

EVAL Reflection Notes series – nr. 1

Enhancing conflict sensitivity within the Norwegian Aid Administration

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This note has been written by Javier Fabra-Mata, PhD, senior advisor at the Department for Evaluation in Norad, with input from Anita Ernstorfer, Owner and Principal, Untangle. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this note do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department for Evaluation.

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The **purpose** of this Reflection Note is to distill and share findings from work carried out by the Department for Evaluation in Norad. These findings may be applicable in various contexts, such as ongoing development assistance within specific countries, regions, or thematic priorities. It provides some high-level pointers for how to operationalize conflict sensitivity.

The primary target group for this note is development practitioners within Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as well as Norwegian development aid partners.

The note consolidates knowledge from various evaluations and learning events conducted by the Department for Evaluation¹. It focuses on conflict sensitivity and seeks to answer the following questions:

- How and how well is conflict sensitivity integrated into Norwegian aid?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for improving conflict sensitivity within the Norwegian aid administration?
- How can Norway better align its strategies and operations with conflict-sensitive principles?

When necessary and feasible, the knowledge derived from the Department for Evaluation's work is supplemented with findings from evaluations conducted by other development aid actors, as well as insights from policy documents, guidance materials, and research studies.

¹ See box 'Resources from the Department for Evaluation' below.

Conflict sensitivity and the Norwegian Aid Administration: A brief Introduction

Conflict sensitivity is the understanding that any development, humanitarian or peace intervention, regardless of context, can potentially influence national, local and regional/cross-border dynamics, in either a negative or positive manner. This concept is rooted in the understanding that **no action occurs in isolation and that even well-intentioned international assistance (development, humanitarian, and peace efforts) can inadvertently cause unintended harm and possibly reinforce existing tensions or create new conflicts.** The key emphasis of conflict sensitivity is to comprehend these dynamics to minimize harm and optimize the positive effects of aid initiatives. It is important to note that conflict sensitivity is important in every context, not only in situations of ongoing violence or war. A conflict-sensitive approach is ultimately a preventive approach and aims to prevent and mitigate any unintended impacts of international assistance on local communities and national and regional dynamics.

Conflict sensitivity is a fundamental aspect of international assistance, and Norway is committed to it. Norway's humanitarian strategy offers insights into how Norway responds to conflict and ensures conflict sensitivity.² The 2017 **strategy for engaging in fragile states**³, as outlined in its operational guidelines, states that conflict sensitivity involves understanding local conditions and the potential impact of the activities in country. By gaining a deeper understanding of the context in which we operate, we can prevent unintended negative effects and enhance the likelihood of achieving positive outcomes. This principle applies to all Norwegian efforts, whether they are directly aimed at achieving peace or providing funding to alleviate human suffering and promote development.

Conflict sensitivity is incorporated into the grant management tool of the MFA and Norad. While conflict sensitivity should be considered in all contexts, it is especially crucial to apply conflict-sensitive approaches in fragile, crisis, and conflict settings, where the risks and opportunities related to conflict and underlying tensions are heightened. Conflict sensitivity approaches are relevant for development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding interventions across all sectors and by all partners, at both national and local levels. Grant managers are advised to include conflict sensitivity approaches in calls for proposals and partner assessments 'if considered appropriate'. In the same fashion, 'if considered necessary' Grant Managers should request grant recipients to conduct conflict analyses and request grant recipients to assess the expected interaction between the project and operational context.

The recently published **triple nexus guidance note for Foreign Service and Norad employees**⁴ also underscores the need for conflict sensitivity. Experience has shown that rapid responses in unpredictable situations can have unintended consequences. Therefore, it is crucial to have robust context and conflict analyses in place. These analyses should describe the potential positive and negative impacts of the measures Norway supports, outline risks and opportunities, and identify

² Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018). Norway's Humanitarian Strategy. An effective and integrated approach.

³ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017). Strategisk rammeverk for norsk innsats i sårbare stater og regioner.

