# Peace responsiveness: a paradigm shift to deliver on conflict sensitivity and sustaining peace

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## Abstract

Though the principle of "Do No Harm" is widely accepted, conflict sensitivity is insufficiently implemented in practice. This is frequently perceived as a failure of knowledge or capacity, but more often speaks to deeper challenges and gaps in organisational cultures, individual mindsets, and larger barriers in the aid system. Interpeace supports organisations to adopt peace responsiveness – a holistic approach to transform the ability of actors to act in a conflict-sensitive manner and to deliberately contribute to peace . This paper focuses on the organisational, individual, and systems-wide changes required to implement conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness in practice.

## Introduction

The majority of humanitarian, development, and peace interventions take place in conflict-affected settings and countries in transition. Violent conflict is one of the main obstacles to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The need to improve international approaches to address conflict and support peace has become a major policy focus. The landmark UN Sustaining Peace resolutions in 2016 and 2020, the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, and the more recent OECD DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian–Development–Peace nexus all call for significant reform of international humanitarian, development, and peace action to address structural causes of violence more effectively. Yet, the gaps between policy and practice linger, and progress towards operationalising these ambitions remains limited. Despite more than two decades of implementing conflict sensitivity to varying degrees, many organisations remain insufficiently aware of local contexts and dynamics and lack political savviness.

A conflict-sensitive approach involves gaining a sound understanding of the two-way interaction between development, humanitarian, or peacebuilding activities and context – and acting to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts of the intervention on conflict, within an organisa-

tion's given priorities and objectives (International Alert et al. 2004). Do No Harm was developed by Mary Anderson and CDA Collaborative Learning as a framework for analysing the impacts of aid on conflict – and for taking action to reduce negative impacts and maximise positive impacts. Do No Harm was developed based on the collective experiences of practitioners and policy makers (Anderson 1999; Wallace 2015). Today, many organisations and practitioners generally embrace the principle of Do No Harm, but few implement conflict sensitivity or the Do No Harm operational framework systematically in practice. Multiple reasons explain these persistent limitations. Conflict insensitivity is often perceived to be a failure of knowledge, capacity, or skill; but more systematic analysis shows that it is more often due to a lack of political will, organisational culture, and individual and organisational mindsets and practices (Handschin, Abitbol, and Alluri 2016).

The core question remains: How can humanitarian, development, and peace actors, and the wider system in which they operate, equip themselves collectively to promote more peaceful and resilient societies? To answer this question, Interpeace is working with multi-mandate development and humanitarian partners on "peace responsiveness". This holistic approach aims to transform the ability of actors operating in conflict-affected or transitional contexts to act in a conflict-sensitive manner and deliberately contribute to peace outcomes through their sectoral programming. Peace responsiveness seeks to enhance collective impact, support inclusive and locally led change, and strengthen societal resilience to conflict and violence. It calls for a paradigm shift in how international actors operate in conflict contexts – and challenges some established ideas and approaches in organisations and the broader aid system.

Peace responsiveness consists of four different building blocks – programmatic, organisational, systems-wide, and individual – with the paper focussing on the last three, analysing some of the key obstacles and disincentives that hinder its implementation. All levels are closely interrelated and require collaboration and collective action by actors at all levels of the international system. Peace responsiveness draws on more than two decades of learning on conflict sensitivity. Specifically, it extends practice in two critical domains: (1) It encourages proactive contributions by development and humanitarian actors to promote peace; and (2) it applies a whole-of-systems perspective, on the premise that many of the current organisational structures and cultures, incentives, and individual mindsets in the international aid system do not support conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive approaches.

The paper draws on various sources of evidence, and represents a further elaboration of concepts and ideas outlined in Interpeace's peace responsiveness framing paper (Interpeace 2021). These further elaborations are based on the following: (1) Lessons and insights from applying conflict-sensitive approaches in development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding work documented in various research, evaluation, and lessons learned documents (such as, for example, Interpeace 2019; Goldwyn 2016; Morris and Midgley 2019; Woodrow and Jean 2019; Zürcher 2017, 2020; Goddard 2014); (2) Interpeace's past and ongoing experience of working with multi-mandate bilateral partners and multi-lateral agencies to integrate peace responsiveness in their strategies and programs (see, for example, Interpeace 2021; FAO and Interpeace 2020; ILO, Interpeace, UN PBSO, WHO 2020); and (3) the lived and practical experience of the authors and contributors working on conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding in various capacities with dozens of different organisations and contexts over the past twenty years. This practical experience includes work with bi- and multi-lateral organisations, donors, INGOs and local organisations, multi-mandate development and humanitarian organisations, as well as peacebuilding and mediation actors.

