

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY: Some Misunderstandings and a Blind Spot?

In 1999 Mary Anderson published ‘*Do No Harm: How aid can support peace-or war*’”. It was the start of an intensive reflection and learning about ‘conflict sensitivity’. In essence this draws attention to the two-way interaction between our presence and programming within an environment where there are tensions or open conflict. It makes us anticipate how conflict might impact on us and in that sense is not unlike aspects of ‘risk management’. But most importantly, it asks us to be very attentive and careful about how our presence and programming can aggravate a situation, by increasing existing inequalities, tensions and conflicts or creating new ones.

Since then many agencies have produced their own manuals; some collaborated in the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium that produced many resource materials; lots of people have been on training courses, and some donors are asking that agencies applying for funding in volatile situations demonstrate organisational competency in conflict sensitivity ways of working.

Yet in my own recent work on conflict-sensitivity with diplomats, donors and operational agencies, I still come across some persistent misunderstandings – and a major blind spot.

1. Not Uncommon Misunderstandings.

a. *Because we work in or on conflict, we are automatically conflict-sensitive.* A reaction not uncommon among diplomats and their advisers, it actually equates ‘conflict sensitivity’ with simple awareness that there is ‘conflict’ around. That is not good enough. ‘Conflict sensitivity’ demands that we are very attentive to whether our presence and actions actually aggravate the situation. If the diplomatic world really acted with ‘conflict sensitivity’, we would not see the frequent competition between countries and individuals for primary roles in ‘mediation’. After all, this signals to the conflicting parties that strive rather than collaboration is actually OK, and gives them plenty of opportunities to play games and shop around for the mediator most amenable to their interests.

b. *Conflict sensitivity is a(nother) methodology.* Manuals and training courses on conflict-sensitivity teach us, for example, about ‘dividers’ and ‘connectors’, to be attentive to who benefits from resource transfers and what ‘messages’ we send, also implicitly through our actions and behaviours. This our overloaded colleagues in the field are then expected to apply on top of, say, methodologically guided gender and market analysis, monitoring of smart indicators, and perhaps later ‘outcome harvesting’. Yes, also for conflict-sensitivity there is methodological guidance. But working with strong conflict-sensitivity is first and foremost a responsibility. The medical Hippocratic Oath to ‘above all, do no harm’ is an ethical prescript, not a methodology. If our goal is to protect people from distress, to relief suffering, reduce violence and build peace, then not aggravating the situation should be a concern that goes deeper than a methodological worry. Not only at the project level but also at the macro-level. If only the big international players had acted with greater conflict-sensitivity in Iraq after 2003?

c. *The unit for conflict-sensitive practice is the individual agency:* Much of the effort has been focused on ‘mainstreaming’ conflict sensitivity within individual agencies, and

their partners and contractors. That is necessary but not sufficient. Very often tensions and increased conflict arise from the dynamics generated by the actions of different agencies. To use the above example: The conflict-sensitive behaviour of one mediator can be totally offset by the actions of other would-be mediators. If one agency has been supporting local communities to grow dry land rice and develop a seed bank, and another then comes in with free food handouts, the rice and seed bank work will probably collapse, and conflict ensue between the agencies and different members of the community. If one agency offers medical care to refugees and host populations, and another only to refugees, the resentments in the host community will still persist and may increase. Individual agency monitoring systems are not geared to assessing possibly negative impacts of different agencies intervening in different ways around similar issues in the same environment.

d. *Conflict-sensitivity can be practiced from an office:* Aid workers nowadays spent far less quality time ‘out in the field’ than 25 years ago, because we have so much bureaucracy and communications to deal with, and security procedures to observe. Yet there is no effective way of finding out, timely i.e. before derailment or escalation, whether your presence and actions have negative impacts, than being ‘out there’. You need to have your finger on the pulse. You need to really understand the environment you are operating in. Good monitoring ‘systems’ with ‘indicators’ that pick up rising tensions or conflict, still fundamentally depend on people picking up and correctly interpreting the signals. At the same time, we cannot overly rely on the indicators we monitor, because in their own way they create tunnel vision. They focus our attention on certain elements, and distract us from looking wider. We need to also hang around in that environment with a mind, ears and eyes open to the ‘unexpected’, the signal that we had not identified as an ‘indicator’.

2. A Major Blind Spot? Interventions to catalyse transformative change.

‘Do No Harm’ thinking has been developed first and foremost with reference to relief operations. But as the mediation example already shows, it is applicable to the wider spectrum of political/diplomatic, developmental, peace and governance ‘interventions’. Within the peacebuilding world, the notion that ‘peace work’ might in certain instances increase tensions and conflict is still as surprising as diplomats discovering that perhaps they are not that ‘conflict sensitive’.

Many of these interventions pursue outcomes that change the status quo, particularly with regard to power relations. Where there is no real ‘democratic culture’ we know that the introduction of multi-party politics and elections heightens tensions and conflicts as the competition for power and control over state resources gets sharper. Rights-based programming is going to make the duty-bearers uneasy; security sector reform will be seen as a threat by certain elements in the military and police; women empowerment programmes challenge the social superiority of men; peace work is troubling to those who benefit from the war economy; providing farmers with reliable and timely market information reduces the power of the middlemen who buy their produce and take it to market etc. In some instances, the change process will increase tensions but there will not be too much upheaval. In other situations however, those who feel that their power is being challenged, will resist more strongly and even fight back.

So what does this mean with regard to conflict-sensitivity? If the outcomes we pursue imply significant changes in the socio-economic and political ‘order’, some people are going to perceive their interests as being ‘harmed’. So our ‘Do No Harm’ motto cannot be absolute. A more equitable society rarely comes about without conflict. And where there is no elite or broader social pact that violence has no place in the power struggles, blood may well be spilled.

Certainly outsiders coming into another society, not just to relief suffering but with a larger change agenda, need to seriously examine their responsibilities in encouraging and supporting

transformative change efforts. Because these change efforts will increase tensions and may escalate conflict. And because those most at risk of countermeasures by those in power, will usually be local people. Where our programmes empower women to pursue a significant change in the gender relations, sometimes angry men will threaten our agency staff. But overall it is their women who are most vulnerable to backlash. Just as the farmers are more vulnerable to aggressive attempts by the middlemen to maintain their monopoly positions, or local activists demanding disarmament and demobilisation can be attacked by fighters who don't want to lose their power derived from the gun.

Here we see clearly that 'conflict sensitivity' is not a matter of 'methodology' but of 'responsibility'. The central question is: What is our responsibility when we encourage and support transformative changes that can put others at serious risk? And what does this mean in practice?

Two attention points can be identified already:

- *Our 'legitimacy', our 'social license to operate' in this environment:* If we as outside agency, with local partners, encourage and support transformative change that is likely to increase tensions and conflict, we can only do so if we have fairly broad-based acceptance and legitimacy among the local population.
- *Local stakeholders determine the threshold of acceptable risk:* Given that they are most vulnerable to possibly violent backlash, it have to be local stakeholders that decide the tactics, timing, pace and intensity of the change effort. This is of course not as straightforward as it sounds: some will be prepared to take more risk than others and want to push on. Others will fear this is too dangerous. How do we handle this?

The practical meaning of 'conflict sensitivity' when programming for transformative change is not something that has been well researched and reflected upon. It is urgently needed. Any studies, case examples and reflections are warmly welcomed.

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