

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY, ACCOUNTABILITY TO AFFECTED POPULATIONS, RISK MANAGEMENT & PROTECTION: How do they relate to each other?

1. A Proliferation of Topical Expectations.

The specialisation of relief, transition and recovery work has led to thematic fragmentation, in which different topics have generated their own specialised guidance. Faced with the expectation that we operationalise standards and guidance on such diversity of topics, we naturally chose to prioritise those that are core to our organisation's mandate (e.g. 'protection'), for which there is a movement around sector-wide standards (e.g. 'accountability to affected populations' (AAP), or that a key donor shows interest in. Others may end up being considered a wishful 'add on', nice to have in a perfect world, but not realistic for already overburdened aid workers.

In this blog, I explore how the four topics of the title relate to each other.

Consider a situation with some 8000 internally displaced people, living in a spread out rather than concentrated 'settlement', on the outskirts of a large town. Religious tensions are one of the major fault lines in this violence-affected society, and the displaced are of a different religious faith than the town residents. During the day, men from the displaced population seek casual work in town, or take part in cash-for-work schemes on public infrastructure there, organised by aid agencies in order to create some constructive relationships between displaced and host populations. Water in the displacement settlement is scarce, is trucked in usually in the mid-afternoon, and collected by women.

2. Risk Management, Protection & Conflict Sensitivity.

We have received reports that notably women living further away from the water distribution points, often get harassed and sometimes sexually aggressed after returning with water collected from the trucks. There are allegations that aggressors come from the town population, something the local administration firmly rejects. We have also received reports of IDP men carrying out casual labour not being paid correctly by their 'host' employer, and regularly being insulted and threatened, even when involved in cash-for-work.

Most 'risk management' tends to focus on the risks to our own organisation, staff and programme. Typical risks that appear in project proposals and risk management matrices are fiduciary, security, reputational and legal risks, or risks of significant delays in our programming, making it impossible to achieve 'results' as planned. The focus is on internal risks and risks related to how our operating environment can impact on us.

A broader understanding of 'risk management' would draw our attention to 'risks' for the populations in our operating area. As the example shows, it then quickly invokes 'protection'

concerns. From a *conflict-sensitivity* perspective, I should already have considered the ‘risk’ of unintentionally ‘doing harm’ when designing my water and cash-for-work activities. Aware of the problems, I now want to adjust these activities, but must again consider the possibly negative consequences from how I will address the two issues. I might consider, for example, opening up the cash-for-work programme to poorer families among the host community, thereby creating a mixed work force. I hope this will create more positive relationship among host and IDP workers, which may lead to a reduction in insults and threats to the latter. But that is a speculative ‘hope line’: if we do not handle this very carefully, the adjustment may have no impact or even aggravate the tensions between both groups.

The brief example shows a close connection between ‘*protection*’ concerns and the responsibility to operate with ‘*conflict sensitivity*’. There are also some differences between both perspectives, and therefore the actions that can result from them.

- Protection work often goes down to the level of the individual: conflict-sensitive actions tend to remain more at the level of intra- and inter-group dynamics.
- The broader risk perspective and a protection perspective, focus on the risks to certain individuals and social groups, irrespective of our organisation’s presence. Conflict sensitivity puts my own organisation into that dynamic landscape. It makes me ask whether *what* we do, *how* and *with whom* we do it, can, notwithstanding its good intentions, add to or create new risks of harm for those individuals and social groups.
- A conflict-sensitive perspective pays more attention, not just to the more visible violations of people’s rights, but also the power hierarchies and patterns of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion, that contribute, structurally, to people’s vulnerability.
- From a protection perspective, we tend to see unequal relationships and dual roles within those: victims and aggressors, rights-holders and duty-bearers, violator and violated etc. From a conflict-sensitive perspective, we can see a more complex picture: Not all whose rights were violated or who were aggressed, remain passive. Some offer resistance, stand up for their rights, fight back to defend themselves, or even become revenge aggressors. The previously clear-cut categories have become blurred.
- A conflict-sensitive perspective may lead us to adopt another positioning and another role from that of a protector. As a protector, we stand with the rights-holder and the victim. Confronted with more complex conflict-dynamics, we need to position ourselves more in-between the different actors, in a place that allows us to contribute to defusing the situation and enable the conflicting actors to pursue more constructive approaches – or to support those better placed than us, to play such role.

To illustrate these last points: Consider a situation where 60 asylum seekers have been kept in a transit center for many months. The conditions are poor, and they have no idea what may happen next and when. In a protection role, we strive to improve their material conditions, ensure they have access to basic services, and help them constitute their personal dossier. We may enable them access to legal advice, and will engage with the authorities as duty bearers for their material conditions and for the speedy and fair processing of their individual cases.

One weekend however, the frustration of some of the asylum seekers boils over. They go out in the streets. Their demonstration quickly turns into vandalism, with cars being damaged and even set on fire, a shop looted, and passers-by intimidated. The authorities send in the riot police.

What used to be a rights holder- duty bearer situation, has now turned more confrontational and conflictual. From a conflict-sensitive point of view, we understand the asylum seekers but also the reactions of the authorities. Now the priority is to defuse the situation, and recreate an atmosphere conducive to more constructive interaction. To that end, we may have to reposition ourselves. Some of the asylum-seekers may feel betrayed, that we seem no longer 'on their side'. We will have to manage the, perhaps temporary but for now real, changes in relationships.

