Conflict Sensitivity

Refining the Analytical Framework

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Conflict Sensitivity: Refining the Analytical Framework

Aid that is being provided to populations affected by disasters, endemic violence or conflict needs to be conflict sensitive. Minimally, it should 'do no harm' i.e. not create, consolidate or aggravate negative dynamics, and if at all possible, it should try to 'do some good' i.e. contribute to and support positive and constructive dynamics. The most consistent development of frameworks, concepts and methodological guidance for conflict sensitive aid has come from the 'Do No Harm' project of CDA Inc.

It seems possible to refine the available framework by more explicitly differentiating where the tensions and conflicts lie that can be created, aggravated or mitigated by aid providers.

We can first of all distinguish between tensions and conflicts a) that are created or aggravated between affected populations and one or more agencies that come to 'assist' them and b) tensions and conflict that exist within the affected populations prior to and largely independently from the assistance providers. Then we can also distinguish between tensions and conflicts between assistance organisations, and within them.

I.   **Tensions and conflicts between affected populations and one or more agencies that come to 'assist' them, can be created or aggravated because e.g.**

- What an agency does or does not do and how it does it;
- Behaviour of agency staff;
- People compare assistance providers against each other;
- Allegations are made about a particular agency that may or may not be based on what an agency actually does and how it does it (i.e. allegations can be made for other reasons, related to someone else's interest or agenda);
- Generalised criticism and cynicism about the efficiency and effectiveness of the international aid system and/or because of the perceived political uses of 'aid' by international donors.

II. **Tensions and conflicts that exist within the affected population(s) independently from the assistance providers, e.g.**

- Socio-economic tensions within households or family groups;
- Socio-economic tensions within a given social group;
- Socio-economic tensions between social groups;
- Socio-political tensions between 'people' and their formal 'authorities' or structures of power;
- Socio-economic tensions between (unarmed or less well armed) populations and armed groups;
- 'Political' tensions between groups;
- The use of 'civilians' as part of wider political and/or military strategies.

III. **Tensions and conflicts that emerge between an international organisation and its local 'partner(s)' because of the way the interaction takes place.**

IV. **Tensions can also be created or aggravated within an agency.**

SOME ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES.[1]

I. **Tensions and conflicts between affected populations and one or more agencies that come to 'assist' them, can be created or aggravated because e.g.**

- What an agency does or does not do and how it does it;

E.g. the agency employs mostly staff considered as 'outsiders' who may not be trusted locally or are at least seen as mostly benefitting from the job opportunities; local people perceive the agency as imposing cultural values they do not agree with (e.g. gender relations); there is corruption by aid agency staff or a perception/suspicion that they are corrupt;

"People are sick and tired of workshops and awareness-raising. They want aid they can touch." *Listening Team Member*

"The organization built a playground in the place of the market. The community did not appreciate this. People wanted different things. It would be best to form a committee with the local population and the municipalities, and find the right priorities together."   *Municipality representative in South Lebanon*

"We used to use waste water for irrigation – then a 'development' project from the World Bank came and now the water goes to a treatment plant far away and there is no more water for us."   *Lebanese farmer in Bekaa Valley*

"Aid is just decoration. It is not income generating. The medical aid is nice, but it doesn't keep the youth from moving away to the city." *Old Christian man from a small village in South Lebanon*

"Sometimes international organizations teach our children new cultures. This is not accepted by the community, for example when a summer camp is mixing boys and girls together."   *School principal in Akkar, North Lebanon*

"Look at this guy, he just lost his job. He doesn't need a box of food aid. He needs a job." *Palestinian owner of a pharmacy, Palestinian Refugee Camp, North Lebanon*

- Behaviour of agency staff as individuals;

Agency staff are seen as disrespectful, arrogant, having no time or willingness to listen etc.; agency staff are criticised for behaviour seen as 'inappropriate' by local populations (perhaps also outside working hours e.g. behaviour at parties etc.).

- People compare assistance providers against each other;

They see that other agencies provide goods to other affected populations that are perceived as more relevant, greater in quantity or quality/value, or because other agencies work in ways that people are more comfortable with. These differences in agencies may be the result of a lack of (sectoral?) 'coordination' and 'standard setting' among agencies, but can also be the result of some agencies

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[1] This resource note was developed for a conflict sensitivity training course in Lebanon, hence the many examples from Lebanon. CDA's Listening Project has been active in various other countries, the reports of which are available on its website. Beyond that, there are plenty of examples and cases for a wide variety of places where significant relief and recovery aid has been provided, along the same lines.

having acquired a much better understanding of the local dynamics and adapted their programming accordingly, while others consider to operate 'blindly' (blind to tensions, social, cultural, political differences and sensitivities).