# Why Peace Responsiveness?

When Mary Anderson published her ground-breaking work *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War?* in 1999, it triggered widespread reflection and learning about the interaction between aid and conflict (Anderson 1999; Handschin, Abitbol, and Alluri 2016; Goddard 2014). Two decades later, many actors have started to integrate conflict sensitivity in their work more systematically. However, misunderstandings persist about what "conflict sensitivity" means in practice, and it has proven to be a challenge to integrate conflict sensitivity seamlessly in institutional practice (Goddard 2014; Goldwyn 2016; Woodrow and Jean 2019).

While conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm have always emphasised that it is equally important to promote peace drivers and avoid fuelling conflict drivers, in practice, organisations have tended to focus on the short-term risks of exacerbating conflict, without adequately considering the effects of structural factors. Such interventions may not be conflict blind, but they often overlook capacities for peace and are therefore "peace blind". This was at the core of the adoption of the UN Sustaining Peace agendas 2016 and 2020 – to prioritise conflict prevention, fundamentally change how the international system engages in conflict-affected settings through a whole-of-systems approach, to shift the primary agency for sustaining peace from the international to the national and local level, and to address structural inequalities, and other drivers of violent conflict, more systematically.

Past efforts to "mainstream" conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm have recorded successes and failures (Beijer and Baltaduonyte 2021; Goddard 2014; Woodrow and Jean 2019; Handschin, Abitbol, and Alluri 2016). Many have concentrated on making project interventions of individual agencies conflict-sensitive (Goddard and Annaraj 2017). This is necessary but clearly insufficient. Too few have aimed to embed conflict sensitivity in organisational practices and the wider system more systematically (ZOA and PeaceNexus Foundation 2021; PeaceNexus Foundation 2020). The below lessons from integrating conflict sensitivity in the last two decades highlight what was learned and why the implementation of conflict sensitivity has been limited. This is based on research from Interpeace and other lessons learnt publications (Interpeace 2019; Goldwyn 2016; Barber and Bowie 2008; PeaceNexus Foundation 2020):

1. High-level policy commitments alone remain insufficient to close the gap between policy and practice.

2. Senior-level commitment, broad uptake in the organisation, and adequate financial and human resources are essential.

3. It is important to tailor the framing of conflict sensitivity issues and find language that resonates with various audiences and contexts. This also includes alignment with other relevant (policy and programming) agendas.

4. Training is key, but conflict sensitivity capacity also needs to be embedded in programs and operational processes.

5. Conflict sensitivity needs to be strengthened at institutional, strategic, and program levels – not only at the project level.

6. External actors (for example, donors) can exert pressure to integrate conflict sensitivity, but this can also create a "box-ticking" trap.

7. Increasing the program effectiveness of technical interventions by operationalising Do No Harm in practice can give conflict sensitivity traction.

8. Tools and guidance materials are most effective when tailored to users' needs, but their potential to promote change should not be overrated.

9. Technical skills of staff matter, but need to be supported by intrinsic motivation and an enabling organisational environment that encourages staff to do things differently.

10. Ultimately, conflict sensitivity is not a technical exercise, but provides an opportunity for a fundamental rethink of an organisation's role and contributions in a conflict-affected setting.

# What is Peace Responsiveness?

Peace responsiveness is an approach developed by Interpeace that supports organisations to be more conflict-sensitive in their work and to articulate the positive contributions to peace that sectoral programming can make. It aims to fundamentally change how the international aid system operates in conflict-affected settings by maximising the potential of organisations to be more aware of the contexts in which they operate, and to enable their technical programming to contribute to peace deliberately , even when peacebuilding is not at the core of their mandate. Conceptually, peace responsiveness is underpinned by lessons from conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm, but it adopts a broader and forward-leaning orientation to address the organisational and systems level concerns that often impede its realisation. In practice, peace responsiveness focuses on structural barriers and disincentives in organisations and the wider aid system that are difficult to address. In addition, if international responses are not conflict-sensitive and contribute insufficiently to peace, their technical interventions are less effective.

Peace responsiveness offers an operational paradigm that can embody the normative commitments set out in the UN Sustaining Peace Agenda (UN General Assembly (2016, 2020) and Security Council Resolutions 2016, 2020), the Agenda for Humanity, Agenda 2030, the World Humanitarian Summit, and what has become known as the Humanitarian – Development – Peace nexus – "HDP nexus" (or "triple nexus") (OECD DAC 2019). These policy agendas ask actors who operate in conflict settings to improve policy, programmatic, and operational coherence and adopt new ways of working that will achieve collective outcomes by meeting people's immediate needs while reducing their risks and vulnerabilities. Actors operating in conflict-affected or fragile contexts are peace responsive if they are conflict-sensitive, deliberately contribute to sustaining peace through their technical programming, and do so in ways that enhance collective impact; support inclusive, gender-responsive, locally-led change; and strengthen societal resilience to conflict and violence.