⁴ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2024). A comprehensive approach to humanitarian, development and peace efforts (triple nexus). Guidance Note.

possible mitigation measures to prevent and address unintended consequences. These conflict sensitivity analyses must be gender-sensitive and assess how discrimination and inequality may intersect, given that crises and conflicts affect different segments of the population differently - and that inequality and exclusion are frequently drivers of tension and conflict in the first place.

In the 2022 OECD Mid-term review⁵, Norway acknowledged that a lack of capacity and human resources poses a challenge in strengthening conflict sensitivity. Over time, several evaluations by the Department for Evaluation have touched upon conflict sensitivity, underscoring its value, and identifying gaps and potential in this area within the Norwegian development system.⁶

Insights and findings from evaluations

On various occasions, the Department for Evaluation has highlighted **inadequacies in the application of conflict sensitivity** by the Norwegian development system. This mirrors findings from other stakeholders and is also found in numerous evaluations of other donors' humanitarian, development, and peace efforts, which have also reported a lack of conflict sensitivity in their approaches.⁷

The evaluation of Norway's engagement in South Sudan found **limited evidence of Norway's operationalization of conflict sensitivity**. It highlighted inadequacies in context analyses and a lack of reflection on how the competition for substantial humanitarian and aid transfers affected local conflict potentials.

In a similar vein, the evaluation of the Norwegian efforts in Somalia found that conflict sensitivity was not systematically integrated. There was no evidence of written reflections on how Norway's overall approach in Somalia was affected by, or affected, conflict. This **lack of explicit articulation of choices** around dilemmas and conflict heightened the risk of Norway negatively contributing to conflict dynamics.

There is a **lack of awareness in the Norwegian development aid system of how conflict sensitivity is applied**, also in the multilateral funds Norway contributes to, even though there is probably such competence at the receiving end.

The evaluation of Norway's efforts in the Sahel found that Norway expects all funded parties to be responsible for relevant conflict sensitivity assessments and for integrating cross-cutting issues. However, there is no detailed 'toolbox' that may serve to ensure that all actors understand and implement crosscutting issues and conflict sensitivity in a consistent, comparable, or systematic way.

Moreover, the evaluation of Norway's efforts in the Sahel also finds that Norway refrains from evaluating the quality of partners' conflict sensitivity approach, and **Norway does not provide guidance on how conflict sensitivity should be ensured**. This lack of understanding and guidance

⁵ OECD. 2022. Norway Mid-term Review, 20-21 October 2022, Oslo. DCD/ME(2022)31.

⁶ See box 'Resources from the Department for Evaluation' below.

⁷ Morinière, L. and Morrison-Métois, S. (2023). Working across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus: What can we learn from evaluations? ODI/ALNAP.

also emerged from the evaluation of the interaction between Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) Efforts in Norwegian Aid. **How conflict sensitivity is operationalised has been delegated to grantees.**

Despite these findings, these evaluations found glimpses of hope for conflict sensitivity. The Somalia and South Sudan evaluations acknowledge **discussions for improvements**, such as deploying roving conflict advisors to selected stations. They also highlight the good understanding of the local context and conflict dynamics by case officers and the informal, conflict-sensitive adjustments made by individuals in the Norwegian development aid system.

There are examples of organizations and initiatives fostering a systematic approach to conflict-sensitivity⁸. Evaluations point out that **several of Norway's partners are much further ahead than Norway when it comes to operationalizing conflict sensitivity**. The 2023 DRC country study in the evaluation of interaction between Norwegian HDP efforts finds that most of the international civil society partners were prioritizing conflict analyses and a do no harm approach, in aiming to make sure that interventions were adapted to the context. While the depth and quality of conflict analyses by partners vary, they have also shown increased maturity over time, as pointed out already in a 2017 evaluation of Norway's support to education in conflict and crisis through civil society organisations.

This suggests an opportunity for Norway to learn from and catch up with its partners in implementing conflict sensitivity.