- Allegations are made about a particular agency that may or may not be based on what an agency actually does and how it does it;

Accusations may be made against one or more assistance providers that they have a hidden political or religious agenda; that its managers or staff are corrupt and siphoning off assets for their own benefit; that it seeks to prolong a situation of dependency out of self-interest etc. Such allegations may spring from an overall poor relationship with communities and a general feeling of frustration and resentment, But they may also originate from individuals or interest groups whose power and influence is threatened by the way the agency operates and who deliberately circulate such allegations and accusations to discredit the assistance provider(s).

"In Sierra Leone, resentment and grievance at the local level tend to trace back to charges of patrimonialism and personal favouritism. Gaps in the coverage of NGO assistance, for whatever reason, generate considerable local resentment. A rural trader interviewed for this study complained that his chiefdom had seen very little NGO activity, compared with chiefdoms and towns with better political connections. It was also claimed by a number of people interviewed that the first schools to benefit from school feeding programmes were always those attended by the girlfriends of local NGO field staff, and that any school left off the list would most likely be attended by a girl who had once spurned the sexual advances of a fieldworker. The NGO s concerned would almost certainly reject these accusations out of hand. But the rumours themselves are significant for local political relations and the position of NGO s *regardless* of whether there is any truth in them. By the same token, complaints of exclusion from aid disbursements and other charges against aid agencies may be a political weapon of the weak. This, in turn, has implications for agencies' accountability to their beneficiaries." (Collinson, S. 2002: Politically informed humanitarian programming. London, ODI, HPN Paper 41:15)

- Generalised criticism and cynicism about the efficiency and effectiveness of the international aid system (its bureaucracy, salary levels, internal competition etc.) because large amounts of aid spent doesn't generate many sustainable livelihoods, and/or because of the perceived political uses of 'aid' by international donors.

"Some international aid agencies would only work in the North of Lebanon, others only in the South. The location where organizations work is affected by politics, feelings and biases." *Mayor of small town in South Lebanon*

"Eighty percent of the money is spent on planning and workshops, and not enough on implementation. Little aid trickles down from donors to contractors. Everyone takes their piece." *Lebanese NGO director in Bekaa Valley*

"[Donor coordination] networks become a place to compete instead of a forum for cooperation or coordination." *Palestinian director of an international NGO, North Lebanon*

"During the Nahr al-Bared crisis, we spent hours and hours in cluster meetings in order to coordinate the aid that was distributed. In the end, it was just empty words. Each organization distributed whatever it wanted to whomever it wanted, regardless of the promise to coordinate." *Listening Team Member*

"War created a window for foreign countries to be present in Lebanon. It was part of the international game. Why didn't they bring aid before the war? Because a war is the window for different countries to intervene. For international agencies, Lebanon is a place to learn and test projects." *Lebanese woman in Hamra, Beirut*

II. **Tensions and conflicts that exist within the affected population(s) independently from the assistance providers, e.g.**

- Socio-economic tensions within households or family groups;

E.g. because men resent that relief is provided directly to women (or to youth) which reduces their control over the household economy, which can be a very sensitive issue if they themselves cannot provide a regular income and therefore act as the main bread winner; or disputes increase within families over the choice of the type of core house that aid agencies have offered to build for those whose homes were destroyed by disaster or violence;

- Socio-economic tensions within a given social group;

E.g. programmes that create spaces for youth are making the 'elders' uneasy as they feel it threatens their traditional authority;

- Socio-economic tensions between social groups;

E.g. a dominant group does not like a subordinate group to be given equal assistance and equal voice in the relief & recovery programmes; dispute arises among previously co-resident groups of a village destroyed e.g. in an earthquake and that is now to be rebuilt; tensions increase between host communities and displaced people because all assistance is directed at the latter and the host community is neither supported in its hospitality and sees itself as an important stakeholder typically excluded from any conversations about aid programming;