Peace responsiveness recognises that peace cannot be achieved by peacebuilders alone, and that development, humanitarian, peacebuilding, stabilisation, and human rights actors must work collectively to support sustainable peace (IASC 2020). At the same time, a significant level of confusion remains amongst practitioners between the differences between conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding (Woodrow and Chigas 2009; Interpeace 2021). In this regard, being clear about overall objectives and ambitions related to working in conflict-affected settings and/or towards peace is critical. Many (development and humanitarian) organisations aim to avoid unintended negative impacts of their actions (conflict sensitivity) and – possibly but not automatically – contribute directly or indirectly to peace without necessarily doing so as an articulated core goal (Inter-Agency Standing Committee Results Group four 2022; Medinilla, Shiferaw, and Veron 2019). By contrast, peacebuilding organisations make

direct and specialised interventions with the dedicated objective to address drivers of conflict and transform conflicts and violence (Interpeace 2021). Their approaches include dialogue and mediation, reconciliation, negotiation of peace agreements, creation of national and sub-national infrastructures for peace, strengthening community conflict prevention and management capacities, etc. In most cases, this is done with a view also to prevent conflict or the relapse into conflict in post-conflict situations (United Nations and World Bank 2018) and working at different inter-connected levels in society with different objectives and ambitions towards peace (Ernstorfer, Chigas, and Vaughan-Lee 2015).

Just as conflict sensitivity highlights "how" an intervention is implemented (rather than "what" is being done), peace responsiveness promotes a different way to implement sectoral development or humanitarian interventions by aligning their implementation with peacebuilding principles. Select peacebuilding principles include, for example: strengthening local capacities and resilience to violent conflict; promoting local ownership and locally-led change (Interpeace 2018); maintaining a long-term perspective guided by context; a focus on inclusive, trust-building and participatory processes; and striving for systemic impacts connecting capacities at different levels (see the pillars of peacebuilding as listed on the Interpeace website https://www.interpeace.org/our-approach/pillars-of-peacebuilding/). Peace contributions by development and humanitarian agencies and other non-peacebuilding actors may take many forms. They may not have explicit peacebuilding objectives. But, if they act in a conflict-sensitive manner and apply a clear theory of change for their peace positive contributions, their programs may nonetheless strengthen peace capacities, social cohesion, or community resilience.

As one example for such an approach to peace responsiveness in practice, FAO's work in South Sudan provides an interesting insight: FAO led an initiative in South Sudan to improve livelihoods, reduce the risk of natural resource-based conflicts, and enhance community resilience. Competition over natural resources led to frequent outbreaks of violence between two communities. FAO provided community-based animal health services to both, while simultaneously working with local authorities and the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei to address wider natural resource use issues, including movement and access to pastures. As a direct result of this work, the two communities reached a community-level peace agreement over natural resource use in 2016 and established a shared market in the heart of a demilitarised zone, facilitating trade and mutual exchanges and also reducing food prices (FAO 2018).

# Building Blocks for Peace Responsiveness

As outlined above, lessons from conflict sensitivity tell us that an exclusive focus on projects and programs is insufficient (PeaceNexus Foundation 2020; Goldwyn 2016). To become peace responsive, organisations need to transform how they operate in the wider aid system. Peace responsiveness requires interlinked and mutually reinforcing efforts at the level of programs, organisations, the wider system, and individuals. This paper focusses on the last three aspects (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Four interlinked building blocks for peace responsiveness: individual, organisational, programmatic, and systems level (Interpeace 2021).
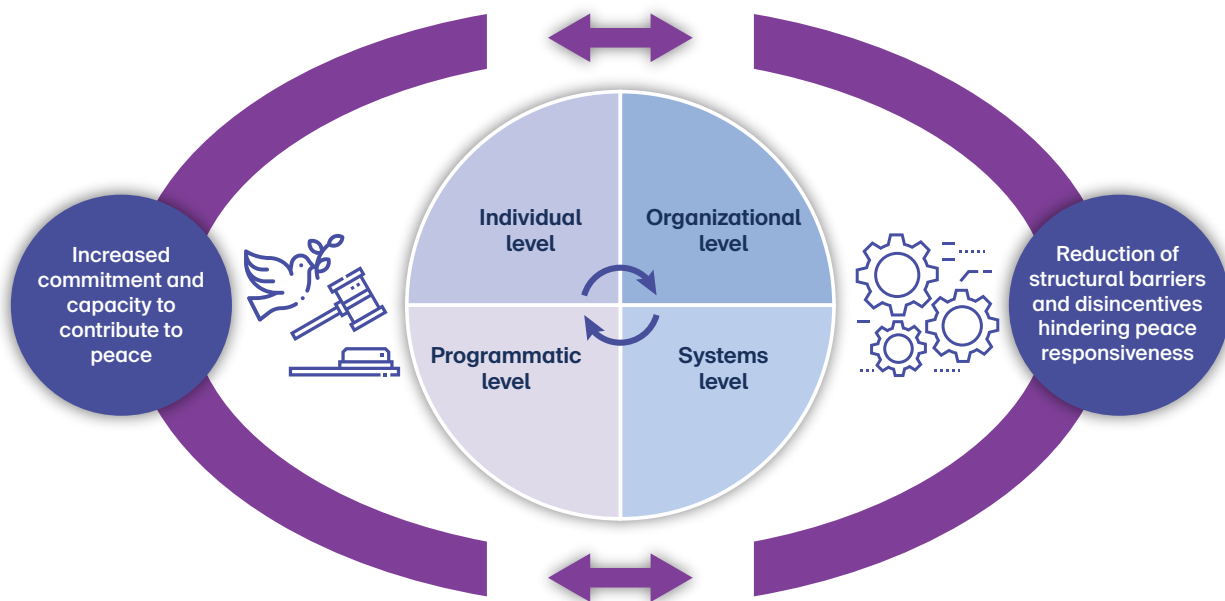


