Lessons learned for embedding conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness into organizational practice

Introduction

The UN Security Council and General Assembly, through their Sustaining Peace resolutions, have called on humanitarian, development, stabilisation and peace actors, in accordance with their respective mandates, to enhance their contributions to enabling sustainable peace and preventing violent conflict. This has led many UN agencies to adopt relevant policies and increasingly direct their attention to the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus. However, effectively operationalising and institutionalising these policies remain a challenge. This paper describes the concept of peace responsiveness, which offers a new lens for working towards integrating contributions to peace across the HDP intervention spectrum. This paper further offers some thoughts on lessons learned thus far through such efforts at integrating contributions to peace, the stumbling blocks that persist and emerging opportunities for moving forward.
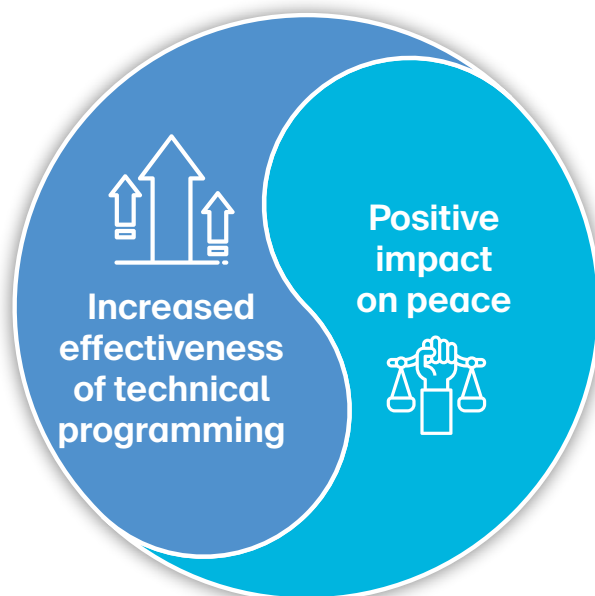
Peace Responsiveness

Peace responsiveness is a concept formulated to support the institutional embedding and programmatic operationalisation of the sustainable peace agenda within the development and humanitarian system. It asks the question: How can programmes not only achieve their technical outcomes but, in so doing, also enable and create opportunities for peace, for instance through strengthening social cohesion or improving state-society relations? Peace responsiveness is based on the notion that by deliberately contributing to addressing drivers of conflict and strengthening capacities for peace, humanitarian and development interventions can enhance the prospects of sustainable peace.

Equally, a more focused consideration of conflict and peace dynamics will also enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of technical interventions and their impacts.

Peace responsiveness is conceptually underpinned by conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm, but adopts a more forward-leaning orientation of deliberately contributing to sustaining peace. While the concepts and methodology of conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm have always placed equal emphasis on avoiding the fuelling of conflict drivers and promoting peace drivers, in practice many organizations and practitioners have often placed emphasis on minimising the risk of exacerbating conflict (as the words Do No Harm imply) and on managing operational and security risks to the organization. Peace responsiveness has a strong focus on understanding and maximising the positive contributions to sustainable peace that can be made by agencies that do not have peacebuilding at the core of their mandate.

Within peace responsiveness, conflict sensitivity remains foundational; a minimum standard for all actors operating in conflict-affected settings. Over recent years, the humanitarian and development sectors have increasingly come to recognise the importance of conflict sensitivity. Yet, while many actors have made great strides towards integrating conflict sensitivity in their work, there remains a long way to go to make it ubiquitous and second nature.

This paper aims to outline some of the key lessons for mainstreaming conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness into humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors' operational practice. It builds on twenty years of efforts to mainstream conflict sensitivity, as well as emerging lessons from embedding peace responsiveness across organizations and the broader system. It is informed by in-depth exchanges with a range of multilateral and multimandated agencies.

Increased effectiveness of technical programming

Positive impact on peace

Peace responsiveness in a nutshell

"Peace responsiveness" refers to the ability of actors operating in conflict-affected or fragile contexts to be conflict sensitive and to deliberately contribute to sustaining peace through their technical programming – in a way that enhances collective impact, supports inclusive, gender-responsive, locally led change, and strengthens societal resilience to conflict and violence.

It requires a multidimensional approach whereby actors collaborate on a complementary basis and thus achieve collective impact.

Peace responsiveness is also about integrating peacebuilding principles and processes into humanitarian and development actors' operational practice, which will benefit the effectiveness and sustainability of technical interventions and their expected development outcomes (e.g., in terms of food security or health).

What do we aim to achieve?

