



DO NO HARM AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN ?

EVENT REPORT

L42, rue de la Loi 42, BRUXELLES

23 May, 2018

DO NO HARM

IMPARTIALITY

LOCAL
COMMUNITIES

MEETING NEEDS

CONFLICT
SENSITIVITY

HUMANITY

NEUTRALITY

INDEPENDENCE

SUMMARY

On 23 May, VOICE hosted an event entitled “*Do no harm and conflict sensitivity: two sides of the same coin?*”. The event brought together VOICE members, leading practitioners from the humanitarian community as well as peacebuilding NGOs, academics and EU institutions’ representatives. The four panelists were Paul Murphy, Executive Director of *Saferworld*, Martina Zapf, Head of Programme Support at *Interpeace*, Peter van Sluijs, Senior Strategist at *CORDAID* and Michael Kühn, Senior Policy Advisor from *Welthungerhilfe*. The discussion was facilitated by Birte Hald, Brussels Representative of *Danish Refugee Council*.

Participants shared the analysis that protracted, complex and conflict related humanitarian crises is the new normality in which humanitarian NGOs must operate and deliver assistance to people in need. From the World Humanitarian Summit emerged a greater international and European focus on the prevention of conflict and a strong call for more peacebuilding, including through conflict sensitivity in a context of scarce resources to address crises in the world. Panellists argued that *Do no harm* is part of the spectrum of conflict sensitivity and that the level of conflict sensitivity of activities depends on the mandate of the organisation and the commitment, at the leadership level in the organisation. It was nonetheless noted that conflict sensitivity can also start as a filter that each individual uses to analyse the context and how then to act.

Despite the general agreement on the interest and the benefits of a more conflict sensitive approach to humanitarian aid in theory, the discussion also questioned whether there is actually space to effectively implement conflict sensitivity considering the various constraints faced by humanitarian NGOs, such as, time constraints to deliver timely assistance, shrinking space for civil society organisations in some countries, lack of funding predictability, funding gaps for LRRD... The relation between conflict sensitivity and humanitarian principles was also touched upon, especially with regards to the role of local actors and the principle of impartiality, with some questioning if the two are often not incompatible?



Panel presentation

Birte Hald, Brussels representative, Danish Refugee Council

Following the opening and welcome remarks by Nicolas Borsinger, President of the VOICE network, Birte Hald introduced the panel and the discussion.

Looking at the world situation today, with more than 65 million forcibly displaced people and with aid being increasingly politicized, Birte Hald said that the topic chosen is more relevant than ever. Referring to the book *Do no harm: how aid can support peace – or war*, by Mary B. Anderson, she gave a brief historical background to 'Do no Harm', recalling that it is an analytical framework developed in the 1990s in order to avoid inadvertently fuelling conflict while delivering aid. This analytical framework gives tools for conflict analysis to take into account the connectors and the dividers in a given society. Aid workers, when delivering aid also convey implicit ethical messages, for example, (perceived) different approaches amongst humanitarian organisations deployed can also fuel tensions.



Acknowledging that the do no harm approach must inform humanitarian aid actions, B. Hald opened with a question on how far should humanitarians go into conflict sensitivity while remaining committed and consistent with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

Paul Murphy, Executive Director, Saferworld

Paul Murphy noted that today's reality of crisis response is one of increasingly scarce resources and therefore the need to share resources and expertise to better answer complex and complicated crises; independently from being a humanitarian or a peacebuilding organisation. Globally, we are witnessing a huge number of protracted crises of a massive scale. This requires all actors to review their strategies.

According to him, conflict sensitivity is about applying a filter to different types of analysis. It is also a spectrum: doing no harm is a form of conflict sensitivity, but a humanitarian NGO or organisation can go further by contributing to peacebuilding through its activities and objectives. He also emphasized that conflict sensitivity is, and must be, context specific.

As part of his presentation, Paul Murphy also drew attention to the benefits for humanitarians of integrating conflict sensitivity, using examples from Saferworld's research and support given to humanitarian organisations and donors: conflict sensitivity can help staff in the field to feel safer in the environment in which they have to operate; it can also



“Crises driven by political conflict have become the new normality. And we are adjusting our response to be more effective. Conflict sensitivity is part of it”.

improve aid effectiveness and impact, including through a better sense of local participation and ownership, it encourages greater flexibility and responsiveness in interventions. The biggest advantage overall, at a time of big challenges for the sector of crisis response, is the understanding of how we engage and how it will make a difference.

Martina Zapf, Head of Programme Support, Interpeace

Martina Zapf recalled the strong focus of the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) on conflict prevention and ending needs. Since then however, space for reflection and moving forward has been missing, and this event is welcome in this context. She said that we all have de facto a common goal, the WHS has clearly redefined what successful humanitarian assistance means: ending needs.

