

# EVALUATION DEPARTMENT

Evaluation Brief / Report 3 / 2020

## Operationalising Conflict Sensitivity

Lessons Learned from Norway's  
Engagement in South Sudan



## INTRODUCTION

The widespread effects of fragility and violent conflict strongly suggest the continued need to apply a conflict sensitive approach to building the conditions for sustainable peace. The promotion of peace, and thus the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, hinges in part on the ability to identify and understand a conflict’s specific causes, dynamics and risks and to respond with tailored, relevant and implementable peacebuilding and state-building arrangements.

The purpose of this brief is to explore the application of a conflict sensitive approach to aid provision in fragile and conflict affected settings. In doing this, we draw from the findings of the recent evaluation of Norway’s engagement in South Sudan<sup>1</sup>, as well as wider research findings and experiences. In the brief, we propose ways in which the design and implementation of aid programmes in fragile contexts can be made more conflict sensitive and thereby more effective.

### What is Conflict Sensitivity?

*Conflict sensitivity* refers to the practice of understanding how aid interacts with conflict in a particular context, to mitigate unintended negative effects, and to influence conflict positively wherever possible, through humanitarian, development and/or peacebuilding interventions.

Conflict sensitivity means the ability to: understand the context in which you operate; understand the interaction between your intervention and the context

(how the context affects the intervention and how the intervention affects the context); and act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts.

**Sources:** CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, [www.cdacollaborative.org](http://www.cdacollaborative.org), Haider, H., (2014).

**Conflict Sensitivity:** Topic Guide. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC

1 Norad Evaluation Department (2020) Blind sides and soft spots: An evaluation of Norway’s aid engagement in South Sudan, E Bryld et al



## FINDINGS ON CONFLICT SENSITIVITY FROM THE EVALUATION

The evaluation assessed the effects of the total Norwegian engagement in South Sudan, considered whether it had been coherent and conflict sensitive, and how it had adapted to a changing context. The degree to which conflict sensitivity was applied in the Norwegian support was thus a central feature of the evaluation.

The evaluation’s overall finding was that Norway was effective in contributing to the implementation of the peace agreements in South Sudan. However, alongside other international development partners, it was not effective in achieving its objectives of ensuring an accountable and transparent state working to enhance poverty reduction. The South Sudanese leadership did not prioritise democratic development or allocate funding for development activities for its people. Instead, Norway and other international partners stepped in to provide for the people of South Sudan and took over responsibility.

The evaluation highlights a number of dilemmas faced by Norway and explores how the absence of a systematic approach to conflict sensitivity had unintended consequences. One key dilemma identified

by the evaluation concerned how to engage with a government that did not act in the interests of its people. As South Sudan moved further and further away from the democratic principles underlying the 2005 peace agreement, this dilemma became more and more obvious. Particularly, after the outbreak of civil war in December 2013, Norway, alongside other donors, was faced with the challenge of how to provide help to the South Sudanese people. Especially when this required collaboration with a government that was openly targeting its own people and thus in reality hindering effective aid. In the face of a spiralling internal conflict, the Norwegian response was to engage less with the government and place more emphasis on emergency assistance.

While this change in direction shows that Norway responded to major shifts in the context and was therefore aware of conflict potentials, the evaluation found that the lack of a systematic approach to conflict sensitivity had made the engagement risk prone. In consequence, the assumptions underlying the Norwegian aid did not always prove to be tenable. For example, Norway had a strong commitment to the South Sudanese leadership around and after independence in 2011 and the assumption was that this leadership would deliver on its promises of

development. In effect it led to Norway supporting what had become an increasingly authoritarian leadership after the immediate post-war grace period. A tangible consequence of this was, that while the Norwegian supported Oil for Development Programme successfully strengthened South Sudan’s capacity to extract oil revenues, it also allowed elites to retain more resources for personal gain.<sup>2</sup>