3. AAP, Protection and Conflict Sensitivity.

Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) is the commitment of aid workers and organisations to use the power and resource entrusted to them ethically and responsibly, combined with effective and quality programming that recognises the community's dignity, capacity and right to participate in decisions that affect them. It means taking account of the views of affected people in the design and implementation of aid activities, collecting and acting upon feedback from them, and being held to account for the quality, fairness and effectiveness of their actions.

One important aspect of AAP is the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), notably by those who should be protecting and serving people in distress: government officials, aid workers, peace keepers etc. People may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation, not only from others, but also from us. We too are duty bearers. Here there is strong convergence between 'protection' and 'AAP', with AAP bringing in the same *self-critical lens* that acting with conflict-sensitive requires us to adopt.

AAP and conflict-sensitivity require us to pay attention to not just '*needs*' and '*rights*' but also to the *quality of relationships*. While a conflict-sensitivity lens looks at a wider set of relationships, e.g. within IDP and host populations and between them, it does include the quality of relationship between the affected populations and us, which is central to AAP.

AAP and conflict sensitivity can support each other: If we have an effective feedback and complaints mechanism, it may help us pick up unintended negative consequences of our intervention. A concern not to cause unintentional harm, will reinforce our care that the AAP feedback and complaints mechanism is indeed 'safe' for people to use, and doesn't expose them to any form of retaliation. It also keeps our eye on the 'implicit messages' we may be sending through our behaviours: reducing people to statistics, to categories of 'displaced' and 'host', to their 'needs', whether we like it or not, is taking away much of their dignity, of their diversity, and of their confidence in their ability to make their own choices. Our power and privilege as aid workers can also lead to behaviours of indifference, impatience, and superiority, which further confirm to those in distress their loss of autonomy and worthiness. Fierce rivalry among aid agencies sends a clear message that competition, not collaboration, is the norm.

A conflict-sensitive way of working goes beyond the local level, where AAP is centered, and includes strategic choices such as who you take funding from, and on what terms. But if we act with great conflict-sensitivity, and prevent or mitigate negative consequences from our intervention, then this is something positive we can account for to the affected populations.

4. *In Conclusion.*

At operational level, there is overall *strong convergence and potential mutual reinforcement* between risk management (understood more broadly), protection work, and acting with conflict-sensitivity and accountability to affected populations.

All require a *quality of understanding of the operating environment* that goes beyond ‘needs’ and standard categories^[1] of ‘vulnerable’ people. A conflict-sensitive approach makes us ask questions about what ‘connects’ people in this environment, and what ‘divides’ them. It also requires us to understand much better the power dynamics, and the patterns of marginalisation and exclusion, or inclusion, within and between social groups.

Assessing ‘risk’ to affected populations, invites ‘protection’ actions, though both perspectives tend to keep the assistance agencies out of the landscape. The responsibility to act with accountability to affected populations and with conflict-sensitivity, *puts us squarely into the picture, in a more self-aware and self-critical manner*. They require us to pay attention to the quality of relationship between different components of the affected populations, and us assistance providers. Which is influenced by what and how we implement, by our behaviours, by our ability to manage diverse relationships, and to communicate but also listen well.

The various perspectives also lead to a richer appraisal of what constitutes ‘effectiveness’: ‘*Effectiveness*’ is not just a matter of efficient delivery of goods and services, but of doing this in a way that takes into account the complex social dynamics within and between social groups, so that it does not increase tensions and conflicts, or creates new ones. It also means operating in a way that is transparent and accountable to the diverse affected populations. This becomes a sophisticated way of operating, for which technical and logistical skills in the team need to be complemented with social (science) skills. It expands what we monitor and periodically review, and may lead to intervention adaptations that were not foreseen. It may slow us down and increase somewhat the budget. Does that mean ‘less value-for-money’? Not if you are serious about considering ‘value’, and let the affected populations have their say on that matter.

5. *Key Questions to Ask*

- *What are the risks to people in this (evolving) environment?*
- *Who needs protection assistance, what would provide effective protection here?*
- *What are the power hierarchies and power relations here, what the patterns of marginalisation, of exclusion or inclusion, that contribute to vulnerability?*
- *What divides people here, what can connect them? How do we contribute to ‘connection’ and avoid confirming or creating further ‘division’?*
- *Are we providing all stakeholders here with the necessary information, on time and in an understandable manner? Does it reach everyone correctly, including those with less power and often marginalised? Can all members of the social groups here express their priorities and feed into the design and adjustments of the intervention?*
- *How does our intervention (what we do, how we do it, and with whom we do it), and the power we ourselves have, impact on the relationships within and between social groups here? How does it impact on individual's and family's sense of self-worth and control over their lives?*
- *Are there safe and effective ways in which people can feedback and complain to us, and are we responding timely and appropriately? Is our monitoring and listening ‘system’*

effective in picking up unintended consequences, even some too sensitive for people to mention? Are we thoughtful and careful about the adjustments we then make?

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<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/conflict-sensitivity-accountability-affected-risk-how-brabant/>

[1] Men are typically not considered a vulnerable category. But in our first example, the IDP labourers into town, though men, could well become vulnerable to physical aggression and attack: a contextual vulnerability