

Beyond box-ticking:

How conflict sensitivity can shape a more equitable aid system

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Introduction

The last ten years have seen massive failings in the ability of the international aid system to translate the principles of conflict sensitivity into action. In Syria, for example, the Assad regime has used aid to starve opposition-held areas, prop up allies, and co-opt civil society (Syrian Association for Citizens Dignity 2021). In South Sudan, armed groups have manipulated aid to encourage population move-ments in ways that allow them to consolidate their power and drain support from their opponents (Craze 2022).

Yet, over this same period, we have seen more agencies committing themselves to conflict sensitivity: the ability of an organisation to understand how it interacts with a context and to use this to maximise potential positive and minimise negative impacts on peace (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium 2012). Many agencies now have conflict advisors, conduct conflict analyses, and have dedicated toolkits, guidelines, minimum standards, and operating principles. But still, we see aid used all over the world to legitimise actions that entrench rather than challenge conflict dynamics, inhibit progressive reforms, and undermine the agency of local civil society.

In this article, we build on arguments that conflict sensitivity risks becoming a box-ticking exercise – one that reflects rather than challenges the fundamental flaws in the aid

system (Handschin, Abitbol, and Alluri 2016). It suggests that a focus on providing practical support to over-come technical problems and improve aid effectiveness at the programme level has obscured the need for fundamental reforms needed in the system at large. It makes the case that the incentives that drive the aid system today undermine the development of a truly conflict-sensitive aid system. Despite this, we believe that conflict sensitivity remains an important concept, arguably more so now than ever, and one that can play a role in shaping an effective and equitable aid system. To do so, it needs to do more to challenge the power imbalances that lie at the heart of the aid system at large.

The views expressed reflect the experiences of the authors, gained over many years of analysing and supporting aid agencies to adopt conflict-sensitive practices.¹ We have worked across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding fields, in diverse contexts across the “Global North” and “Global South”. Our critique is focused on the incentives that impact the wider aid system, rather than on the behaviour of any specific agency within it, many of whom have been fighting for a more equitable and conflict-sensitive aid sector for years.

¹ The views included are those of the authors alone, all of whom are writing in a personal capacity.

Looking back: The evolution of conflict sensitivity

The concept of conflict sensitivity grew out of the work of Mary Anderson and colleagues in the mid-1990s (Anderson 1999). Their analysis of the unintended consequences of humanitarian assistance in prolonging the conflict in Central and East Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere, resulted in the foundational “Do No Harm” framework. From the early 2000s, policy influencers were advocating for reforms to embed conflict sensitivity into the organisational structures that govern how aid is designed and delivered. This included efforts to devolve more power and resources to people from the contexts where aid is being received, break out of rigid programme design models, and ensure resources are available for ongoing analysis across programme cycles. Since then, conflict sensitivity as a concept has informed progressive approaches to aid, such as adaptive management and outcome-based monitoring while linking with more critical agendas driving aid reform efforts, most notably, localisation and decolonisation debates (e.g. Saferworld and Save the Children 2019; Peace Direct 2021).

These positive impacts should not be downplayed. But as the rhetoric of conflict sensitivity has become more pervasive, the practice has arguably been absorbed into the very aid system that it originally sought to transform. In a bid to be as practical as possible, guidance is often tailored to fit with rather than disrupt pre-existing ways of working. An industry of consultancies, advisors, and researchers has grown up, paid to conduct analysis and develop toolkits, guidelines, and methodologies aimed at increasing uptake of conflict sensitivity. However, the more fundamental obstacles, such as the division of power within the sector stemming from its colonial roots, incentives that put fundraising and efficiency above contextual awareness, subordination of developmental to geopolitical objectives, and unequal partnerships, remain largely beyond the purview of most conflict-sensitivity discourses.

Structural obstacles to a conflict sensitive aid system

If conflict sensitivity is to play a stronger role in supporting a more equitable aid system, practitioners will need to find better ways of contending with a range of inter connected structural obstacles to change in the sector:

a) Lack of trust in ‘local’ actors

We know that aid will be more effective, efficient, and responsive to local realities and conflicts when it is shaped and led by the people most impacted by it. Yet despite widespread rhetorical commitment towards localisation, the lion’s share of resources and decision-making power still rests with international organisations with headquarters in the Global North. Vague definitions of “local” and “localisation” have allowed some actors with more international links and privileged access to capture many of the benefits. Meanwhile many aid providers working among their communities are too often left behind. Conflict sensitivity support itself often reflects these wider inequalities, with experts and organisations from the Global North securing most resources to shape the policies and practices of donors and bigger INGOs.