Risk management and conflict sensitivity are both very important considerations, often seen as 'two sides of the same coin'. Simply put, risk management looks at risks that the external context and environment pose to the portfolio, project, funders, and implementing organizations – for example, safety and security risks to staff, reputational risks to the organization or the risks of corruption and abuse of funds. Conflict sensitivity, on the other hand, looks at the risks external actors represent for the context by the resources and activities they bring – for example, inadvertently reinforcing existing power imbalances, negatively influencing local market conditions by bringing in external resources, or unintentionally legitimizing specific actors and parties to a conflict through specific partnership approaches.

Conflict Sensitivity within sectors

Food security in volatile environments depends on reliable and up-to-date comprehensive contextual analyses that should account for physical, market and societal factors. Factors such as conflict intensity and risks, addressing the challenges of limited access to right-holders, aid/food politicization, and regional tensions are crucial. The peace dimension of the nexus in food security materializes at different levels, most significantly at the community level, where addressing local conflict dynamics and developing local peace mechanisms to manage conflicts and create conditions for collaboration around natural resources is paramount. Moreover, given the volatile nature of the environment, which is, by definition, fast evolving, it's necessary to retain the capacity to regularly update these analyses. Such updates should be conducted on a rolling basis, at regular intervals, or in response to significant changes in the situation.

Millard, A. S., Fabra-Mata, J. and A. Wilhelmsen (2023). Navigating Aid in Complex Environments. Norway's Sahel Assistance. Briefing Note 05/2023. Department for Evaluation, Norad.

⁸ For instance, multi-donor conflict sensitivity facilities/hubs exist at the country level in countries such as Libya, South Sudan or Yemen.

Are external actors inadvertently putting their local partners at risk with some of the more sensitive projects? The 2023 Lebanon country study in the evaluation of interaction between Norwegian HDP efforts finds that conflict sensitivity is more effective when it is implemented by organizations that are strongly embedded in communities, have had a presence in those communities for a long time, and have a good grasp of the root causes of tensions. At the same time, as the evaluation of Norwegian women, peace and security efforts highlighted, local actors are part of the social ecosystem and are particularly exposed to severe risks. This calls for a greater awareness about the possible risks, better and more systematic risk assessments, and the necessary planning and resources to implement prevention and mitigation measures.

The importance of national and local capacities for conflict sensitivity is not confined to pre-crisis periods or periods of relative stability; it remains critical even as conflicts unfold. Given the dynamic nature of conflicts, understanding their evolving dynamics can be challenging and requires ongoing analysis.

Safeguarding humanitarian principles, especially when operating in spaces where access for international assistance must be negotiated, is particularly important. Even though many humanitarian organizations have ascribed and committed to the principle of 'Do No Harm', there are sometimes **misconceptions around perceived misalignment between humanitarian principles and conflict sensitivity approaches in practice**. At an operational level, there is at times a sense that humanitarians 'just need to act to save lives' and don't have time for 'lengthy' conflict sensitivity analyses. This approach, however, can backfire in the long run, as numerous examples demonstrate. At a more normative and policy-oriented level, the HDP Nexus has, in some instances, led to increasing misperceptions about the conflation of objectives and principles of engagement across sectors. Some in the humanitarian sector perceive the HDP Nexus as a threat to humanitarian principles and a form of 'mission-creep'. This perception can disincentivize the uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches at a programmatic level, as it can be wrongly viewed as overtly 'political'. However, failure to properly engage in conflict sensitive approaches can contradict humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. Understanding the conflict dynamics is crucial for maintaining neutrality. The opportunity for humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors lies in co-assessing the contexts in which they work. This allows them to either work together or distinctly separately from one another, tactically leveraging each of their capacities for a conflict-sensitive shared outcome.

The Evaluation Brief, 'Operationalising Conflict Sensitivity – Lessons Learned from Norway's Engagement in South Sudan,' posits that conflict sensitivity in Norwegian aid can be implemented at two levels: 1. The overall portfolio level, and 2. The project level. However, an exclusive focus on these two levels neglects an essential aspect: the organizational level. The entire organization must prioritize the operationalization of conflict sensitivity, which requires leadership and commitment at all levels.

