, disarming and reintegrating combatants is crucial in any post-conflict environment. At their most basic, DDR programmes attempt to remove arms from all but the regular armed forces (i.e. military and police) and to reintegrate former combatants into society. However, complex political and social contexts can undermine these interventions, resulting in a failure to contribute to consolidated peace and stability, or even in a recourse to arms. Evaluations of long-term impact seldom highlight the levels of conflict sensitivity of such programmes.

A government-led DDR programme in Uganda, for example, aimed to integrate former rebel groups and reduce the size of the regular army (Saferworld and InterAfrica Group 2000). However, an increasingly fragile security situation in the north, coupled with an under-funded reintegration phase, resulted in problems. Large numbers of the demobilised combatants were recruited into emerging rebel movements (often because of security threats to their families); others were re-absorbed in the standing army as home guards or reserve forces. Re-skilled individuals had to move to urban areas to be able to apply their new skills, but even there economic opportunities were limited. Membership in the army offered an easier livelihood option. A failure to understand and respond to the structural constraints in the socio-economic context meant the programme, at best, did not fulfil its potential and, at worst, created a pool of demobilised combatants without livelihoods in an unstable security environment.

Similarly, when designing a weapons collection or small arms programme, insufficient attention is often paid to the context; civilians and former combatants will only relinquish their arms if their security situation improves and they trust the state security services to protect them. In the

Karamoja region of Uganda, for example, several disarmament attempts by the government failed. The reasons include a general perception among the population that the government would not be able to protect them, and a situation where cattle rustling is key to economic survival. A conflict-sensitive disarmament programme should consider how to improve these circumstances.

There are numerous other areas that might also benefit from the application of a conflict sensitivity lens. More importantly, however, is the understanding that the consolidation of peace at a country-wide level requires a maturation of conflict sensitivity beyond a project-focus to a country-wide application.

6. Conclusion

We believe that some of the most useful conflict-sensitive approaches reflect the experience and findings of Southern organisations working in conflict-affected countries. These organisations have made a contribution to the implementation of better practice and to raising awareness, learning and reflection amongst a diverse group of actors. Key learning and trends have emerged from our experience with the implementation of conflict-sensitive approaches. While many of these are not new, and others were 'foretold', we believe our experience with implementation – and the documentation of others' experiences in other organisations and regions – gives us particular insight into conflict-sensitive approaches.

At the core of conflict sensitivity is an investment in learning about the conflict context and a responsibility to act upon that learning to make better-informed choices. These tasks seem deceptively simple. They, however, require a great deal of commitment on the part of any organisation. Tools help to 'concretise' the rather abstract concept of conflict sensitivity. Yet as we have noted throughout this piece, the reduction of PCIA or conflict sensitivity to a 'tools only' based understanding will not achieve the 'avoidance of negative impacts and the enhancement of positive impacts', nor will it empower in the way that some would hope. A lack of clarity on 'what is' conflict sensitivity or PCIA is not merely an academic issue, but one that inhibits its adoption and application. Moreover, while operational guidance in the form of tools is an important aspect of conflict sensitivity, true impact requires a more fundamental and focused transformation of institutional practices. This requires the 'mainstreaming' of conflict sensitivity within an organisation. Without mainstreaming, islands of better practice will emerge that will have limited impact. This paper describes key approaches to engage in conflict sensitivity mainstreaming, moving it from the conceptual to the practical. Mainstreaming is, however, a significant task for any organisation and will necessarily be a long-term process.

Conflict sensitivity has a relevance and importance to government, the private sector and peacebuilding actors, much beyond only the traditional humanitarian and development sectors. There is some emerging experience of engaging government and the private sector, but it is early days. Conceptually there is no reason why conflict sensitivity cannot be extended to new areas such as macro post-conflict reconstruction and DDR. We, and those we were working with, learnt the hard way that conflict sensitivity is relevant to all programming, including programming aimed at promoting conflict sensitivity. We know from experience that for conflict sensitivity to move beyond rhetoric and concepts, changes in practice are required, not least by those organisations and individuals championing it.

Our experience in Sri Lanka, Kenya and Uganda demonstrates that a number of agencies have already developed methods to understand the conflict environment, make informed decisions

on how to avoid negative impact, and increase positive impacts. A wealth of experience exists that, while not specifically called or understood as 'conflict sensitivity' or PCIA, is nevertheless highly relevant, important and should be studied and utilised by practitioners and scholars alike. The adaptation of existing methods of assessment and evaluation in the humanitarian and development sector to make them more conflict-focussed is also being attempted, and again shows some promise. The development of impact monitoring and evaluation remains an area of huge interest, but one in which there is the least guidance in terms of theory or practice. New thinking on topics such as 'interaction indicators' shows promise worthy of application and subsequent learning. More application and documentation of practice should be the focus rather than conceptual tinkering, away from the realities of implementation.

The last five years have seen significant advances in the application of conflict sensitivity, though application remains weak in both breadth and depth across the myriad of actors and processes connected with 'development' worldwide. Conflict sensitivity has not yet reached the same level of recognition as have topics such as mainstreaming the environment, gender or rights-based approaches. Nor has conflict sensitivity yet become the catalyst for empowerment of communities that some analysts would have hoped.

Despite the limits of the breadth and depth of applications of conflict sensitivity, there are a number of new areas and difficult questions it can help address. Conflict sensitivity and emerging thinking such as 'strategic peacebuilding' complement each other, and as we have indicated, may help address some of the issues concerning coordination of agencies and the divide between micro-level interventions and macro-level impact. As was often indicated by practitioners in Sri Lanka, Kenya and Uganda, the responsibility and need to be conflict-sensitive increased with the size and influence of the organisation. For conflict sensitivity to truly have an impact it must be adopted by all actors (national governments, donors, international NGOs and civil society) – with the understanding that there are many practical and political obstacles to making this a reality. The challenge of the future of conflict sensitivity is for the views of those at the sharp end of implementation to be continually sought in order to achieve learning and accountability. These views should be sought in much more comprehensive, systematic and impartial ways than has been the case in the past.

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