

I. Why Conflict Analysis?

Why Do We Need a Conflict Analysis?

- To understand the background and history of the situation as well as current events.
- To identify all the relevant groups involved, not just the main or obvious ones.
- To understand the perspectives of all these groups and to know more about how they relate to each other.
- To identify factors and trends that underpin conflicts.
- To learn from failures as well as successes.

Fischer, S. et alii 2000: 17)

It helps to be clear about the purpose of doing a conflict analysis:

- *Understanding the 'context'*: Conflict analysis can be done simply to provide people with a better understanding of the context they are working in, also if they have no peacebuilding ambitions;
- *Basis for programming*: The most commonly cited reason for doing conflict analysis is to identify programming needs and shape programming objectives. The goal of that programming may not be a peacebuilding one. Conflict analysis is often done by actors working IN conflict who do not seek to work ON conflict;
- *Part of programming*: Conflict analysis can however also be done – actively involving a diversity of local actors- as an intrinsic part of the programming itself. Unlike the previous two purposes, it is not something that is done before your intervention starts. In this case it becomes a first step of reflection on the 'problems' by the local actors themselves. It is likely to stimulate initial reflections on causes and effects, but also to reveal that not all actors see 'the problem' or 'the conflict' in the same way. It will also have to be an iterative process, as your understanding of the various actors, their perspectives and what drives them will only be build up gradually.

The understanding of 'conflict analysis' of Fischer and others (see the above box) draws attention to the component that we can call 'actor-mapping' and 'actor-analysis', but also to the need to pay attention

to what has been tried already and what worked, didn't work and why. In other words, a conflict analysis should not limit itself to 'the problem' but also review the attempts at 'solving' it.

Conflict analyses are said to be able to serve also other purposes such as:

- Deciding whether or not to engage in a country or to scale up or down existing levels of action
- Developing more realistic expectations of what aid might accomplish given the characteristics and constraints of a country, and the actor's own political and bureaucratic constraints
- Avoiding the unintended consequences of external action and guarding against the risks of elite capture and corruption;
- Providing baseline analysis against which progress may be measured;
- Informing decisions about aid allocation and funding modalities in light of fiduciary risk;
- Ensuring accountability and transparency in the use of aid resources;
- Stimulating a discussion about reform with the partner country. (Int. Peace Inst. 2009:3)

This may not all be very realistic expectations to load onto a 'conflict analysis' or it would require a fairly vague and expansive concept of 'conflict analysis' to be able to serve these diverse purposes. To take the decision to engage or scale up or down in a country will probably depend on a broader set of data and considerations (leading more to 'context' than to 'conflict' analysis), while a baseline is probably only useful if it has more detail about one or more specific issues that you intend to work on, than a wider 'conflict analysis'.

The question of 'purpose' however also invites a distinction between the type of analysis that is needed to make major decisions, say at a more 'strategic level', and the deeper analysis that is required to initiate and navigate a specific intervention on an aspect of the conflict dynamics.

II. Conflict- Fault lines- Problem Analysis.

- 'Conflict', certainly in the discourse of the international actors, tends to be associated with 'violent conflict'. 'Conflict analysis' then takes place once there is violence. Alternatively, while there is no overt large scale violence, people will not feel a need to do a 'conflict analysis. This may be quite mistaken and is certainly unhelpful from the perspective of 'prevention'. Diplomats of course are actively attentive to situations of 'rising tension', and may proactively engage to try and defuse it.
- The attentive analyst may want to look not only at (violent) 'conflict' but also at 'fault lines' in a society and its governance. Fault lines, as in geology, are underlying 'divisions' that may remain 'dormant' for a long time, but that may become the points of fracture along which different groups will align themselves in confrontation with each other as tensions heat up. The failure to notice the 'fault lines' led to a premature down scaling of the international presence in Timor Leste in 2005, only to return after being taken totally by surprise by the outbreak of intra-Timorese violence in the spring of 2006.

“We are living quietly but not in peace.” (local person in Timor Leste 2009)

- Sometimes it may just be helpful to talk about the ‘problem’ analysis. Conflict doesn’t have to be intrinsically negative. Conflict can liberate creative energies, generate alternatives and lead to innovation. Inquiring about ‘the problem’ can reduce the negative connotations that ‘conflict’ now carries.