At **organisational** level, the paper puts forward five organisational capacities that are key to peace responsiveness: (1) a strong institutional commitment to sustaining peace, independent of an organisation's mandate; (2) an enabling environment, which entails a learning culture, appropriate management and operational practices, and willingness to take adaptable peace-responsive action; (3) staff capacities and skills to undertake peace-responsive programming; (4) design, monitoring, evaluation and learning systems that identify and prioritise linkages to peace; and (5) meaningful and strategic partnerships, and multi-dimensional programming.

At **systems** level, some fundamental changes are required to: (1) address power asymmetries in the international system and between international, regional, national, and local actors, leading to more equitable and locally-led ways of working; (2) reform funding in order to bridge silos, incentivise collaboration, and make resources more accessible to local organisations; (3) change how we understand and live partnerships by making more creative and collaborative use of each other's experiences and finding more equitable ways of working together, especially for international and local organisations; (4) enhance collaboration and coherence between actors, to increase coordination and create synergies; and (5) develop accountability systems that are more horizontal and based on trust.

At **individual** level, people behave in a peace-responsive manner when they take initiative in their organisations and the contexts in which they work. Numerous structural barriers often stand in the way

of effective engagement in conflict-affected settings, and individuals can take action to overcome these. Specifically, this requires people to: (1) exercise leadership at all levels, independent of formal hierarchies; (2) embrace complexity and think systemically; and (3) adopt reflective practice and ongoing learning as core approaches.

Conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive action is most often impeded by the institutional environment, individual practices and mindsets, and wider aid system conditions. The paper will subsequently further unpack the organisational, systems-wide, and individual building blocks for peace responsiveness.

# Organisational Requirements for Peace Responsiveness

Peace responsiveness requires a fundamental shift in organisational practice. The organisational culture, policies, and procedures should be conducive to facilitate learning and adaptation. Learning from past practice needs to be prioritised, and information needs to flow freely and effectively between communities, country offices, headquarters, and other relevant levels. Management and accountability systems need to foster context-led and adaptive management, promote calculated risk-taking, and balance control and trust. Human resources, procurement, and financing policies and mechanisms need to function in support of this way of working. From research and experience-based learning (Interpeace 2019; Goldwyn 2016; Burke 2013; Morris and Midgley 2019; Pantuliano, Metcalfe-Hough, and McKechnie 2018; Barber and Bowie 2008; Robillard et al. 2020), we already know the many barriers that prevent the uptake of conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding principles in development and humanitarian work. Table 1 summarises some of these barriers.

**Table 1.** Barriers that obstruct conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness (Interpeace, 2019, Goldwyn 2016, Burke 2013, Morris and Midgley 2019, Pantuliano et al. 2018, Barber and Bowie 2008, Robillard et al. 2020)

→ **Project management rather than process orientation.** A focus on predefined outputs and outcomes impedes processes that strengthen relationships and trust.

→ **Competition crowds out collaboration.** Procurement rules and competition for resources impede partnerships.

→ **Upward rather than downward accountability.** Accountability systems that prioritise fiduciary accounting marginalise accountability to the people served.

→ **Context does not lead decision making.** Programme designs and implementation are insufficiently grounded in local realities, and ill-adapted to their context.

→ **Local actors are not included or do not meaningfully participate.** Participation is often limited to 'consultation' processes that are not locally-led or driven.

→ **Institutional politics trump a mission-driven focus.** Organisational cultures incentivise intra-institutional rather than context-led dynamics.

→ **'Short-termism' dominates.** Funding modalities and project cycles impede actors from adopting a long-term perspective.

## How can these organisational barriers be overcome?

In a seminal work, Peter Senge set out the "architecture" of learning organisations (Senge et al. 1994). It includes guiding ideas, organisational infrastructure, and theory, methods, and tools. The version presented here is an adapted from Senge's original and captures the key elements required to embed a peace-responsive approach (Figure 2). It also places the individual at the centre of action, which we will elaborate on in the last section.