What would an organization look like that has a high degree of conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness and can effectively apply this in practice? Such an organization would have some of the following key characteristics:

- the capacity to systematically recognise its activities' impact on the (conflict) context and adapt accordingly
- the capacity to systematically recognise and seize opportunities to contribute to peace

- conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness processes embedded in core organizational systems and processes
- an organizational culture with a strong ability to reflect, learn and adapt
- an organizational culture and administrative procedures that enable collaborative and meaningful partnerships with other actors, especially local actors.

What have we learned so far?

Considering this overarching vision of what would be required to embed peace responsiveness into organizational practice, some of the key lessons learned thus far on how to move towards this vision have been compiled here:

- **High-level policy commitments provide a helpful anchor.** By now, strong commitments to conflict sensitivity have been made at the policy level, and in recent years also to sustaining peace and the HDP nexus. But the gap with practice remains wide. High-level, general policy commitments must be matched by a genuine commitment and dedication by senior leadership within an organization, which includes setting a clear direction and assigning resources to enable operationalisation and institutionalisation. Ideally, such high-level organizational commitments would be backed by the member states through the adoption of suitable strategy documents.

- **Language matters.** Concepts such as "peacebuilding", "conflict" and "fragility" can raise red flags. In response to these sensitivities, framing

can be adapted, for instance through the use of concepts like "social cohesion" or "resilience". Especially for agencies who define themselves as non-political, it can be helpful to stress the distinction between being politically engaged versus being aware of one's potential unintended impact on the context and possibilities within one's mandate to contribute to laying some foundations for peace (this distinction is also referred to as "big-P peace" as opposed to "little-p peace").

- **Focus on enhancing programme effectiveness.** A better understanding of conflict and peace dynamics can contribute significantly to the effectiveness and sustainability of technical interventions, as unintended consequences can significantly undermine the impact on the ground. Linking conflict sensitivity to risk management can also be helpful, although this would require a broader interpretation of "risk", to include not only risks to an organization's operations and staff, but also risks of potential negative impacts on conflict dynamics or social cohesion.

- **Training is necessary, but insufficient.** Building individuals' capacity remains a key pillar for enhancing conflict sensitivity. Yet, experience has shown that the effectiveness of training increases when it is directly applied in practice, in real-life situations in the fields in which the trainees operate. Concepts may be deceptively simple but thinking through the real implications and the adaptations necessary in a shifting and dynamic context requires a deeper internalisation of the methodology, which is best forged through facilitated sessions relating to a specific context or programme. Training can only contribute if it is followed by accompaniment and action and embedded in a wider organizational commitment and process of change. An organizational context which welcomes new ways of integrating peace contributions into humanitarian and development interventions then allows individuals to enact practice changes based on new skills acquired.

- **Tools and guidance materials need to be tailored and light-touch.** Over time there has been a notable shift from more complex analytical frameworks to more light-touch approaches that often revolve around key questions for reflection. Approaches are increasingly tailored to specific thematic areas, and applied more flexibly, which has improved the uptake. An example of this is the [programme clinic](#) used by the Food and Agriculture Organization.

- **Guidance is no panacea.** Too often it is assumed that issuing guidance will lead to increased conflict sensitivity and contributions to peace. However, experience shows that guidance only works when there is sufficient motivation, commitment, and incentive to effectively integrate the guidance into a programme's analysis and design phases. Highly committed people have used generic guidance creatively and adapted it themselves to serve their needs. This shows that internal commitment remains the crucial element here, although guidance has a key role to play. Incentives created by donors, for example, can also engender a drive towards the development and application of guidance for conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive programmatic approaches.

- **Dedicated capacity and accompaniment are essential.** Even with training and appropriate guidance, conducting context analyses and translating these into conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive programming remain challenging for programme staff. The former require ongoing support that both empowers and guides the latter. Peace and conflict advisors at country, regional or headquarter level who provide immediate support, accompany processes and provide quality assurance can have significant positive impact. This is most effective when this support function is integrated into an organization's main structure, rather than as a separate project or outsourced to consultants.

- **Conflict sensitivity at the strategic and institutional levels trails behind project-level conflict sensitivity.** Most progress on conflict sensitivity has been made at the project level. Higher-level strategic decisions related to the conflict context are often more political in nature and driven by other incentives, coming with a stronger resistance to adopt a conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness lens.

- **Donors have a key role to play.** Donor requirements for conflict sensitivity do create important incentives and have the potential to significantly enhance conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness, particularly at the project level. This lever has in the past been used somewhat haphazardly and with relatively low associated accountability . Although making conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness imperative risks becoming just another box-ticking exercise, it can still catalyse a shift in practice, which may over time become more engrained.

