

GOOD CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY AND PEACE BUILDING DONORSHIP

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Are our Formats and Procedures Fit-for-Purpose?

Tensions in the world are rising, human security is threatened in many places and more violent conflicts become intractable. Intervening and injecting financial resources in turbulent environments can increase the tensions and confrontations or create new ones. We know that we need to work with conflict-sensitivity, and support particularly local and national capacities for peaceful conflict management. Various aid donors actively support conflict-sensitive work and peacebuilding in their policies.

The question is: *Are our planning and grant making formats and procedures enabling or constraining for such?*

Working with conflict-sensitivity and peace work is typically non-linear and happens at variable pace. Sometimes we accelerate to grasp a window of opportunity, sometimes we need to slow down drastically because the situation is not ready for a certain step. We must anticipate set-backs.

Working with conflict-sensitivity or doing peacebuilding means focusing on the quality of relationships among divided and antagonistic groups. Improved relationships cannot be 'delivered' as per a plan, the way you can 'deliver' the rehabilitation of public service infrastructure like schools and clinics, or cash to people in acute distress. Yet by and large the aid world continues to operate with an illusion of 'control' that it rarely has, certainly not in turbulent environments, and even less so where it seeks to affect the relationship between different groups with high levels of distrust. Getting two important protagonists to -finally- agree to meet, can be a major milestone in its context and have taken months of persistent effort. But be dismissed as 'trivial' by those who sit far removed from that context.

'Project cycle management' is not a good fit for handling volatile socio-political dynamics. Yet we have to write project proposals with a detailed intervention logic, visualised in a linear cause-effect logframe, with a promise to deliver results by a given time, and a budget detailed accordingly. This encourages thoughtful planning. The problem arises when this becomes the reference for a legally binding contract. The Prussian Chief of Staff von Moltke famously stated "*No battle plan survives the first contact with the enemy*". Adapt to: "*Many relief and recovery or peace plans do not survive first contact with the conflicting parties.*"

Fortunately for peacekeepers and for diplomatic peace mediators and negotiators, they are not subjected to Results-Based Management approaches that bind them legally to 'deliver results' in fragmented, chaotic and violent environments. When it comes to them, donors and their political task masters demonstrate realism. Why does that realism so rarely extend to the efforts of aid-supported organisations?

Procedural constraints do not come from institutional donors only: operational organisations have their own. These too can be an obstacle to doing the right thing at the right time, and to rapid adaptation to an evolving contextual situation or based on internal learning about the effects, intended and unintended, of our intervention. Many operational organisations furthermore work with or support local 'partners', to whom they provide sub-grants. Do their procedures and requirements enable local partners to flexibly adapt where needed?

How do we overcome our own internal institutional contradictions, without falling into a vacuum of planning and of accountability? Here are a few useful steps:

1. Plan for adaptive management

“By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail” warned Benjamin Franklin. To which Eisenhower responded: “In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” Going into a volatile environment without a sense of what you want (hope) to achieve, and how and with whom you are going to get there, is like going into rough seas in a boat without rudder. You will be tossed around and likely go nowhere, or even drown.

Peace work and working with conflict sensitivity require planning - but of a different nature. “*Plan for sailboats not for trains*”, the brilliant subtitle of Rachel Kleinfeld’s Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report on “Improving Development Design and Evaluation”, says it all. Sailboats are subject to the forces of water and wind; their sailors must know the different abilities of different boats to cope with these. Sailboats get from A to Z but not in a straight line like a train. For centuries, sailors even ventured into uncharted waters, often having to return when a hoped-for passage turned out to be a creek with no other exit. Working in volatile environments, with conflict sensitivity and perhaps more ambitiously to reduce violence and contribute to greater peacefulness, requires the skill of sailors. Perseverance is good - but not if it means doggedly ‘staying the course’, as the US did for years after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, following the ‘plan’ virtually on automatic pilot and ignoring blatant evidence of massive negative consequences.