**Figure 2.** Peter Senge's model of a learning organisation, applied to and adapted for peace responsiveness (adapted from Senge et al. 1994, 22).
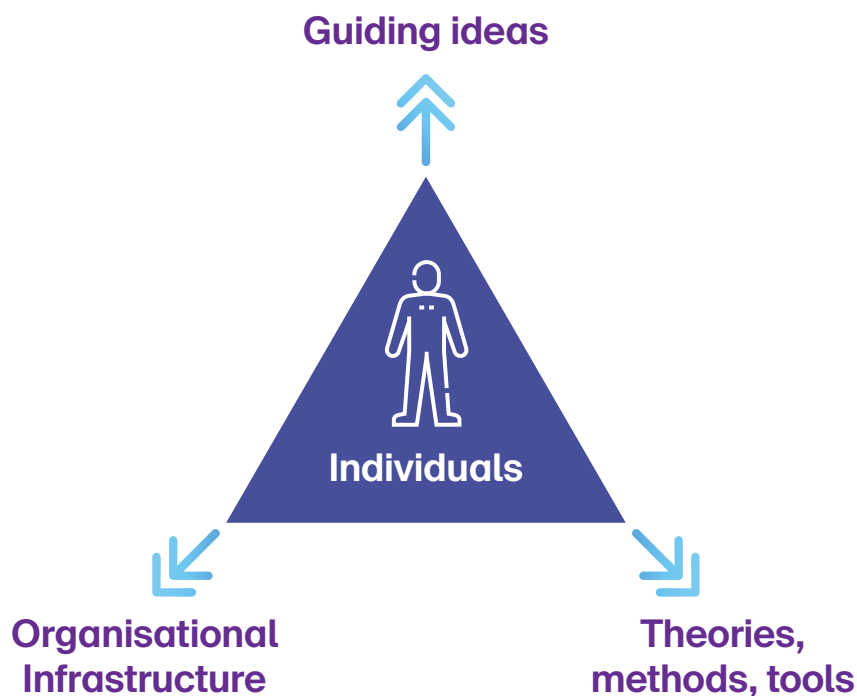


*Guiding ideas* should be the orienting compass for organisations. In addition to a core mandate and mission, organisations need to articulate how they will contribute to peace and avoid unintended harm, and set out their values, purposes, strategies, and policies.

With respect to *organisational infrastructure*, organisations should define the organisational processes and mechanisms for achieving conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness, nurture an enabling organisational culture, and become flexible and adaptable.

*Theories, methods,* and *tools* include knowledge and guidance, underlying theories of change, and internal programming and operational capacity to implement conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness systematically.

Concretely, aligned with the learning organisation paradigm, the section below puts forward **five critical organisational capacitie**s that promote peace responsiveness. These capacities were developed as part of Interpeace's ongoing work on a "peace responsiveness capacity mapping". This mapping is based on the above-mentioned lessons from decades of conflict sensitivity application, and more specifically, on Interpeace's past two years (2020–2022) of experience gathering practical insights from working with and accompanying bilateral partners on peace responsiveness. The five capacities are the following:

*Organisational commitment and institutional anchoring*

Formal organisational commitment is required at the highest level (for example the Executive Board), supported by clear mechanisms and processes for translating organisational and policy commitments into practice at all levels of the organisation.

*Organisational enabling environment*

To sustain uptake, organisations need to allocate sufficient human and financial resources; these should be core rather than project-specific. Peace-responsive skills and competencies need to be incorporated in human resource policies (job descriptions, performance assessments, etc.); those roles should not be wholly outsourced to consultants nor housed exclusively in specialised technical units. Relevant "soft skills" should be recognised and incentivised in organisational structures; technical programming skills (for example, in peace and conflict analysis and adaptive programming) matter but are not sufficient. The organisation must also promote entrepreneurial staff whose mindset is flexible and who strive to understand the big picture, irrespective of their specific job descriptions. Dan Honig has done relevant work on the importance of "intrinsic motivation" of staff (Honig 2021) and is currently working on gathering evidence across different organisations and contexts on "mission-driven bureaucrats" – which explores when a managerial focus on empowering public employees will lead to better performance outcomes.

*Capacity for peace-responsive programming*

Programming that aims to be peace responsive requires a strategic direction, supported by relevant programming guidance. Staff need to possess the skills and mindsets peace-responsive programming requires. For example, this requires understanding how peace and conflict drivers are relevant to development and humanitarian programming, and how to conduct and use peace and conflict analysis on an ongoing basis. In addition, the organisation needs to acquire a holistic understanding of each conflict situation and be ambitious to contribute to a broad vision of peace, even if its work is primarily developmental or humanitarian.

*Design, monitoring and evaluation and learning systems address links to peace*

It is critical to set out clear pathways for change ("theories of change") that promote peace. These need to be embedded in the organisation's monitoring and evaluation systems, which should identify intended as well as unintended impacts. These activities should be based on available evidence and practically relevant research. Monitoring and evaluation efforts need to emphasise collective learning and not be uniquely focused on accountability.