"Appropriation of schools and other facilities to house Iraq's displaced persons has periodically caused tensions with host communities when the host community is deprived of the use of those facilities. In one illustration of this near Fallujah, one floor of a school building was being used to house IDPs. Tensions arose between the IDPs and their host community when boys from the IDP families in the school began harassing girls attending their classes. Soon, threats were made against the IDP families. Religious leaders stepped in to help resolve the dispute, with the outcome that some IDP families were moved to different accommodation, while others were employed by the community as guards for the school. The example illustrates the need for local authorities to consider carefully the impacts on neighbourhoods and communities when decisions are made about how to accommodate and tend to the welfare of newcomers. (NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq, Briefing Paper Jan. 2008)

"Iraqi aid workers from mixed areas of the country are also concerned that whenever housing reconstruction and other assistance to returnees increases, aid that is rightly targeted on the basis of need will appear to favour a particular identity group in some locations. Their concern is prophetic, given the experience with returns in many other conflicts. Due to the way destruction was experienced by various communities from place to place during inter-communal violence, if people of one group were expelled from a neighbourhood, then returnee assistance targeted solely on the basis of need will appear to favour the group that was displaced." (idem source)

- Socio-political tensions between 'people' and their formal 'authorities' or structures of power;

"All the village received aid, but those who were favoured by political parties received more." *Lebanese shop owner in South Lebanon* (political economy statement)

"I don't belong to any political party so I cannot get aid." *Shop owner in a small town in South Lebanon* (political economy statement)

"If you have a leader from your religious sect in the government, he will bring you aid. If not, nobody will take care for you." *Mukhtar in a small village, South Lebanon* (political economy statement)

"If you don't have wasta, you won't get anything." *Displaced Palestinian refugee woman, Nahr al-Bared camp, North Lebanon* (political economy statement)

"Some countries cooperated well with the municipalities after the war. You need to work with them as partners but you need to supervise them as well." *Lebanese pedestrian in a village close to Tyre, South Lebanon*

"People in the municipality have a low salary, but build big villas." *Female shop owner in small town in South Lebanon*

- Socio-economic tensions between (unarmed or less well armed) populations and armed groups;

E.g. aid resources are siphoned off directly or taken from 'beneficiaries' after distribution by armed groups (who can have an alleged political purpose or simply be criminal gangs), thereby unwittingly supporting the 'economy of violence'.

- 'Political' tensions between groups;

E.g. different groups have different political sympathies or allegiances and the way aid is provided in their environment not only confirms the fault lines and antagonisms but is perceived as enhancing them (this can also come about because of the behaviour of a particular group e.g. the Serb Kosovars who see the international community as favouring the Albanian Kosovars and therefore tend to keep a distance from it, creating a self-chosen 'marginalisation' from the assistance effort, which then generates the 'discrimination' they originally feared).

- The use of 'civilians' as part of wider political and/or military strategies.

"Currently, most actors in the humanitarian community are acutely concerned about the apparent manipulation for political purposes of the question of returns of IDPs and refugees to their homes in Iraq. Humanitarian agencies face a dilemma. On one hand, there are grounds for facilitating a return as soon as safely possible in order to avoid the entrenchment of displacement, and the institutionalization of divisions that ratify inter-communal cleansing. However, there is a strong sense that a return is being rushed before conditions conducive to safety and dignity have been established, and suspicions that data on existing returns has been inflated and propagandized by Iraqi and international authorities in order to illustrate that Iraq is safer and more stable than it actually is." (NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq Jan. 2008)

III.   **Tensions and conflicts that emerge between an international organisation and its local 'partner(s)' because of the way the interaction takes place.**

E.g. INGOs hire away best staff of local organisations; retain dominance over all key decision-making; provide only project funding but no core organisational support etc. (This would not necessarily be a major area of attention for this workshop, but it may have to be inasmuch as the local agency may align itself with the 'population' and hence add to the resistance towards the international agency – and it is also relevant inasmuch as an international agency entirely working through local partners would have to implement 'conflict sensitive action' with and through them).

"There is not enough funding for local NGOs, so the international NGOs play the local NGOs against each other – to outbid each other. Outside money controls our freedom to do what we want." *Lebanese NGO director in Beirut*

"Some donors come to us with ready-made objectives so we have to channel them into our objectives." *Lebanese NGO employee in Bekaa Valley*

 "Everything is decided before you start the project." *Lebanese NGO director in Beirut*

"We need strategic, long-term partnerships with donors. The impact doesn't come overnight. We need to know that we can rely on their support not only tomorrow. If they want to make a change that lasts, they need to start taking longer breaths." *Lebanese coordinator of local NGO in Tyre, South Lebanon*

"If funding will be discontinued, donors should inform you early so you can plan for it. Otherwise the people are upset. Organizations should have an exit strategy and give one year's notice." *Palestinian NGO director in Beirut*

IV.   **Tensions can also be created or aggravated within an agency.**

E.g. due to perceived differential treatment between 'international' and 'national' staff'.