Much planning for action in volatile environments is overdesigned. We need to learn to plan for process-work and for adaptive management, building flexibility into our preparedness and planning itself. A good example of that, from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I have documented in an earlier blog. ([Encouraging sophisticated programming](#))ⁱ Theories of change, inasmuch as they are very contextually specific rather than generic, are more helpful than logframes, because they force us to render explicit our assumptions and revisit them regularly. Problem-driven iterative adaptation (PDIA) is another mindset and practice to operate in complex situations where there are no clear cause-effect relationships, so that we need rapid feedback and learning loops. ([PDIA why and how](#))ⁱⁱ In its 2017-2022 Sustainable Peace Strategy, the Swedish government deliberately mentions that “*The implementation of the strategy shall be characterised by an adaptive and iterative way of working.*”

2. Anticipate dilemmas

Violent and volatile environments often present us with moral dilemmas where our actions have some positive effects but also negative ones which we cannot reduce or correct. I heard it is part of the training of senior military in some forces. But have not yet seen a manual or training on ‘project cycle management’ in the aid sector that addresses dilemma management and provides practical guidance on working this through. My most useful resource so far has been the Framework for Ethical Decision Making from the Markkula Centre for Applied Ethics. ([Guidance ethical decision making](#))ⁱⁱⁱ

3. Engage your resources management colleagues

Working with conflict sensitivity or doing peace work has implications for decisions about human resources, logistics and procurement and finance. Cost and quality cannot always be the only considerations.

The best bid from a supplier, in terms of cost and quality, may come from a company that is headed by the brother of the local militia commander. It’s probably not a good idea to ignore that. It poses a double risk for you: first, if you have a problem with the contractor, you might find some militia members on your doorstep; secondly, working with this contractor may mean that some of the profits go to the irregular militia making you a supporter of the local war economy, or other socio-political groups will perceive you as aligned with the group the militia belongs to. When recruiting staff for field work in a fragmented and contested environment, I may not just choose those that scored best in the recruitment process, if these best candidates come overwhelmingly from one of the contesting groups. I may consciously opt to hire others who did less well, to have a staffing profile that includes all major

contesting groups in that environment. I am aware that by doing so I may bring the conflict dynamics into my organisation and am prepared to work on that. But I do it to underscore my impartiality to the conflicting parties, thereby increasing my acceptance and socio-political 'license to operate'. Financially, I may have to accept what has now become 'necessary duplication' e.g. in the rehabilitation of schools and health centres. Whereas previously a locally diverse population would share the health centre and school, their internal conflict may have led them to physically segregate into their own neighbourhoods and no longer willing or able to share the same service infrastructure. I may have to invest in additional school and health infrastructure to get enough coverage for the whole population – accepting an extra cost.

Unless my resources-managing colleagues understand and buy-in to the rationales of conflict-sensitivity and effective peace work, they may object, because these practices are not in line with the overall procedures.

Most training and guidance about conflict-sensitivity and peace work however focuses on programme staff, not their resources-managing colleagues. Recently, with a colleague, we ran a first workshop on conflict-sensitivity for resources-managers from UN and INGO organisations operating in Libya. Remarkable was their active interest and appreciation to be 'included' in this reflection. While most organisations have a provision for 'exceptions' of standard procedures, they actually recommended that the consideration of 'conflict-sensitivity' be written into the regular procedures, along 'cost' and 'quality' – and made an active element of the 'value' side in 'value-for-money' conversations. An entry point for this can be 'risk management' but now in its more comprehensive understanding: not only the risks from the operating environment to us and our operations (security, fraud and corruption, reputation) but also the risks of unintended negative consequences of our intervention in a turbulent environment.

They are right: Only by making conflict-sensitivity a standard consideration can we also counter other perverse incentives, a notable one being 'the pressure to spend'. Pouring money into a tense environment is often pouring oil on the fire. Yet I see managers ask more questions about the 'burn rate' than about negative impacts. This is irresponsible and potentially destructive.

These resources-managing colleagues were not happy with their segregation from their programme colleagues: They wanted to understand the narrative of a proposal and not just work on the budget, they wanted to see or hear the insights from conflict-and peace assessments and analysis that their colleagues conducted or commissioned, they were eager to see their organisation internally 'working-as-one', and sit together with their programme colleagues in discussions about dilemmas and difficult decisions.