*Meaningful and strategic partnerships, and multi-dimensional programming*

To succeed, conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive organisations need to work closely with partners and promote program synergies in all areas. They should analyse, advocate, and program in association with national and international organisations that have similar activities and purposes. Too often, large multi-mandate agencies bring a "service provider" attitude to partnerships. Peace responsiveness requires meaningful, eye-to-eye partnerships that create synergies and go beyond formal coordination or exchange of information.

Putting these organisational conditions and capacities in place is difficult enough. In addition, because progress and change in individual organisations will not be sufficient, a system- wide effort is required.

# How Does the Wider System Need to Change?

Many of the obstacles to conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive humanitarian and development action can be ascribed to structural barriers and disincentives in the aid system. These include funding streams; timelines and operating modalities of donors; agencies and programs; weak systems and incentives to coordinate and operate coherently at country level; or poor accountability for intended and unintended socio-political impacts on local situations. A strong consensus in favour of shifting power to the local level ("localisation") is emerging at policy level and among civil society and other actors who want social change to be led locally and leverage local knowledge and capacities more meaningfully (Campbell 2018; Roesdahl, Peet-Martel, and Velpillay 2021; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). However, international assistance has responded slowly; it struggles to authorise local leadership and more equitable partnerships between international and local actors. Below, we list some areas in which systems change will be necessary if international assistance is to become peace-responsive and conflict-sensitive.

## Addressing power asymmetries

Peace-responsive programming prioritises local leadership. Programming decisions should be participatory and local stakeholders should be involved in design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes. Programs should not undermine national and local institutions, systems, or solutions. The ambition should be to achieve locally-led initiatives (not just locally managed or implemented). This standard will need to become the norm if interventions are to be more effective and international actors are to remain relevant.

There are positive trends. Efforts are increasing to make aid locally-led and more equitable. For example, civil society is pressing collectively to shift power, funding, and decision-making to local organisations (Roesdahl, Peet-Martel, and Velpillay 2021; RINGO project https://rightscolab.org/ringo/; the work of Peace Direct or https://startnetwork.org/). Discussions of "decolonising aid" and overcoming racial inequalities give momentum to advocacy for systemic change. Power asymmetries need to be addressed at various levels: between international and national staff in organisations; between funders, implementers and recipients; between international agencies and their implementing partners, etc. Only on the basis of a self-critical analysis of global–national–local power relations will organisations be able to support local leadership and take effective steps to make themselves and the international system more equitable. To run such analyses, organisations must possess the skills and openness to value and interpret contextual information that may not match their global blueprints. Ultimately, incentive structures will need to change fundamentally across the various levels of responsibility.

## Reforming funding modalities

To improve coherence and increase synergy, organisations will need to bridge silos, including those in donor governments. The Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) Nexus can and needs to spark new energy in this regard – particularly related to overcoming funding silos (Redvers and Parker 2019). Donors can enhance peace responsiveness by incentivising their partners to be conflict-sensitive and peace responsive, and rationalising funding mechanisms and operating cycles to facilitate collaboration between humanitarian, development, and peace actors. To do this, funders could re-examine how funding mechanisms are set up and designed, and how they are applied (Veron and Sheriff 2020). For example, thematic and context-specific pooled funds or multi-partner trust funds that operate across a

range of country contexts have the potential to provide longer-term and more flexible funding that can be accessible to local and national actors. The "Paung Sie Facility" in Myanmar (openaid.se/en/activities/SE-0-SE-6-12539A0101-MMR-15220) has supported locally driven initiatives for several years and prioritises conflict-sensitive practice. Globally, the Radical Flexibility Fund (https://radicalflexibility.org/) plans to improve foreign assistance and the private foundation model by shifting resources more effectively and directly to individuals, networks, and civil society organisations. At the same time, these changes need to be implemented with care and conflict sensitivity, considering different angles and implications. Burdensome administrative and reporting requirements are attached to many large financial contributions, which local organisations find hard to manage. Reforming those requirements and establishing new forms of partnerships between international and local organisations is required.

## Living a different partnership approach

Many partnerships in the international system suffer from the power asymmetries and inequities described above. To promote a peace-responsive approach, partnerships will need to be reimagined and those power dynamics re-shaped. Locally-led partnership strategies are also critical to conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive objectives, because they can reduce harm to local partners and strengthen the commitment to local leadership. Local actors are closer to people affected by conflict and well placed to identify context dynamics and needs. In this respect, several initiatives show promise. For example, USAID's New Partnership Initiative (usaid.gov/npi) aims to make it easier for partners to access USAID resources and share ideas and practices, while strengthening local capacity.

In addition to dynamics between international and local organisations, partnerships across the board need to be re-shaped. Many large organisations think in terms of "funders" and "implementers"; they are not familiar with more horizontal and collaborative ways of working to maximise expertise. Interpeace aims to work with its partners on peace responsiveness in collaborative and horizontal ways. To illustrate one example: in 2021, Interpeace worked with the World Health Organisation (WHO) to understand the linkages between health and social cohesion in Ukraine. Jointly implemented participatory community consultations in several regions (oblasts) revealed that the provision of health services in a conflict-sensitive and peace responsive way is a key pillar of the social contract and of social cohesion. Bottom-up and people-centred approaches to the design of health services are needed to improve communities' access to health and increase trust.