Notwithstanding this, many aid agencies have sought to demonstrate their commitment to localisation by directing more money to local organisations, but with little focus on devolving decision-making power. Whilst local actors may be included in funding proposals, they tend to be as down-stream delivery partners, and far too often only in a tokenistic manner. As the junior party, typically in a sub-contractor role and hence without a formal relationship with the donor, they often have little say in programme design, limited access to overheads, and are prevented from negotiating better roles on programmes. The resource poor environment means that the funding environment is highly competitive for these organisations, fuelling mistrust and disincentivising collective action to improve funding conditions.

The absence of equitable aid partnerships is rooted in discriminatory structures, processes, and beliefs that help exclude and disempower many organisations and individuals. For example, the problematic refrain that local agencies are inherently biased because they are embedded in, and therefore part of the context, ignores the reality that international experts and organisations are also subject to assumptions, biases, and blind spots in their views and analysis. Equally problematic is the oft-cited view that local agencies lack the “capacity” to engage on an equal footing with international agencies. This argument is based on a narrow interpretation of “capacity”, which prioritises skillsets confined to a small band of primarily Western-educated aid professionals and focused on the ability to comply with donor systems, often at the expense of contextual understanding and an ability to engage with communities. Unfortunately, this has led to a self-fulfilling prophecy, as such assumptions leave “local” organisations starved of the technical and financial resources needed to respond to burdensome reporting templates, procurement processes, and accountability frameworks.

b) Persistent gap between evidence, policy and practice

There remains a persistent gap between what the evidence tells us about what is necessary to support effective programming, and the policy positions, administrative tools and processes used to design and implement programmes. At the country level, too often policies and programmes are informed by either rushed, ad hoc assessments and fragmented research or lengthy and laborious one-off analyses by external experts that are disconnected from programming decisions. At the same time, too much knowledge and analysis is kept secret, meaning that it is duplicated multiple times at significant cost, or foregone entirely by others without the resources to conduct research, but who are committed to programmes anyway.

Where evidence about what works is available, it is often disconnected from the tools and pro-

cedures that are used in programme design and implementation. In a recent study on conflict sensitivity in the protection sector, respondents highlighted how programming continues to be donor-driven, whilst financial channelling allows international bodies to dictate how programmes are designed, which tools to use and how to measure success. Respondents pointed to the need for more in-depth and transparent monitoring and evaluation processes, and a consistent adaptation of approaches regarding how programmes and interventions interact with the conflict (El Tara-boulsi-McCarthy et al. 2021, 2).

Encouraging more adaptive and flexible programming will require transparency but also proactive reflection and learning, both within international organisations as well as between local and international agencies. Successful adaptation is contingent on an ability to learn as much from what has not worked, and when interventions have had a negative effect, as from successes. Nwa-jiaku-Dahou et al. (2021) make the case that the overriding emphasis on measurable results “to demonstrate accountability to the ... taxpayer and ensure impact” can block progress on adaptation because “[...] An underlying premise of adaptive management is that processes of change are complex and uncertain. [...] This means that international development actors may need to become more tolerant of risk and even failure.”

c) Growing aversion to risk

Despite this, the aid system has developed incentives that encourage risk aversion, even as many proclaim a willingness to take more risks in the work that they do. Recent budget cuts and a relentless push for agencies to demonstrate value for money for example, have left many in a precarious financial situation. Some (including major donors) have responded by putting in place formulaic compliance requirements and increased reporting requirements against rigid accountability metrics. Without concurrent increases in staffing and resources, this is leading to increased staff overload, whilst (perversely) making it harder for agencies to

engage in open and honest reflection when things do go wrong, for fear being penalised. This, in turn, undermines our ability to generate a genuine picture of widespread and common challenges that agencies face; a necessary first step in addressing the conflict sensitivity risks.

Many funders have responded by transferring more risk to intermediaries, such as INGOs and the UN. These intermediaries, in turn, push compliance, programming, and security risks downstream to local actors, further limiting their decision-making, and closing space needed to adapt to challenges.

This challenge is compounded by the increasingly competitive nature of the international aid system. Where aid budgets have reduced, so this competition has become more intense. Meanwhile donor trends of consolidating funds into a smaller number of programmes, coupled with increasingly complex procurement processes, is making it harder for smaller agencies to directly access donor funds. This further increases competition and introduces further administrative layers between the donors and recipients of aid, making conflict sensitivity harder to ensure in practice.

d) The politics of conflict sensitivity: donor interests vs values

The practice of conflict sensitivity does not take place in a vacuum. It is influenced by global geopolitical shifts, power inequities and the broader political economy of the international system. A series of studies by ODI on the impact of foreign policy on international engagement in humanitarian response found that in situations where national interests, including counter-terrorism, arms sales, and migration, coincide with humanitarian crises, national interests often trump humanitarian values (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, Metcalfe-Hough, and Willits-King 2016).

