

## CONFLICT ANALYSIS: DATA AND NARRATIVES

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### 1. How We Communicate about Tensions, Conflicts and Ways to Reduce Them

A dispute with family members does not manifest itself in the form of quantifiable data alone, but as emotionally charged narratives or 'stories'. How you position yourself in that tense family environment is probably also not going to be driven by data but more by your emotional and social intelligence.

Similarly, while it may be useful to collect a multitude of quantitative data on the consequences of conflict-induced suffering, and the impacts of humanitarian alleviation of these, measurable indicators do not tell the whole conflict story.

### 2. Data and Narratives as Evidence

Can narratives – 'anecdotes', 'stories' – be taken serious as a basis for decision-making?

*A first misunderstanding: Data are evidence.*

'Data' do not speak for themselves. Ultimately, an interpretation is required of what factors have generated the 'data' as they are, and what actions the 'data' suggest now be taken. To give a contemporary example: the data tell us that the mortality rate from COVID-19 in Italy is higher than in Germany. They do not automatically explain why. Perhaps reporting modalities are different in each country? We thus need to inquire into all sorts of contextual factors. These will be expressed and communicated in narrative form.

Because data require interpretation, it is possible to lie with statistics.<sup>1</sup>

*A second misunderstanding: Stories are (unreliable) anecdotes.*

One story may be an anecdote, but a set of stories may show a pattern.

Even if there is only one story, it may influence mass behaviour. Humanitarian actors in certain operating environments have started tracking 'rumours' (false stories) and countering them with accurate information if needed. The classical media, and even more so social media, provide us more stories/narratives than data points. With contemporary interconnectivity, these stories spread ever faster, and people act upon them. One story that aid actors tell about themselves is that their decision-making is 'evidence-based'. Is it, really? Do we have strong 'evidence' for that?

If narratives (with the emotional content that quantitative data lack) can have such a major influence on people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, they are definitely worth paying attention to.

This is not an argument against 'data'. It is a cautionary note about overrating them as the only worthwhile source of information.

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<sup>1</sup> Huff, D. 1954: *How to Lie with Statistics*. New York, Norton & Company (freely available on <http://faculty.neu.edu.cn/cc/zhangyf/papers/How-to-Lie-with-Statistics.pdf>) See also Monmonier, M. first edition 1991, 3th edition 2018: *How to Lie with Maps*. Univ. of Chicago Press

### 3. The Relationships between Qualitative Narratives and Quantitative Data

Is it not useful or necessary to turn qualitative insights into quantifiable data? Sometimes it is. Software is available to scan narrative texts and identify whether certain words or phrases are used repeatedly, for instance, or within certain combinations of other textual elements. That can be an indication of the importance certain terms have on the ways we make sense of the world. If done over time, it may be possible to pick up shifts in discourse this way.<sup>2</sup> But such analyses, often conducted (beyond academia) by ‘spin doctors’ engaged in political campaigning or advertising, are probably quite removed from the daily analytical concerns of the humanitarian. And for our daily practice, it is worth thinking about whether all our ‘data’ has to be in quantitative form in order to be of merit.

*A third misunderstanding: all empirical knowledge must be expressed quantitatively.*

Importantly, we can (and do) conduct surveys among affected populations to assess their current experiences beyond their humanitarian needs. Such surveys tend to be undertaken in less acute crisis situations, e.g. when the overall level of violence has (temporarily or more permanently) reduced. We can inquire whether people feel more ‘secure’ (and what that means in terms of their practical, daily, experience). We can inquire about their ‘hopes’ and ‘fears’, or their ‘images’ (stereotypes) of ‘the other’. And we do this with questionnaires, giving us quantifiable data. But that data still needs to be interpreted, contextualised, and put into perspective: which is why the in-depth knowledge (the stories, the narratives) of those undertaking the analysis is so crucial.

The critic will point out that this ‘in-depth knowledge’ introduces various forms of bias. This is certainly true: surveys are anything but a ‘neutral’ data collection instrument. To give a few elements:

- **Sampling frames:** the administrator of the survey will have to rely on their own knowledge (of statistics and the context!) to decide how to run the survey (simple, stratified or cluster random sampling etc.) in order to get a ‘representative’ view of the target population. These are important decisions that will have a significant bearing on the ‘results’ of the survey. And they are decisions taken beyond the remit of the quantifiable data themselves.
- **The questions posed:** the choice of questions, the way they are phrased and, in a multiple choice survey, the options for answers, are all heavily influenced by the interests and the assumptions of those who designs the survey and/or the client for whom the survey is conducted. Studies have shown that merely by changing the order of the questions in the survey, the answers change as respondents are ‘prompted’ to think in one direction rather than another. Just ask any political polling company!
- **The answers received:** we cannot assume that survey respondents will answer fully and truthfully, certainly not to questions about sensitive topics. They may calculate their interest in choosing how to answer, depending on whom they understand is behind the survey or within earshot of the answer. Or they may be cautious with their answers because of a risk of negative consequences from others, with power over their situation. Or they may simply be bored by the survey or in a hurry. Survey design and survey administration may have to be conducted with lots of conflict-sensitivity!

The point is that while we, as practitioners – and donors! – tend to ‘hide’ behind the numbers as being the solid ‘evidence base’ needed for decision-making, the way those numbers are generated leaves plenty of scope for subjectivity. That is not a problem in and of itself, as long as we – the analysts as well as the users of such analysis – are transparent about the methods used and acknowledge the limitations faced: the validity of a study is a function of the honesty and openness of those who conducted it. However, who reads the methods section of a report!?

When discussing conflict (and/or violence reduction or peace) dynamics, donors themselves accept and certainly talk in narrative form. They may not (yet) see you as a useful interlocutor on conflict dynamics; but they will hear your narrative when they realise it is not only insightful but also thoughtful about the reliability of its sources and the interpretations offered.

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<sup>2</sup> Such analytical techniques could also be applied to the narrative texts of project and programme proposals and the analysis of donor policies and/or guidelines. Both, as we know, are susceptible to trends in terminology: from malnutrition to food security, from vulnerability to resilience.