- **Reputational risk is a double-edged sword.** Reputational risk is another factor that can push organizations to increase their conflict sensitivity. Unfortunately, this often comes into play after an initial harm has already been done, and it can lead to an overly risk-averse attitude, rather than a risk-aware approach, which is necessary for moving towards peace responsiveness.

What are some of the main stumbling blocks?

Notwithstanding these lessons learned and significant advances made in this field, a host of obstacles remain, many of which relate to broader organizational practice and the incentives driving it.

- **Conflict sensitivity and peace advisors have insufficient influence to catalyse real change.** The units in which peace and conflict issues sit are often associated with one of an organization's programmes or sections. This can pigeonhole these advisors somewhat, leaving them with insufficient influence over other parts of the organization. Their ability to further embed conflict sensitivity and peace contributions into the organization's core processes and systems is therefore hampered. This constraint is even more poignant when it comes to addressing broader organizational policies and practice, such as those sometimes found in procurement or human resources (HR), that hinder the adoption of such contributions. In addition, the volume of human resources dedicated to peace and conflict issues is often limited and discontinuous.

- **Spending pressure and other incentives tend to trump conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness requirements.** The need to spend and to meet deadlines imposed from above often create strong incentives to skip the analysis, reflection and adaptation steps to make programming more conflict sensitive or peace responsive, as these are seen as time-consuming. Even donors with a strong dedication to peacebuilding may have spending deadlines that can sometimes override their commitment to conflict-sensitive, peace-responsive and, at times, simply high-quality programming.

- **Competition with other mainstreaming agendas.** Conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness are not the only issues to be mainstreamed; gender, protection, accountability to affected populations, and other topics demand equal attention from policy makers and programme staff. They come with their own concepts, tools, training and check-lists, and these end up competing for time and attention. In addition, this may create the sense of an additional burden and another "box to tick" that detracts from gaining a genuinely internalised sense of importance for any of these topics. Many of these agendas also interrelate in some ways and insufficient effort has been made to connect the dots between them.

- **Context-flexible and adaptive management is not widely practiced.** Although adaptive management has become part of mainstream thinking, in practice, accountability is still largely directed upwards and based on meeting agreed outputs and targets. Donor agencies differ greatly in the extent to which they allow mid-course corrections when these run counter to agreed targets and expenditure lines. Implementing agencies also often do not have established systems for learning and adaptation that would allow them to present more strongly underpinned justifications for proposed adaptations.

- **Hierarchical and control-oriented structures hamper the flow of information and learning.** Asymmetrical power relations between centre and periphery (headquarters–country office; country office–implementing partners; and implementing partners–local actors) constrain the flow of information from bottom to top. Decisions are often taken from afar, with those closest to the ground insufficiently empowered to point out potential unintended consequences or untapped opportunities to contribute to peace and adapt accordingly. This may even be the case in more decentralised organizations, or ones that work only with local partners. Partnerships with local implementing partners, where most local context information lies, are often managed in a purely output-focused way, not giving enough space for these partners to share other relevant observations and discuss how they affect pre-agreed programming.

- **Existing accountability structures create mindsets insufficiently tuned to local realities.** Project management staff tend to feel primarily responsible for implementing prescribed project interventions and meeting their targets. In line with John le Carre's statement that "*a desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world*", project managers can be quite disconnected from the realities on the ground – particularly in conflict contexts where access can be challenging – which can lead to an insufficient ability to perceive risks or unintended consequences, and a resistance to adapt planned project interventions.

- **Accountability mechanisms for conflict sensitivity are weak.** Few agencies have integrated conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness into their core Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) processes. Accountability on conflict sensitivity is mostly a matter of process (Has conflict analysis been conducted? Is programming based on this analysis? Is there continuous monitoring of the context? Are mechanisms in place to detect unintended consequences? And so on.). This requires a significant cultural shift from a focus on the results framework (Are outputs achieved?) to how the process was carried out.

- **Peace responsiveness monitoring and evaluation is underdeveloped.** The peace-contributing theories of change – the pathways through which development and humanitarian work may contribute to sustaining peace – often remain implicit or underdeveloped. Well-articulated theories of change are an essential prerequisite for effective programming, and for measuring progress towards sustaining peace. This also comes with a risk, however. Articulating pathways for peace may lead to an overclaiming of peace outcomes when peace impacts are too easily understood as an automatic by-product of technical work. Although addressing unemployment may contribute to peace if unemployment is a key driver of conflict, it may also exacerbate conflict if targeting is not done carefully.