This applies equally to conflict sensitivity. When the provision of aid is seen as a tool for furthering geopolitical objectives rather than

as a means of promoting social well-being, the risk that conflict sensitivity principles will be sacrificed where they come into tension with other priorities becomes acute. Governments in aid recipient countries are often adept at playing donor priorities off against each other, ceding ground in some areas, such as tightening border controls, whilst concurrently perpetuating patterns of repression that might benefit domestic elites, and which often lie at the heart of conflict dynamics in the country. Examples of donors grappling with these tricky dilemmas can be found across many contexts, from Sudan to Afghanistan, Egypt, Turkey, and beyond.

The ability of aid agencies to adopt conflict sensitive practices is also driven by domestic pressures within the donor countries. The UK government's commitment to increase aid spend at a time when domestic services were facing budget cuts provides an interesting example. Whilst the arguments for more aid were (and are) strong, it also placed aid at the forefront of critical media attention, making risk-taking harder, and encouraging centralisation of control. The pressures that this created made conflict sensitivity harder to achieve in practice.

Looking forward: How we can use conflict sensitivity to support reform of aid sector

Despite these challenges, conflict sensitivity can play a role in supporting broad, systemic change in the aid sector. Doing so will require practitioners to see conflict sensitivity less as a technical, box-ticking exercise, and more as a political effort to address the structural inequalities which permeate the aid system.

In the first instance, we can do more to challenge discriminatory institutional and cultural systems that exclude local actors from the design and implementation of programmes. We should be more intentional about ensuring that the analysis used to shape programmes and policies is led by people from the places covered by it. Equitable partnership

requirements between different types of organisations should be embedded into bid evaluation criteria, and a meaningful seat at the table for them created, allowing for substantive and regular engagement with donors and other international policy makers. Conflict sensitivity analysis should identify and challenge cultural norms and mind-sets that inhibit progress towards genuine localisation. This may involve pointing out colonial, sexist or racist attitudes and behaviours or structures; something that can be uncomfortable to discuss and elicit defensive responses. Despite the reputational or relational risks involved, conflict sensitivity requires that these issues be addressed.

Practitioners should also facilitate and advocate for improved and more equitable access to knowledge and analysis on conflict. Building knowledge and analysis on conflict is time-consuming, expensive, and often thankless, with countless conflict analyses gathering dust on organisational servers. Rather than simply developing more research, donors and INGOs need to find better ways of sharing existing resources. This can be done by investing in research repositories which draw academic, organisational, and “grey” literature into one place. This not only limits duplication, but saves resources for new research that fills genuine gaps and also means that organisations without the funding for conflict analysis can benefit. This should also spur changes in the way the aid sector conducts analyses. With improved coordination, conflict analyses for specific programmes should be better able to build off preceding work.

International aid agencies meanwhile need to reassess what their administrative systems and policies are for, and who benefits most from them. These systems, and the underlying assumptions upon which they are based, need to be fundamentally reimagined to create incentives for genuine local ownership, flexible and adaptive programming, and community empowerment. Procurement and reporting processes should be made more accessible, while accountability and value for money metrics need to be upended to incentivise

programmes that are as (or more) transparent and accountable to affected communities as they are to donors. More agencies should provide longer term, core funding to a larger number of small organisations. This implies agencies ceding more control over how money is spent, and on what, to groups closer to where that money will be spent. Perversely, it might mean donors incurring higher overhead costs, since they may have to manage a larger number of relationships. New leadership within the multilateral system might be needed before the sector is willing to engage such fundamental reforms.

Engaging with the structural drivers of conflict insensitivity in the aid sector is also contingent on practitioners understanding and engaging with the political economy of the aid sector, and especially of donor agencies. Working with others across the aid sector, we must find ways to shift the incentives that shape aid agencies' (including donors and INGOs) behaviour, the domestic audiences they need to face and those constituencies that hold them to account most effectively. We may need to do more to bring the principles of conflict sensitivity to policy makers and influencers beyond the aid sphere, including other government and financial institutions as well as business and civil society organisations. This includes in areas already recognised as important to the aid sector, such as migration, trade, and climate change, as well as many which currently do not factor in conflict sensitivity discussions, such as financial regulation and crime policy.

Conclusion

Taken together these changes imply that there should be a fundamental re-evaluation of what conflict sensitivity is for. Rather than seeing it primarily as a tool for identifying challenges in the con-texts in which aid is being implemented, and tweaking what we do accordingly, we should pay at least as much attention to the incentives that drive our own behaviour (as international actors) in such contexts. Conflict sensitivity is, fundamentally, a state of mind. It is a set of guiding principles that should lead us to critically reflect on who we are in any given context, to ask ourselves who really benefits from our presence, and to consider whether the practices we employ genuinely incentivise the kinds of change we want to see. It is therefore as much about what the problem is “in here ” as it is “out there”. When applied to the aid system as a whole, the answer must lead us towards a bolder and more radical response than current practice would suggest.

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