The expert from Interpeace then gave examples of cases where humanitarian interventions can have a negative impact on tensions or conflicts, such as in Zimbabwe where the selection of local implementing partners of a UN resilience fund has led to a negative impact on interethnic relations. She also acknowledged that there are also examples of positive impact of humanitarian aid on conflict dynamics. However, she noted that considering that 80% of humanitarian aid is delivered in conflict contexts, there is an imperative to move beyond the do no harm principle.

The main focus of Interpeace is to look at how tensions and possible factors of conflicts can be addressed from within societies with international actors playing an enabling role. As a conclusion of her presentation, M. Zapf shared a few recommendations

Peter van Sluijs, Senior Strategist, CORDAID

CORDAID is adopting a LRRD (Linking Relief Rehabilitation and Development) approach wherever possible, trying to combine the lifesaving humanitarian response with the longer term improvement of healthcare systems, economic opportunities, disaster resilience, and the promotion of security and justice.

Peter van Sluijs started his presentation by underscoring the crucial importance of partnerships, of adapting programmes to the local context and saying that the starting point is a good needs assessment based on communities and the input from local actors. In understanding the context in which you will operate, you have to take into account the partners and relations dynamics in the local context – i.e. the ethnic, political and religious affiliation of those you work with.

P. van Sluijs concurred on the notion of spectrum: do no harm is part of the conflict sensitivity spectrum. Cordaid tries to integrate conflict sensitivity by understanding in depth the local context and by anticipating the potential impact of their intervention from the start, at programming stage. Partners must also be taken on board as soon as the programming starts. According to him, political processes in protracted crises, in search for a political solution to the conflict, should be part of the analysis of the

proposed by Interpeace on how humanitarian response can contribute to resilience to violent conflict and ending needs:

- Humanitarian response must move from local ownership to meaningful partnerships to achieve local resilience to violent conflict. It means working with local partners seen as legitimate in the local context. In this sense, conflict sensitivity is very much linked to the localisation agenda and the participation revolution.
- Humanitarian response must look at best process rather than best practice as a way of fully taking into account the specific (community) context in which aid is delivered and strengthening local capacities and relationships.



“Do no harm does not go far enough. There is a need and a possibility for humanitarian and development actors as much as peace-builders to contribute to peace in societies. But the objective can't be that humanitarian actors become peace-builders”.

context, and humanitarian organisations should take this into account in planning interventions to address humanitarian needs. Cordaid's expert also emphasized that the triple nexus is very much a global level discussion stemming from the WHS and the interest of the new UN Secretary General in conflict prevention. The role he sees for NGOs is linked to early warning and preparedness, when working with local partners, as a possible contribution of humanitarian actors to tackle the complexity of crises.



“The vast majority of countries where we operate are protracted crises due to conflicts and that affects the way we deliver humanitarian assistance”.

Michael Kühn, Senior Policy Advisor, Welthungerhilfe

Michael Kühn very much agreed with points raised by the previous speakers, be it on the premises or the context specificity or the possible ways to adopt a conflict sensitive approach. However, he strongly questioned the implementation of conflict sensitivity within humanitarian response, asking participants to wonder why conflict sensitivity has, to a large extent, been an operational failure. Especially when do no harm guidance has been a standard part of the toolbox for so long, even if sometimes neglected.

M. Kühn pointed at the many 'sensitivities' - such as gender sensitivity, climate sensitivity, disability - that humanitarian operators are asked to take into account within emergency responses in chaotic contexts. He drew attention to the many, and increasing constraints in which humanitarians must deliver lifesaving assistance: time constraints for timely delivery of aid, shrinking space for civil society organisations in some countries, lack of access, heavy



“There is nothing to say against conflict sensitivity. But practical constraints are there and we can't ignore them”.

donor reporting, lack of funding predictability, funding gaps for LRRD... He also noted that working with local partners, in conflict contexts, is not always straightforward when people and communities have suffered grave traumas. As much as humanitarian organisations would like to contribute to conflict sensitivity, they already struggle to operate to their own high standards in difficult conditions.

Exchange with the audience

The question and answer session was divided into three rounds.

In the first round of questions, several participants from the floor raised question on the practical **feasibility of adopting a conflict sensitive approach while upholding the humanitarian principles**. Participants also made the connection with the extension of the scope of humanitarian aid, wondering if it was **time for humanitarian aid to go back to basics** and maintain the ability and incentives to reach people most in need, in the most difficult conditions.

In reaction to these questions, Paul Murphy replied that conflict sensitivity is not merely about some training and programming. He believes that conflict sensitivity should be a commitment at the highest level of an organisation; to be an institutional endeavour. The mere fact of giving time and space to conflict sensitivity within an organisation leads to reflections that can lead to more sensitivity even if it starts at the interpersonal level in interactions with beneficiaries.

Martina Zapf said that the level of efforts put into conflict sensitivity must of course be adapted with the mandate of your organisation. The nature of the context and the nature of the programme determines what level of conflict analysis and programme adaptation is necessary to not only avoid harm but positively contribute to the conditions for peace. But in any case, conflict sensitivity is not or should not be optional.