III. Do conflicts have phases?

Sometimes conflict is analysed in terms of ‘phases’: We have then obviously the pre-, during – and post-conflict ‘phases’. The identification of ‘phases’ tend to be quite influenced by the varying levels of violence. That is not irrelevant but it may lead to only a superficial attention to the dynamics of confrontation. ‘Frozen conflicts’ may not experience any violence for prolonged periods of time, but that doesn’t mean they are ‘post-conflict’. Georgia and Armenia-Azerbaijan are obviously examples. There are also situations of prolonged instability, with occasionally outburst of violence - Lebanon and Cote d’Ivoire can be mentioned as examples here. And then there are those situations referred to as ‘intractable conflicts’, for which the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, Afghanistan and Sudan are sometimes used as examples. The simply ‘phasing’ structure here obscures rather than enlightens the analysis.

The ‘post conflict’ phase then gets further subdivided with confusing labels such as ‘stabilisation’, ‘humanitarian’, ‘early recovery’, ‘peacebuilding’, ‘development’ etc. Such labels really relate more to programming; they are an expression of the need of donor administrations to give meaning to their programming efforts and to be able to activate different funding modalities. People in the society concerned obviously do NOT perceive the reality they experience in those terms.

It may be helpful to visualize the ‘up and downs’ over time, but avoid the mistaken labels of pre-during-post conflict etc. A graph can simply identify against a time line those moments of rising tensions or escalation, and of de-escalation. That can then stimulate an enriching discussion, particularly if a diverse group of ‘internal’ actors is involved, who may not all have the same reading of events.

Structuring an analysis around the ups-and-downs of escalation and de-escalation can be helpful. Using the international jargon of ‘phases’ is likely to diminish the quality of the analysis as it introduces a strong international assistance programming bias.

IV. When to do Conflict Analysis?

- Conflict analysis is most frequently done, as a formal exercise, prior to designing programmes. That can be at the point of entry/new engagement with a country or society, or when there is intent to shift into new types of programming.
- Conflict analysis can usefully be done or re-done when there is a significant shift in the dynamics (e.g. with the Ethiopian invasion into Somalia in late 2006 and the subsequent rise of Al-Shabaab

there; after the violent confrontation between Fatah and Hamas and the takeover of Gaza by Hamas in the summer of 2007;)

- It may actually be useful to include a 'revisiting' of the situational dynamics into the ongoing programme management, e.g. in the form of periodic strategic reviews. Periodically taking stock of 'what has changed and what has not changed and why' in one's operating environment, may help detect and invite reflection on more subtle qualitative changes that have meaning for your intervention and efforts. Ongoing analysis keeps you in 'strategic mode' rather than just having an initial 'strategic moment'.

V. Conflicting Analyses?

It is to be expected that there will be different analyses of the conflict, for several reasons:

- *A technical-analytical reason:* Analyses take place at a given moment in time. Certainly prolonged conflicts evolve in their dynamics, so different analyses done at different moments may yield somewhat different pictures.
- *An analysis is not value-free:* It is extremely hard to conduct a value-free analysis: key words that will be used have intentional or implicit value connotations and hence create a certain value perspective. A simple but important example would be whether the analyst(s) consider that a group is driven by 'grievances' that are indeed 'legitimate' – or not.
- *Different and competing narratives are an intrinsic part of conflict:* People that argue fiercely with each other and groups that fight with each other tend to construct their own narratives in ways that justify their own behaviour and throw the blame on the opponent. 'Historical' truth is quickly a serious casualty in heated conflict. Accepting one narrative over others would make the analyst(s) appear clearly biased in the eyes of various actors in the conflict, and undermine trust. Peacebuilders often have to explicitly engage with the contesting narratives which requires that contesting narratives are 'accepted' as part of the reality.

FREQUENT PROBLEMS WITH CONFLICT ANALYSIS.

The analysis is

- ▶ Left implicit because people have a deep experience – but then how do you know that as a team you have indeed a shared analysis or how do you know what your programme or intervention is really trying to work on?
- ▶ Really one of ‘context’ rather than ‘conflict’. But ‘context analysis’ is not ‘conflict analysis’ – not everything is centrally related to the dynamics of conflict
- ▶ Uncertain about its time scope: although what you need to address now is what is driving the conflict today, how far back in history do you go?
- ▶ Uncertain about its ‘spatial’ scope: it leaves out or is weak on the regional and international dimensions, actors and factors – how can you ensure that you bring those into the picture?
- ▶ Looks at ‘one conflict’ while often there are multiple conflicts – that may or may not have become interconnected (e.g. Sri Lanka, or local problems into wider one e.g. Darfur)
- ▶ Confuses causes and consequences;
- ▶ Relatively blind to gender and age dimensions;
- ▶ Only partial – you may be missing important aspects of the conflict/problem dynamics?
- ▶ Too comprehensive: very elaborate but does not help to identify which factors are most important;
- ▶ Biased and closer to the narrative of one actor in the conflict but not listening to or taking into account the narrative of one or more other actors;
- ▶ Biased because it is ‘supply driven’ or ‘mandate shaped’: You analyse in function of what you like doing or are mandated to do;
- ▶ Static and not dynamic: A ‘list’ of issues or factors doesn’t tell you much about how different factors relate to each other and drive each other in vicious or virtuous circles?
- ▶ Not updated – have you updated your analysis since the beginning of your programme?
- ▶ Mute as to what has already been tried and why it may not have been as effective as hoped for.