## Increasing collaboration and coherence

The Sustaining Peace agenda, the HDP nexus debate, and efforts to reform the aid sector have all confirmed that siloed ways of working need to change. Challenges and limitations are abundant but some progress is being made. Agencies now do joint analysis and programming more often, articulate their contributions to sustainable peace more clearly, and strengthen their theories of change. Policy and practitioner communities are starting to discuss more the opportunities, practical possibilities, and dilemmas associated with improved collective impact approaches and coherence (IASC 2022 for a mapping of tools and guidance related to H-P linkages in the HDP Nexus; FAO 2020 for FAO's evaluation of its contribution to the HDP nexus, or Velpillay and Woodrow 2019 for a summary document on lessons from various case studies testing a practical framework for collective impacts in peacebuilding). Learning lessons from implementing the HDP nexus is getting traction – in 2021, the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) commissioned a mapping of operational examples, good practice, and lessons learned from the implementation of HDP nexus approaches in 16 countries (IASC 2021). In the UN system, the financial expansion of the UN Peacebuilding Fund, and its efforts to incentivise coherence and

impact planning at country level, is an example of efforts of more joined-up ways of working – as challenging as it might be to fully operationalise this in practice (Ernstorfer 2020).

A peace-responsive approach aims to achieve collective impact through the complementary efforts of many actors. It requires strong collaboration between institutions across the development, humanitarian, and peace spectrum, based on a sound understanding of links and interactions between the political, social, environmental, economic, and security spheres. The multi-agency/multi-donor "conflict sensitivity hubs" that have been set up in various countries in the last few years are one example of a collective effort to promote joint thinking and practice by donors, national and local actors, and international organisations (Groenewald and Kaltenpoth 2021). At a global level, the conflict sensitivity community hub (https://www.conflictsensitivityhub.net/) provides a platform for mainly INGOs and NGOs to share experiences and lessons from conflict sensitivity implementation.

### *Moving towards a trust-based accountability system*

How individuals and organisations relate to each other, the power dynamics of those relationships, and related accountability systems are key entry points for wider systems change. Many organisations have a wealth of relationships with local and international partners and donors. Peace responsiveness requires rethinking the nature of these partnerships and associated accountability systems. It is necessary to invest in formal and informal relationships and channels of communication, and adopt more horizontal, trust-based accountability systems (Honig 2020) alongside or in place of "upstream" forms of accountability. Some country-office staff try to work differently by creating "informal local accountability arrangements", by delegating authority to a representative group of local stakeholders who hold the country-office accountable for achieving its objectives. Through such an approach, the country-office receives the local feedback it needs to reconcile its global peacebuilding aims and local peacebuilding outcomes (Campbell 2018).

Ultimately, the skills and motivation of individuals make everything work. We explore the role of individuals and personal agency in the next section.

# Individuals and "Intrapreneurship"

Ultimately, individuals influence, animate, and shape an organisation's architecture. Organisations are created by the decisions, actions, and mindsets of individuals. Though they are at the core of programming decisions and organisational policies and practices, individuals are often discouraged by the limitations and dysfunctions within "the system". Frequently, they don't recognise their role or influence. The dysfunctions of bureaucratic structures are regularly highlighted, but it is less often remembered that these systems are, ultimately, the collective product of individuals. Séverine Autessere and Susanna Campbell are some of the few scholars who have done systematic academic research on the role of individual behaviours of international aid workers in conflict-affected settings (Autessere 2014, 2021; Campbell 2018). They found that the daily practices, habits, and narratives of individuals working for international organisations in conflict settings have a significant influence on the effectiveness of externally-supported peace efforts – and that innovative, if seemingly wayward, actions of individual country-office staff are necessary to improve peacebuilding performance. On a practical level, Interpeace has offered training in "effective advising in complex contexts: enabling sustainable peace" since 2013, one of the few professional development opportunities that focuses on personal skills, inter-personal relationships, and the role of individual behaviour change (ipat-interpeace.org/effective-advising-global-edition).

Experts in systems change recognise that attitudes, beliefs, and mental models are usually the strongest forces holding social structures in place – and the hardest elements to change. Many organisational change processes fall short because they change policies and practices but do not understand that structural changes will not be adopted until mental models have changed (Kania, Kramer, and Senge 2018). How can we understand the role of individuals within the systems and organisational structures that they create collectively?

At individual level, "intrapreneurship" (entrepreneurship within an organisation) is required: to induce organisational processes to advance peace, staff must display an entrepreneurial mindset. This can feel risky, especially if your organisation is not very conflict-sensitive or peace responsive. But aid organisations frequently ask people in societies they assist to "stick their necks out" for change, sometimes at great personal risk. We too need to "walk the talk" and be willing to take risks ourselves. Below are three considerations that staff motivated to promote peace might keep in mind.