Operationalizing conflict sensitivity

How could one evaluate conflict sensitivity at these three levels? The **overall portfolio level** requires a systems approach that highlights the importance of boundary choices—deciding what to include in the portfolio and what to exclude, based on a thorough understanding of the intervention's context and its boundaries relative to other donors and interventions. Such an approach necessitates a deep exploration of inter-relationships and dynamics between different projects within the portfolio and external factors, understanding linkages and cumulative effects, and emphasizing the significance of these relationships and dynamics in achieving conflict-sensitive outcomes. This involves designing support mechanisms and incentive structures within its funding portfolios to encourage not only conflict-sensitive implementation by its partners but also risk-sensitive practices that are mindful of the broader conflict dynamics.

At the project application stage, the focus is on utilizing conflict analysis to tailor interventions, ensuring monitoring frameworks include conflict-sensitive indicators, and preparing for adaptive management in response to changing contexts. This stage emphasizes the need for comprehensive planning and resource allocation to support conflict-sensitive practices from the outset. It is through this meticulous preparation that projects can be designed to not only avoid exacerbating conflict but also contribute to peacebuilding efforts effectively.

Lastly, **the organizational level** represents a foundational pillar for embedding conflict sensitivity across all aspects of aid delivery. This encompasses senior-level commitment, organizational integration, and effective partner engagement, ensuring that conflict sensitivity is a core value that permeates every facet of the organization. Leadership plays a pivotal role in embedding conflict sensitivity into the fabric of organizational culture. The development of organizational capacities, such as staff skills and the active use of guidance on conflict sensitivity, further consolidates this approach.

Resources from the Department for Evaluation

Publications

- *Betts, J. et al. (2017). Realising Potential Evaluation of Norway's Support to Education in Conflict and Crisis through Civil Society Organisations. Evaluation Report 9/2017. Department for Evaluation, Norad.*
- *Bryld, E. et al. (2020). Blind Sides and Soft Spots – An Evaluation of Norway's Aid Engagement in South Sudan. Evaluation Report 03/2020. Department for Evaluation, Norad.*
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- *Fabra-Mata, J. and A. Haslie (2023). Evaluation of the Interaction between Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) Efforts in Norwegian Aid. Synthesis Report. Department for Evaluation, Norad.*
- *Fabra-Mata, J. et al. (2022). Evaluation of Norwegian efforts for women, peace and security. Evaluation Report 3/2022. Department for Evaluation, Norad.*
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- *Toft, E. et al. (2023). Evaluation of the Interaction between Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) Efforts in Norwegian Aid. Country Report Ethiopia. Department for Evaluation, Norad.*
- *Van de Velde, M. et al. (2023). Evaluation of the Interaction between Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) Efforts in Norwegian Aid. Country Report Lebanon. Department for Evaluation, Norad.*

Seminars

- *Implementing the humanitarian, development and peace nexus in practice. March 21st 2024.*
- *Navigating Norway's Engagement Amidst Rapid Changes – lessons from the Sahel. October 26th 2023.*
- *Promoting women's participation in peace processes. How can Norway best contribute? May 24th 2022.*
- *Norwegian management of risks in fragile states. October 29th, 2020.*

Further reading - External resources or references

- *Barnard-Webster, K., N. Goddard, and I. Jean (2016). Monitoring and Evaluation of Conflict Sensitivity: Practical Considerations. Conflict Sensitivity: Taking it to the Next Level, swisspeace Working Paper Series no.2, 88-95.*
- *Bush, K., and C. Duggan (2015). Evaluation in the Extreme. Research, Impact, and Politics in Violently Divided Societies. SAGE Publication.*
- *Chigas, D., and N. Goddard (2016). Monitoring and Evaluation of Conflict Sensitivity- Methodological Considerations. Evaluation Connections, 10-11.*
- *Groenewald, H. and F. Kaltenpoth (2021). Supporting conflict sensitivity through country-focused facilities. Lessons from Libya, Lebanon, South Sudan and Yemen. Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub.*
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- *Goldwyn, R. (2016). Conflict Sensitivity Integration Review. United States Agency for International Development (USAID).*
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- *Interpeace. (2022). Lessons learned for embedding conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness into organizational practice.*

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