Shortcomings in understanding and acting on conflict dynamics are by no means unique to Norway. As other reports on South Sudan has shown *‘donors worked with a poor understanding of local power relations, drivers of conflict and causes of vulnerability; this created flawed and unsustainable programme designs which barely involved existing structures or communities.....ignorance about drivers of conflict, particularly at the sub-national level, left little room for early warning that developing tensions might affect*

<sup>2</sup> As was stated in the OECD-DAC’s evaluation of donor’s engagement in South Sudan in 2010 ‘the transition from war to peace is not a technical exercise but a highly political process. A sophisticated and nuanced analysis of power relations, the causes of vulnerability, and drivers of conflict and resilience indicators, was largely missing from the design and execution of many aid programmes. In dynamic conflict settings, an analysis of the political economy of the transition must also be continuously revised in order to remain useful. This analysis was not done, as donors have instead tended to focus on administrative delivery and implementation.’



*programming.*<sup>3</sup> The evaluation of Norway’s engagement in South Sudan found that Norway’s conflict-sensitive understanding did improve over time. And, current policy now seeks ‘new ways of enhancing Norway’s conflict analysis capacity at country level; for example, by appointing roving or permanent conflict advisers at selected missions.’<sup>4</sup>

#### HOW CAN NORWAY OPERATIONALISE CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN ITS WORK?

As the South Sudan example amply demonstrates, working in conflict affected settings is extremely complex and what works in one location may not work in another. As we describe here, working in an area of conflict requires a tailored approach based on a thorough understanding of the specific context and the roles, interests, perceptions, capacities and needs of individuals and groups within it and surrounding it. Research on aid and conflict asserts that aid should be handled as a political agenda, because it represents an influx of resources over which there may be

competition.<sup>5</sup> Thus, to optimise its effectiveness and to avoid inadvertently doing harm, the effects that aid may have on local and national conflict dynamics need to be considered and mapped in a manner that is useful for overall portfolio-, programme- and project-design and later monitoring. As the context changes, so too may the effects of aid, and the regular assessment of such dynamics and their effects must be included.

Development logic implies that the sum of many projects will add up to broader development. This in turn means that the impact that even a small project can have on local conflict dynamics can add up to a bigger conflict picture too. This can work both ways – either mitigating conflict or exacerbating it. At the project level, a clear understanding of how even a small project might influence conflict dynamics is therefore crucial. In practice, this requires articulating how the project may be affected by conflict factors and how it may, in turn, affect them.

Fortunately, various toolkits have emerged that can be used by aid agencies to guide a conflict sensitive approach. Examples include Do No Harm, Peace and

Conflict Impact Assessment, and Aid for Peace.<sup>6</sup> As the Evaluation of Norway’s engagement in South Sudan shows, a systematic use of such tools and approaches could successfully add to Norwegian aid programming and implementation.

Conflict sensitivity in Norwegian aid can be operationalised at two levels:

1. At an overall portfolio level
2. At the individual project and programme level

At the country portfolio level, the Norwegian engagement should be outlined in a strategy which is regularly updated reflecting changes in the conflict pattern in the country. To inform the portfolio prioritisation, strategy development needs to build on conflict as well as political economy analysis.

The factors that should be examined here are likely to include aspects such as group identity, conflict history, rule of law and justice issues, culture and values, inequalities and asymmetries, allegiances, gender and youth (and violence), as well as individual and group perceptions, interests, capacities, needs

3 Norad Evaluation Department (2016). Country Evaluation Brief South Sudan, Sørbø, G.M., Schomerus, M. and Aalen, L.

4 Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2016). Strategic Framework for Norway’s Engagement in Conflict Prevention, Stabilisation and Resilience Building (unofficial translation). Oslo

5 Anderson, M. (1999). Do No Harm, How aid can support peace – or war.

6 See Haider, H., (2014). Conflict Sensitivity: Topic Guide. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC



etc. In South Sudan, for example, efforts relating to refugee returns would need to take into account the perceptions of the population groups (both returnees and host communities); the violence that may have been committed; the local power structures; the needs, capacities and interests of the returning and host communities; etc.

