# CONFLICT ANALYSIS: 13 Weaknesses to Avoid.

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Tensions and open violence in the world are on the rise. Relief workers, diplomats, mediators, peacebuilders, as well as private sector actors, the media and a worried general public, are all trying to understand what is happening and how these negative dynamics can be halted - and transformed into more constructive ones. Many of us carry out 'conflict analyses' to deepen our understanding of what is going on, who is involved and what the confrontation is about. Conflict analyses are intended to help us decide how to position ourselves in a complex landscape, and to design appropriate actions.

To make the most of it, we need to avoid thirteen frequently observed weaknesses that undermine their potential.

**The Wrong Attitude.**

1. *Conflict-analysis as administrative requirement:* We only do a formal conflict analysis because our donors or headquarters want to see one. So we tick the bureaucratic checklist, once. But there is no noticeable connection between our programming and the analysis.

2. *Mandate and supply-driven conflict analysis*: We analyse the situation in such a way that it will justify what we wanted to do anyway, based on our mandate, or the particular service we supply. Or what funding is available for. If my agency is focused on political party development, then our conflict analysis is likely to put problems with the political party system and practices in this country, center-stage. If our mandate relates to population-movements and forced displacement, then our analysis may put the spotlight on that phenomenon as cause and consequence. If there is a lot of funding available to prevent violent extremism, then we will orient our analysis towards the threat of radicalisation and violent extremism. Understandable as these institutional reflexes are, they are not likely to produce a deep and nuanced insight in what is going on, particularly as seen through the eyes of the key actors and stakeholders in the country concerned.

**Methodological Weaknesses.**

3. *Confusing context-conflict-situational analysis:* Certainly if we are outsiders, we need to understand the general context we operate in. Just as we read the introductory chapter in a Lonely Planet guide before going on holiday somewhere new. But not everything in a 'context' is relevant for the conflict-and peace dynamics. Context-analysis also tends to relate to conflict- and peace analysis as the parts of an ice-berg above and below the waterline. Much of the conflict-and peace dynamics is not easily visible. A situational analysis on the other hand, focuses more on the short-term and what happens on the surface. We need it to inform our tactical moves in that situation. But without an understanding of the deeper currents below the surface, we will remain in reactive mode, unable to operate more strategically.

4. ***Making too much of 'phases' of conflict***: We tend to talk about 'pre- ', 'during' and 'post-conflict' situations. That is a misnomer. What is really refers to is the occurrence and scale of violence. A formal peace agreement, just like a governmental clamp down, can significantly reduce the level of violence. That doesn't mean the 'conflict' is over. At best, over time, it will indeed transform into a generally more constructive dynamic; at worst it will be 'frozen', perhaps only temporarily. It may flare up again. And of course, in many places we see protracted conflicts: take Colombia, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan as examples, perhaps Kosovo too? It may make more sense to talk about periods of rising tensions and escalation, and moments of de-escalation. That also forces us to be more realistic about what we might be achieving. And tells us we need to engage for the long-term.

5. ***Seeing only 'open conflict':*** We all know from personal experience that there can be 'tension' and 'simmering' conflict. There is no shouting or shooting, but the fault lines are there. Generally speaking, outsiders are not good at sensing this. They also remain blind to it, because they fail to actively inquire into it. By 2005, the UN Mission in Timor Leste was hailed as a success. Even though the country had been virtually run for several years by thousands of experts, there was simply no awareness of the tensions among the East Timorese who had so recently gained their independence. Until intra-Timorese violence broke out in the spring of 2006. How connected are we, really, to the societies that we come to assist, if we miss so much of what is really living among its people?

6. ***Making too much of 'root causes'***: Personally, I find it much more helpful to analyse a situation in terms of 'key drivers of conflict', and 'contributing factors', than searching too long for 'root causes'. For two reasons: First: Conflicts are like viruses – they mutate. While there are continuities in the decades-long conflicts in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan etc., there have also been significant developments and changes. We must work on the contemporary dynamics before we can ever hope to address some of the long-standing, structural causes. Secondly, addressing 'root causes' is likely to be way beyond our programmatic and institutional abilities. Perhaps one of the 'root causes' of conflict in Afghanistan is the long-standing tension between a modernizing urban elite and a conservative rural population, that goes back at least 100 years. There is no programmatic solution for this, even if we had large-scale programme funding for a decade guaranteed. In Guatemala, one of the 'root causes' of 36 years of civil war undoubtedly was the deep socio-economic inequality, with wealth heavily concentrated in the hands of a small super-rich elite. The civil war ended with the Peace Agreements of 1996. But the deep inequalities persist – and are probably one of the factors why politically-driven violence in Guatemala has mutated into social and criminal violence. Focusing on 'root causes' may weaken my understanding of how conflict transforms and lead me to overpromise about what my intervention can realistically achieve.

7. ***Uncertainty about the chosen time frame***: How far does my conflict analysis go back in time: Five years, twenty years, a hundred years, more? Does the 1389 Battle of Kosovo have a role in the analysis of the ongoing conflict between Serbs and Albanian Kosovars? Do the Crusades (also as seen through 'Arab' eyes) a thousand years ago, have to figure into the analysis of the contemporary geo-political confrontations in the Middle East? There is no generic standard for how to treat 'history' in conflict analysis. But we can take three elements into account: a. *Personal experience*: People's own lived experience, and usually that of their parents (which they have absorbed as children) plays out in how they behave regarding conflictual issues. b.