A closely related problem is that often the actual programming is not linked to the analysis, but shaped by other considerations such as the mandate, mission or particular ‘expertise’ of an organization; financial opportunity; the inertia of what an organization has been doing in a country etc.

VI. Suggested good practices in Conflict Analysis

- An explicit conflict analysis is better than one that remains implicit.
- A conflict-analysis is not only relevant when there is visible violence. There may be more or less visible tensions that reflect underlying ‘fault lines’ and divisions that the society does not seem to have adequate capacities to mediate effectively. Preventative action is based on pro-active analysis.
- Pro-active conflict analysis can also be expanded into scenario-thinking. Scenario-thinking also helps to consider deeper underlying issues and interests, and possible ‘triggers’.
- Conflict analyses are done in participatory or non-participatory ways. From a technical point of view, it is possible to do them in a non-participatory way. From a peacebuilding point of view, it is hard to see how it could be done in a non-participatory way. How those who are in conflict perceive the situation and analyse or ‘rationalise’ it, is evidently part of the dynamics. It is hard to imagine a ‘peacebuilding intervention’ where people’s own – and probably diverging- views on ‘their conflict’ would not come up. This can be treated as an ‘unplanned event’ – or seen as a necessary aspect of any peacebuilding intervention in a given environment.

This note argues that a ‘participatory’ approach to conflict analysis constitutes ‘better practice’ than a non-participatory one. The quality of participation also matters: just bringing together a group of ‘local/national analysts’ is not the same as consciously seeking out the relevant diversity of views from all groups/sectors that matter in a fractured society.

Gender and age are often relevant factors that shape perspectives. Take gender and age into account in who participates – and reflect gender and age aspects in the analysis.

Even if there is a low level of participation, good practice suggests that you share your conflict analysis with local actors, to get a degree of verification and possible validation.

- Avoid the use of ‘pre-during and post- conflict phases’ and other related jargon, which say more about the fluctuating levels of violence, and serve the programming needs of external actors, rather than providing insight in the drivers of conflict. The notion of ‘post-conflict’ can be particularly misleading, as it really refers to a significant reduction in the levels and scale of violence. Violence obviously is an indicator of conflict, but by no means the only one. Violence reduction is an important objective of peacebuilding, but again not the only one.
- A conflict-analysis is not a ‘one off’ exercise. Good practice implies that periodic updates are planned for. Major shifts in the dynamics also demand a renewed analysis.
- A conflict analysis is more specific than a ‘context analysis’. It focuses on the key issues or factors that are drivers of the conflict, and tries to learn about the full spectrum of actors (visible and less visible) that matter with regard to the destructive dynamics that prevails but also that

can matter to turn this into a more constructive dynamics. It is unlikely that the same depth of insight will be gained on all issues and actors simultaneously. The analysis is likely to be iterative and progressive.

A 'Post Conflict Needs Assessment' is not a conflict analysis. There are many 'needs' which legitimately need to be addressed. But not every unmet need is a driver of conflict. A 'common conflict analysis' should not ignore the fact that the actors concerned may have different narratives about the conflict, nor support one narrative over another. A 'common conflict analysis' should also not be a simple expression of the areas of 'common interest' of those doing it: that may introduce a mandate/supply bias and hence distort the analysis.