- **The weak evidence base for contributions to sustaining peace hampers further momentum building.** The weakness of the monitoring and evaluation systems for peace responsiveness also hampers the generation of an evidence base. Such evidence is crucial for gaining more buy-in to the agenda of conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness. Claims that technical agencies can – in their own way – contribute to sustaining peace cannot stay theoretical in nature, they need to be backed up with evidence to be credible.

- **System-level incentives have a significant influence over organizational practice.** Organizations are embedded within a broader system of actors and policies. Policy incoherence and institutional competition between different branches of government, the UN or donors create different pressures and incentives, making it more difficult for implementing agencies to achieve a peace-responsive approach. Funding mechanisms often do not incentivise integration or alignment of different sectoral approaches to collective impact. Although some donors do have requirements around conflict sensitivity, there is little accountability towards meeting these requirements on an ongoing basis.

What are opportunities and potential ways forward?

- **The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the multidimensional nature of crises.** The pandemic has clearly brought to light the fault lines in societies and the degree to which social cohesion is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of the response. It has further raised awareness of the multidimensional nature of crises; of how health, economic and social factors are interconnected and must all be considered when designing the response. Furthermore, although born out of operational necessity, the pandemic has provided an impetus to localise. The increased awareness of these interlinkages between social and conflict dynamics and seemingly technical areas, such as health systems and socio-economic issues, can be powerful levers to practically advance the sustaining peace agenda.

- **Moving from commitments to practice.** Strong commitments to integrated, multidimensional, nexus-oriented approaches in policy and donor circles exist, such as the OECD DAC Recommendation on the HDP nexus and the UN New Ways of Working. Donors' and implementing agencies' focus is now moving to operationalisation, which provides entry points to truly embed conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness more deeply into systems and processes. The momentum generated by the Sustaining Peace Agenda and the HDP nexus commitments can serve to push for greater attention to conflict prevention, collective impact, and localisation. The growing interest in collective impact provides opportunities for a more holistic engagement and the increased use of systems approaches. The localisation debate may provide greater opportunities for decentralising decision making and thus create more space for locally led interventions, or, at a minimum, increased learning and adaptation.

- **Clarifying what it means to contribute to peace.** There is a need to clarify, and perhaps come to in-creased consensus on what it means to be conflict sensitive, to contribute to peace outcomes and/or to be engaged in peacebuilding. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Results Group 4 has embarked on an effort to articulate the "P" in the HDP nexus, and the distinction between "big-P" and "little-p" peace can help to reduce the resistance to integrating peace contributions in humanitarian and development programming – bringing peace closer to these actors' real and perceived spheres of influence. Several organizations have embarked upon a process of making explicit the potential pathways through which their efforts may contribute to peace and the conditions that would need to be met for this to be the case. This unpacking can help establish a stronger evidence base around actual contributions to peace outcomes.

- **Focusing attention on barriers and disincentives created by broader organizational policies.** Procurement policies, HR policies and decision-making structures create powerful incentives that may hinder or promote conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness. Although there are good reasons for having such controls in place, there are trade-offs to be considered and balanced and creative solutions must be found to ensure that these policies create the conditions in which conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness can thrive.

- **Building alliances within the organization.** Engaging other departments or units in the quest for more conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive approaches is crucial. Space for collaboration may be found with other "mainstreaming units" by keeping each other informed about opportunities to be seized, and perhaps even by streamlining processes and methodologies. Building alliances with MEAL departments, programming departments, evaluation departments, and even procurement and

HR departments can support the push for a deeper integration of conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness into existing systems and processes.

- **Catalysing change where change is possible.** All change takes time and is reliant on individuals' commitment and entrepreneurship. Change comes about through working iteratively, seizing opportunities, showcasing small successes and increasing traction. Windows of opportunity may present themselves within organizations: a chance to insert a few key words into a policy framework or corporate document; an evaluation that stresses the need for conflict sensitivity; a restructuring exercise that can be used to strengthen the clout of the conflict unit; and so forth. Small cases of success can be shared widely within an organization, or – its opposite – case studies where significant harm was done can be harnessed to increase traction for conflict sensitivity. Generally, the opportunities can be found where the need and therefore the change energy is the highest. ∎

Connect with us

Contributing to sustaining peace has become everyone's business and everyone's responsibility. We believe that the only way to achieve the aspirations of the sustaining peace agenda, the HDP nexus and Agenda 2030 is by working together through a process of co-creation, co-development and a joining of hands and hearts.

We invite all those with an interest in the topic and who feel a degree of alignment with our vision and mission to connect with us, to join us, to partner with us.

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