Reacting to the need to go back to basics in humanitarian response, Peter van Sluijs disagreed, saying that since 90% of humanitarian assistance is now delivered in protracted crises, adaptation of our response is needed in order not to be still here after many years.



“Doing harm or doing good? There is a potential danger in this direction, that in order not to risk doing harm, we would do no good. The core business of humanitarian aid is to save lives. Isn't it time to go back to basics?”

Multiple response strains are needed to address root causes of conflict and instability and to seek to come to lasting (political) solutions.

The second round of questions again highlighted the limits of conflict sensitivity in relation to **principled humanitarian aid**. Local consultations or partnerships can be challenging because you can't expect victims or beneficiaries in a conflict to be neutral or impartial. A participant also brought to the table the distinction to be made between humanitarians' contribution to **peace at local level and peacebuilding at national level**. It is a completely different story at national level to work with peacebuilding missions and governments while abiding to the humanitarian principles. The **triple nexus** at other levels than the community level can be challenging.

P. Murphy welcomed the remarks from the floor. In his opinion, the discussion and divergent points of view really showed that conflict sensitivity is not just about having a policy framework. He reiterated that business as usual is not an option anymore because of the normalization of protracted conflicts and the inadequacy of humanitarian aid to respond sufficiently. Furthermore, humanitarians can take the lead in peacebuilding precisely because they are the first to respond but also because humanitarian aid is where the most significant amount of resources is put when it comes to crisis response. It is especially true when we look at the design of the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework, where funding for conflict prevention is being blurred and securitized^[1]. He added that conflict sensitivity actually contributes to risk management because operators are better informed.

While M. Zapf stressed that fact that we are collectively already failing to meet needs (most urgent needs) is exactly the reason why we need to invest in conflict sensitivity, M. Kühn called on participants and the different actors to be realistic about their respective expertise and where each one can make a difference – hinting at comparative advantages of actors and complementarity of actions. He then drew attention to the advocacy that NGOs can work on to contribute to political solutions to conflicts at levels where they cannot make a difference through their own actions.

The third round of questions drew attention to the **example of South Sudan**, ten years ago, where all actors were joining forces, there was capacity building and we were all engaged in conflict sensitivity... but the crisis has not been solved and became even worse. Participants wondered what has not worked in the case of South Sudan and can be learned from this. The scope of humanitarian aid was further discussed by participants.

In the case of South Sudan, Michael Kühn said that the conflict was about resources. For him, the issue goes far beyond and is much more complex than what humanitarians could ever resolve. Peter van Sluijs, argued that up to 2013, the outlook for South Sudan looked good with all international donors having agreed on a compact. But suddenly everything fell apart and in his opinion, some potential crisis factors at the national political level were not sufficiently taken into account (also not in the Fragility Assessment process) and anticipated. For Paul Murphy, what did not work in South Sudan is probably the very top down approach to peacebuilding and stabilisation: the state building exercise was done in a technocratic and restrictive way, neglecting other dimensions than the security/military one. Martina Zapf supported the point raised on the need for a division of labour and stressed that the triple nexus probably is a suitable approach to do so, with resilience to violent conflict as the common end goal.



"Local consultation is challenging because you can't expect victims or beneficiaries in a conflict to be neutral or impartial"



"We are discussing about how we should end needs, but in many contexts we are failing, already, meeting the needs".



"Ten years ago, we were all in Sudan: humanitarians, development actors, peace builders. And we were well aware of conflict sensitivity. What has gone so wrong in a country like South Sudan? We should draw lessons."

[1] In the proposal for the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework, 2021-2027, the European Commission proposes to merge the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace into a broad external action instrument. A 'European Peace Facility' outside the budget is also foreseen with a scope mainly limited to financing military operations.

In **conclusion**, Birte Hald provided a wrap up of the discussion, listing the following elements:

- Conflict sensitivity must be contextual and refers to a wide spectrum of possibilities to contribute to peace building beyond the do no harm principle.
- Conflict sensitivity starts at the individual level.
- Local actors and meaningful partnerships with organisations perceived as legitimate are crucial in conflict sensitive programming.
- Humanitarian actors will not and should not become peacebuilders.
- Part of the failure to prevent and end conflict is probably linked to a still very much top down approach to peacebuilding from the decision makers.
- Division of labour and complementarity is probably one of the possible approaches to conflict sensitivity.
- Again, humanitarian aid cannot substitute for political will and solutions.

VOICE President, Nicolas Borsinger, closed the event, drawing attention to the relevance of this discussion to the broader context of the UN Security Council's failures to secure peace and security for people and his wish that civil society organisations could join together across different sectors to work on this.



VOICE (Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies) is a network representing 85 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. VOICE is the main interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid and disaster risk reduction



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