## *Assume leadership – independent of your status in the organisation*

Most organisations are organised in clear hierarchies, many of which assume that leadership devolves from the top. This assumption is embedded in the power dynamics of organisations, as noted above. An intrapreneurial approach encourages every member of staff to exercise leadership and take initiatives in their sphere of influence – with the objective to "change the system from within". Leading at any level may incur personal risks (as a result of disagreeing, being a minority, being denied rewards, etc.). At the same time, staff are frequently unaware of how much influence they have because they are close to day-to-day operational decisions. The Intrapreneurship Academy has done forward-looking work in this area (intrapreneurship-academy.net).

## *Embrace complexity and think systemically*

We observed earlier that it is essential to develop a systemic understanding of peace and conflict dynamics. We also need to understand our own role(s) in our organisations systemically. Organisational performance often falls short because bureaucratic systems divide functions and responsibilities into small, discrete elements (Honig 2020). To make an organisation peace responsive, it is often necessary to reconnect silos and sectors. This is easier to do if we embrace complexity and non-linear thinking; pay attention to relationships, dynamics, and interconnections; accept that many situations are neither black nor white; and manage the spaces between apparently extreme polarities in a constructive and adaptive manner. We also need to understand our own roles, the roles of our team(s), and the place of our organisation in the larger system. Our organisational and inter-personal dynamics influence more than the projects and programs we work on.

## *Pursue reflective practice, inquiry and generative listening*

Especially in high-intensity environments, it is easy to be consumed by daily operations. Reflective practice enables us to take a step back and look at the broader patterns of the contexts we work in, to learn and adapt. It prompts us to ask questions, listen carefully, learn from experience and look out for the unexpected. Reflective practitioners periodically ask high-order questions: *What if? Why? How might we … ?* Reflective practice also encourages generative listening and generative questions – to develop new ideas, new approaches, and different ways of doing things that might not have been tried before (Scharmer 2018). This applies to individuals but also to organisational practices as past research, for example the "Listening Project", found that international organisations, broadly speaking, do not lis-

ten well and openly enough to the people they intend to serve and the partners involved in the process (Anderson, Brown, and Jean 2012).

Table 2 shows how to move from linear to systems thinking. It offers a generalised model. Most individuals and organisations will fall somewhere along its spectrum rather than at one end. Table 2 was developed by the authors for the purposes of this article, and also builds on the expertise and work of the corresponding author in systems and complexity approaches, which have also been informed by the work of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute (https://www.hsdinstitute.org/).

**Table 2.** Towards 'Intrapreneurship' for peace responsiveness: a generalised model on how to move from linear to systems thinking

| Linear mindset | Systems thinking mindset | Key questions that emerge from an approach that embraces complexity |
|---|---|---|
| You consider yourself a temporary 'intervener' who works on very specific issues or fixes specific problems. | You consider yourself and your organisation to be an organic part of a system and context. This helps you to understand patterns in the system and how they can be influenced. | If I were in this situation long term (independent of the duration of my current contract), how would I change our role and approach? What influence do I have to intervene meaningfully in ways that create opportunities for long-term change? |
| You teach best practices and deliver certainty and a predictable model. | You seek out what is useful in your context, leverage paradox, and build adaptable capacity. | How can I get my team and partners to figure out what is appropriate in this particular context? How can we design a process that we can work with and adapt to changing circumstances? |
| You act exclusively on the basis of your formal mandate. | You act on the basis of what is needed in the context and interpret your mandate creatively. You explore what is possible within formal and informal elements of mandates. | What action is really needed and how can we get it done? How can I create space for what needs to be done? Who should I partner with to get it done? Where do I have wiggle room (if not permission) to change things? |
| You need to control and break things down into manageable pieces. | You embrace complexity and are comfortable with ambiguity. | I cannot control or understand everything in this situation and know that A won't necessarily lead to B, however good my analysis is. What contributions can we make now that might shift elements of the system? What can we achieve tomorrow and in five years? |
| You fear failure. | You take some risks, question dominant assumptions, and learn from past experience. | I will encourage my funders and partners to take some risks, experiment and learn from past approaches (not 'mistakes' or 'failures'!). How will our work culture change if we encourage our frontline staff and local partners to share openly what works and does not? What in our past experience will help us plan a different way forward? |

# Final Reflections

There is much discussion of "systems change" in the international aid sector, but little agreement about what it might imply or where to start. An important pre-condition for reform is to understand our own role in the system and how we are perceived. What specific roles does our organisation play? What do we believe our roles are and what do our (international and local) partners believe our roles are? What can I do as an individual to overcome organisational and systemic barriers? Working together in conflict-affected settings needs to become more relational and less transactional, based on equity rather than a hierarchical and control-based system that reproduces traditional power asymmetries. The system, however, will not change unless we change ourselves and our organisations and recognise and dare to challenge the systemic dynamics our organisations are embedded it – and the implications thereof.

# Acknowledgements

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