Perhaps they were not a representative sample. Resources manager can also act as the staunch guardians of the procedural doctrine, resisting and refusing any exceptions or flexibility, even less so if they would lead to a deviation from a legally binding contract. This is misplaced: Resources management exists for two purposes: to enable operations and to exercise oversight and control for accountability. The primary purpose, deploying the right resources to enable contextually effective action, should not be rendered subordinate to the controlling function. That is counter-productive, as proper learning, review and evaluation processes, and management audits. will highlight.

4. Engage the oversight actors

Even if our resources-management colleagues are on board, they too remain subject to further oversight: from auditors and lawyers, and indirectly from parliament and the media. If we build process-work, adaptive management and the responsibility to work with conflict-sensitivity into the procedures and documents that get legally enshrined, we remove potential stumbling blocks for lawyers and auditors. Most of these are intelligent people: let's also spend some time explaining to them why this makes for very good practice in turbulent and complex environments. As for parliaments and the media, who cause worry to our colleagues in the aid administrations and their political task masters: most of them are solid realists as well. They too can understand why working in and on the conflict dynamics in e.g. Yemen, Libya, Mali, Syria or Afghanistan is not a simple straightforward 'delivery of planned results' story. Our journalist colleagues cannot 'deliver press freedom and protection of journalists' in e.g. Egypt, Turkey, Venezuela or Malta. Our parliamentarians, who alternate between governing and opposition, know full well that in our Western home countries most of our public sector programmes do not simply go 'according to plan' - or budget.

5. What about accountability?

How do we combine flexibility with accountability? Here are some of the attention points that emerged out of my many years as programme manager, proposal assessor, learning facilitator and programme evaluator:

- *Draws on collective learning and context insight?* I still see proposals and plans for action in troubled environments that are oblivious to the vast collective learning available. Too often, we still see poor designs and proposed actions with obvious shortcomings. Negative consequences are almost predictable. On the other hand, what the best things to do is, can be very context and even situation-specific. So here I will check how much insight the proposer actually has in the dynamics of the operating context.
- *Navigational skills?* When reviewing or evaluating an intervention in a volatile environment, seeing an organisation implement very much according to a plan (often established years before), rings an alarm bell rather than reassures. What I am looking for, and will positively appreciate, is skilful navigators in troubled waters – not just the captain but the crew as a whole.
- *The decision-trail?* Project progress and end reports are mostly written for administrative and contractual purposes. What I am interested in is a logbook of important decisions during the lifespan of the intervention, and the considerations that were taken into account. I positively value examples of adaptation and course correction, when based on ongoing assessment of the evolving dynamics in the environment, and constant learning about the various effects of our action in it. If in the reporting of a two-year intervention in a violent environment I don't find examples of course corrections driven by the identification of negative side-effects, I fear I found a serious case of conflict-blindness.
- *The views of those stuck in the storm?* The 'value' of an action is not (just) its relevance for the policy or strategy of a foreign government. What we really need to hear is the perceived and experienced value for those who are intended to benefit from it. If these views are absent, underrepresented, or given less weight, in our reporting or e-value-ation, we have lost our sense of purpose.
- *Longer term effects and impacts?* Many effect and consequences of an action don't show up quickly, within the relatively short time frames of a 'project'. Some of the more immediate and visible benefits may also not last – but perhaps our action has strengthened the confidence, competencies and capacities ('resilience') of those continuing to live in difficult circumstances. The deeper legacy is more interesting than the short-term successes. That means we need to assess, evaluate and appreciate over long-time frames.

We know all this from our domestic public policies, programmes and practices – let's apply that realistic wisdom also when we try to help other societies in turmoil.

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ⁱ<https://www.linkedin.com/post/edit/sophisticated-programming-how-donors-can-encourage-brabant>

ⁱⁱ<https://www.oecd.org/dac/accountable-effective-institutions/Governance%20Notebook%202.3%20Andrews%20et%20al.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>