*Important political changes*: The 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that is the basis of the contemporary states in the Middle East, remains a relevant reference. So too the changes from a one-party to a multi-party system, for example in Ivory Coast and Guinea Bissau in the early 90s, as it creates a different landscape for political competition. 3. *Historical narratives*: All of us live with selective narratives of history, which make us remember certain things, and forget others. Conflict entrepreneurs propagate narratives that incite emotion and polarisation. Participants in violence construct personal narratives to justify their actions: Listening to those who fought in civil wars. It seems there were only defenders and victims, no attackers or perpetrators. So we need to pay attention to the different narratives, and what historical events they use to mobilise and justify, not for their historical truth, but as a contributing factor to the contemporary conflict dynamics.

8. ***Pushing for one 'conflict analysis'***. It is in the nature of conflict (and peace work) that there are different narratives about the conflict (e.g. Israelis and Palestinians see the same events in very different light; there are different narratives about the historical relationship between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, just as there are different narratives about important aspects of the Second World War etc.) Competing narratives are precisely an indicator of the fault lines or antagonisms between different groups. Trying to erase the differences into one 'agreed' narrative, may actually lead us to converge with the narrative of a particular interest group, and make us reject the narrative other actors. Given its atrociously brutal behaviour, there wasn't much sympathy for the narrative of the RUF in Sierra Leone- And yet, however distorted, the narratives of those we ourselves don't agree with, point at some important factors that feed the cycle of confrontation and destruction. If for no other reason than that it appeals enough to mobilise support, we should bring it into our analysis. (Apply this to rule also to the current controversies over 'migration' and 'Brussels' in Europe.)  Rejecting or neglecting some of the narratives may also weaken our potential to play a constructive role as a (principled but still) impartial '3th party' in that environment.

9. ***Insufficient attention to the economic interests in violence and conflict:*** In situations of violence and open conflict, many suffer economic losses. Our tendency to design programmes based on 'needs', directs our attention to this. But for others, violence and war create opportunities for economic gain. Maintaining a situation of violence and open conflict also requires economic resources. Transforming conflict implies transforming war economies into peace economies. A tall order. Not paying attention to the economic dimensions – and benefits- of conflict, means we miss an important factor.

10. ***Failing to acknowledge somewhat separate yet also interlocking 'conflict dynamics':*** Typically, the conflict (and peace) dynamics at local or 'micro' level has a certain autonomy. Yet it also connects with the national and international dynamics. During the stabilisation period in Liberia for example, local level tensions and volatility could well be influenced by influential people based in the capital Monrovia or even abroad, who operated with a game plan of wider scope. The same happens in Somalia. The long-standing tensions in Tripoli city in Northern Lebanon, which have repeatedly erupted into violent clashes, relate to very local factors and dynamics, but are also mixed up with national Lebanese politics, and nowadays with the conflict dynamics in Syria and even the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. International actors can deliberately stir up tensions and clashes in Tripoli as part of their 'political messaging' and games to each other. While in return, locally-driven eruptions of violence can undermine the fragile balance and 'entente' among national Lebanese actors.

Effective peace work will require engagements at the different levels, not necessarily all by the same organisation.

11. ***Neglecting the capacities and initiatives for peace.*** Conflict analyses, like needs and many other assessments, tend to become portrayals of a 'glass half-empty'. We focus on the problems, what isn't working, the miseries and tragedies. The media, with their motto that *'good news is no news'* strongly encourage this. This also suits our organisational interests, as many of us intervening in conflict believe that we as outsiders and professionals must and can bring the 'solutions'. *Problem solvers look for a problem like a hammer looks for a nail.* But there is no situation of conflict where people are not also trying to reduce the violence and create more constructive dynamics. And where even more people are uncertain, feel powerless or are sitting on the fence like swing-voters. When supported and encouraged, these too can join the forces that oppose division and promote renewed connection and constructive relationship. So there is 'water in the glass', positive energy and drive, to learn from and to work with. We need to bring these out in our analysis, so that our action will support these forces for peace, rather than go parallel to theirs or even unintentionally undermine them.

12. ***Failing to inquire into what has been tried before***. Before large scale violence broke out, or while it has been going for a while, there usually have been different attempts to prevent or reduce escalation and to (re-)establish a climate of constructive resolution of differences. Our analysis should look at these, and why they apparently haven't produced the desired results. There can be a multitude of reasons: it was the right design but the wrong timing or the wrong leadership for the process; the design had some fatal flaws such as not including some key players etc. We will need reflective 'insiders' to these attempts, to identify which ones turned out critical in a particular instance. We need this learning to make our own attempts 'smarter'. If we did, we wouldn't continue to organise the sporadic 'Israeli-Palestinian peace process' in the same mould as the last 25 years.

**The Wrong Attitude.**

13. ***Analysis paralysis:*** Convinced by the previous observations, we now embark on such a deep, refined and nuanced analysis, that we don't get to act anymore, always wondering whether another actor or perspective must not be first included, and whether we are giving the right value or weight to a certain factor or actor. Our conflict analysis becomes a Ph.D. dissertation.

In practice, it is well possible to avoid both extremes of a superficial and biased analysis and a never-ending one. We can do this by practicing four good habits: a. Start out with the awareness that conflict and peace dynamics are *multi-facetted and multi-layered phenomena*, that you need to approach with nuance and finesse. b. Make the time to listen and listen and *listen to a wide variety of actors and stakeholders*, but to also test the coherence of their perspectives and reasoning by asking catalytic questions. c. Pay attention to stories, events, reactions that *do not easily fit in your understanding* of what is going on, and who and what drives it, and enrich, adjust, refine that understanding in an iterative learning process. d. Accept that you, nor anybody else, will ever fully understand the conflict and peace dynamics, because, like the human beings that create them, it is *not rational and coherent.*