"You have to understand the hierarchy. I am a Lebanese employee of an international NGO. My status is regarded higher than the one of the Lebanese working for local NGOs. And again, the Lebanese employee has a higher status than the Palestinian working for a local NGO. If we want to empower the locals, the best we can do is to stay out. By my very presence, representing an international NGO, we are disempowering the locals." *Listening Team Member*

"The donor may say local staff members belong to a political party or are a certain religion and therefore they are considered unable and not objective. This is very naive. People coming from outside have less knowledge than local staff, but local staff have no decision making power. This creates antagonism in the office. Local staff sees this as discrimination. The only problem with a local getting a higher position is that they are local." *Lebanese NGO director in Beirut*

Acknowledgement: All quotes from Lebanon are taken from CDA Inc. 2009: Field Visit Report Lebanon. Boston, CDA Inc. Listening Project.

A REFINED ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK.

This analytical framework differentiates more clearly in what type of relationship(s) the tensions or conflicts are located. In some of these relationships (I, III, IV) the aid agency is directly involved and therefore has in principle greater control over the quality of the relationship. It should be easier to do no harm and even to do some good in these fields of relationship, compared to the tense and conflictual relationships that exist within and between the populations the aid agency seeks to assist, whose existence (though not their intensity) is relatively independent of the presence or not of the aid agency. Secondly, attention is drawn to the fact that rarely is there only one aid agency operating in a given environment. Even if one is deliberately conflict-sensitive, the potential benefit of this may be reduced or even outweighed if other aid providers continue to operate in a way that creates or aggravates tensions and conflicts. In other words, conflict-sensitivity in aid operations has to be dealt with as a collective and not an individual agency responsibility.

The picture in the next page visualises this perspective.

On the right hand side is the 'world out there' of socio-economic and political groupings within which complex dynamics take place at different levels. Within there, we find the populations affected by disaster, violence, human rights violations and/or or prolonged poverty (but also others), where we identify those that are entitled to benefit from humanitarian action (assistance, but also protection).

On the left hand side we find a simplified picture of assistance and protection providers, among them NGOs but also others such as local authorities, political groupings, even foreign state actors etc. Some INGOs may implement directly, others with local NGOs and/or via local state level authorities etc.

The negative and positive dynamics among the wider populations can be affected by the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection (what, how, to whom etc.) – but we should bear in mind that it is also affected by other actors and factors that are far less under our control (far right side).

When considering conflict-sensitive action or Do No Harm, our first area of focus obviously has to be on our own action, whether we implement directly or with others together. Because this is the area where we are in the best position to make some changes, if needed. Yet we cannot ignore that even if we would work in very conflict-sensitive ways, the manner in which others provide assistance and protection can continue to stimulate negative dynamics, and actually neutralise or even outweigh our efforts to minimise negative impacts and to try and create or support some positive ones. We therefore cannot just look at our own actions and their consequences in isolation. Often, if we have concerns about the consequences of how others operate, it will be comparatively easier to take that up with them when they are other NGO-type organisations.

The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership has developed standards and benchmarks with practical guidance that concern the relationship between aid agencies and affected populations. It is therefore particularly relevant for those scenarios where the way the aid agency operates is itself a source of resentment, anger and possibly antagonism. HAP also pays attention to the quality of the relationship between notably international aid agencies and local/national partners. But any negative dynamics among populations can of course have its origins or be fuelled by factors that are not related to how the aid agency operates and that will be harder to influence.

DNH – CONFLICT SENSITIVE ACTION – FIRST FOCUS

INGO DIRECTLY IMPLEMENTING

HAP

INGO WORKING THROUGH PARTNER(S)

HAP

LOCAL PARTNER

HAP

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

POLITICAL GROUPING

TENSIONS, CONLICT, VIOLENCE

Within families, within social groups, between social groups, between political groupings etc.

SOMETIMES MULTILAYERED, INTERWOVEN

OTHER ACTORS & FACTORS