- Consider the scope of the analysis from the perspective of the realities on the ground, and not in terms of your particular interests or because you have only limited time or don't want to devote 'too much' time to it:
 - A primary focus is what is driving the conflict now! It is the current and the historical realities that you inevitably will have to engage with;
 - Consider multiple conflicts and to what degree they have (sometimes) a relatively autonomous dynamic of their own and to what degree they are (sometimes) interlocking with each other: local conflicts, national conflict, regional conflict;
 - A historical perspective is relevant and valuable inasmuch as perceived historical 'grievances', expressed in 'historical narratives' by those involved in the conflict, shape the current dynamics. Note that not everybody in the society may equally feel the 'legacy' of history: what for older generations may be part of 'lived experience' may already become a vaguer and less relevant narrative for younger generations;
- Conflict realities tend to become 'vicious circles', in which different factors feed into and reinforce each other. That is also what gives it a resilience to change. The 'vicious circle' dynamics is not captured in 'lists' of issues – use a dynamic systems representation to visualize this. Remember however that this is only a 'representation' and not a mirror-image of reality.
- You are probably not the first one trying to reduce the violence and effect some 'transformation' in the conflict dynamics. Actively review what has been tried before and what worked or did not yield the hoped-for results, and why. The 'why' can be a sensitive question, but is the critical one. Those insights can best be gained by listening to those who at the time were closely observing or actually involved with an intervention and hence have intimate knowledge of (aspects of) it, but are now somewhat at a distance and both free and perhaps more able to reflect on it.

- Analysing a conflict is not a ‘value-free’ or ‘emotion-free’ exercise. Beware for subjectivity and bias creeping into the analysis – e.g. through whose perspectives you emphasise in your analysis and whose you neglect or even misrepresent, and through the use of value-laden words (e.g. ‘spoilers’). Peacebuilding is a value-based engagement and involves action to stop certain things. Participants in a conflict play ‘blame-games’ and create simplified portraits of ‘the bad’ and ‘the good’ guys. Hence a good peacebuilder will seek to control as much as possible for bias in the ‘analysis’ of the situation, and cannot too quickly and too much display her or his values if s/he wants to be able to engage all sides.

There are also good practices in actor-mapping and actor-analysis. These are considered in another note.

The annex provides a picture of what one might expect to find in a good conflict analysis document. The level of detail may differ depending on the primary purpose: is it to make broad strategic decisions, or is it meant to be an analytical basis on which to base the choice of intervention and begin to design that intervention? The overview of topics resonates well with the content of various concrete conflict analysis documents and with certain guidance for conflict analysis (e.g. the ‘Strategic Conflict Assessment’ produced for and used by DFID) (Goodhand et alii 2002).

Relevant reading and sources used.

Fischer, S. et alii 2000: Working with Conflict. Skills & strategies for action. London, Zed Books

Goodhand, J., T. Vaux & R. Walker 2002: Strategic Conflict Assessment. London
<http://www.conflictsensitivity.org/publications/strategic-conflict-assessment>

International Peace Institute 2009: Understanding Local Context. The use of assessment tools for conflict-affected and fragile states. New York

Reflecting on Peace Practice 2009: Training of Consultants and Advisers Manual 1. Boston, CDA Inc.

Woodrow, P. 2006: Advancing Practice in Conflict Analysis and Strategy Development. Interim progress report. Boston, CDA Inc., Reflecting on Peace Practice

Annex: Conflict Analysis. What would you expect to see in it?

I. THE ANALYSIS.

- Who initiated this analysis and why?
- What is its purpose?
- Who was involved in it – in what ways?
- How was it done – when?

II. THE SETTING.

- General context
- Overview recent events
- The formal political process and dynamics.

III. CONFLICT(S) DYNAMICS.

- Current drivers of conflict/conflict factors (systemic analysis)
- Deeper, structural, longer-standing, drivers/factors
- How is this conflict connected to other conflicts?
- What do we need to understand better about the conflict dynamics and its interconnections?

IV. ACTORS.

- Actor mapping (local, national, regional, international)
- Analysis of the actors and their role in the dynamics
- What do we need to understand better about the actors and their influence on the dynamics?

V. INTERVENTIONS.

- What have been or currently are significant peacemaking/peacebuilding initiatives?
- How is their relevance and effectiveness assessed, especially be the 'insiders' i.e. those directly affected by the conflict?
- What can be learned from that?
- What do we need to understand better about peacemaking/peacebuilding efforts?
- What is the perceived impact of 'aid' on the conflict & peace dynamics?
- What can be learned from that?
- What do we need to understand better about the impacts of aid on the conflict & peace dynamics?

VI. FORWARD LOOKING.

- Trends
- Threats
- Critical events and potential triggers
- Scenarios and how they can be monitored.
- What do we need to understand better about the possible futures?

This is really the end of the 'analysis'. From here you could go to **STRATEGIC OPTIONS.**

This should probably take into account a range of elements such as 'opportunities & risks', 'capacities', 'perceived legitimacy', 'scenarios', 'priorities', 'potential consequences of failure to act' etc.