In the late 1990s, the author Mary B. Anderson proposed the terms “dividers” and “connectors” to help guide such assessments. The former are aspects to avoid or mitigate, while the latter ideally should be strengthened.<sup>7</sup> In the example above, a divider could be the tribal affiliation of the returnees concerned or, in a different context, this aspect might turn out to be a connector. In practice, many (if not all) of the factors mentioned above can be both a divider and a connector, although not at the same time. The conflict sensitivity analysis should therefore map and assess the relative importance of the conflict factors for the stakeholder groups concerned.<sup>8</sup>

It should also be recognised that undertaking such an analysis and charting a way forward involves making assumptions about the causality underpinning the changes expected.<sup>9</sup> For example, that former combatants will be welcomed back amongst their compatriots or that the provision of services to both returnees and host communities will help facilitate reintegration. Conflict sensitive programming will therefore be explicit about the assumptions upon which it is built.

Or, to put it another way, the results of a conflict sensitivity analysis should be expected to reveal the potential for positive peace and the steps that can be taken towards achieving it.<sup>10</sup> Conflict potentials should feature as potential risks. And the Norwegian strategy should be aligned with these understandings.

We would therefore suggest that, as part of the implementation of the strategy, Norway needs to regularly take stock of its portfolio in the light of the results being achieved and possible changes in the

context. Ideally, this should be more than a desk-top process. It will entail updating the conflict and political economy analyses: For example, political allegiances may have changed or renewed violence may have created a different balance of power. Such an update will allow Norway to assess the continued validity or otherwise of the assumptions underpinning its approach, and thereby adjust its portfolio accordingly, to ensure its conflict sensitivity.

At the project and programme level, a similar but often more localised approach needs to be taken. We suggest that conflict sensitivity analysis and discussions around it should:

- a. Be included as part of the initial project design (as an example, this should include an assessment of key stakeholders, power relations and previous conflicts, as well as an assessment of who benefits and who does not benefit from the project and the implications of this). The stakeholder assessment should be extended to include the role of implementing partners that are supported or being considered for support and the beneficiaries of this support. An implementing partner that is regarded by stakeholders as partisan would obviously risk exacerbating conflict.

7 Anderson. M (1999). Do No Harm, How aid can support peace – or war.

8 Ibid

9 Woodrow, P. Oatley, N (2013). Practical Approaches to Theories of Change in Conflict, Security & Justice Programmes.

10 See also Bush, K (1998). A measure of peace: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of Development Projects in Conflict Zones.



- b. Be integrated into the monitoring system of a project to allow Norway and implementing partners to address emerging conflict issues and risks (this should include an assessment of changes made by the project which may have altered the conflict potential). Such information will allow the project to adapt to emerging conflict risks and peacebuilding potential. Once they have been made explicit, the assumptions and pre-conditions involved can be tested to see if they hold. And, having established a baseline with the initial analysis, any changes can then be monitored and assessed through the use of appropriate indicators, as part of the project's monitoring, evaluation and learning framework.
- c. Be part of the dialogue with implementing partners (and the monitoring of them) and should seek to ensure that these partners apply a conflict sensitive approach and monitor it accordingly.

In this way, through explicitly planning for and raising the issue of conflict sensitivity throughout the project cycle, Norway will be able to strengthen the capacity for promoting peace and lessen the risk of inadvertently doing harm through its engagement in fragile and conflict affected states.

#### Evaluation Overview

This evaluation brief complements the 2020 evaluation '*Blind Sides and Soft Spots: An Evaluation of Norway's Aid Engagement in South Sudan*'. The evaluation was commissioned by the Evaluation Department in Norad and conducted by Tana Copenhagen in association with Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI).

The brief is written by Erik Bryld (Tana Copenhagen), the team leader for the evaluation.

Responsibility for the accuracy of data included in this brief rests with the author alone.



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