Beirut, Lebanon | 17—19 October 2017

REPORT OF THE CONFLICT-SENSITIVE ASSISTANCE FOR SYRIA RETREATS

A conflict-sensitive approach involves gaining a sound understanding of the two-way interaction between activities and context, and acting to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts of intervention on conflict, within an organisation's given mandate.

CONTENTS

PCi, in partnership with the Syria Peace Process Support Initiative (SPPSI*) and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, designed and facilitated three one-day exploratory retreats to review the conflict-sensitive approach to assistance currently being delivered in Syria. This briefing summarises key findings from the retreats and examines some of the significant challenges identified by the participants.

KEY TACTICAL CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS

[1]

APPLYING CONFLICT-SENSITIVE APPROACHES

There is insufficient capacity in many organisations to embed and "mainstream" conflict sensitivity in programme planning and implementation. This is exacerbated by remote programming modalities and a lack of coordination between programming hubs, while at a very basic level there is insufficient community-level analysis to inform conflict sensitivity considerations.

[2]

EXAMPLES OF HOW ASSISTANCE IN SYRIA IS DOING HARM

Creating and reinforcing tensions between community groups, instrumentalising and undermining the impact of Syrian civil society, feeding the overall and local war economies, and shifting donor priorities are potentially contributing to the closing of civilian space.

The conflict sensitivity retreats took place in Beirut from 17—19 October 2017. Participants included Syrian NGOs, international implementers, and government donors and missions involved in delivering assistance in Syria. The exploratory retreats invited participants to reflect on the specific and shared conflict sensitivity challenges they face in such a complex environment. Each retreat convened a different group of actors:

Retreat 1 **Syrian civil society actors (both from inside Syria and the region);**

Retreat 2 **International implementing agencies delivering humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance;**

Retreat 3 **Representatives from the community of donor missions.**

The SPPSI is a joint initiative by the European Union and the Federal Foreign Office of Germany that aims to contribute to a peaceful political transition in Syria. The Initiative is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in cooperation with selected partners working to support peace consultations at different levels.

KEY STRATEGIC DILEMMAS IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS

What kinds of interventions are appropriate? Where and when? There are difficulties in assessing what kinds of interventions are appropriate, especially in terms of how to sequence and blend humanitarian and non-humanitarian activities. In addition, there is concern about the geographic distribution of work and how this may be politicising aid.

LEGITIMACY

All participants face difficulty in selecting local partners and understanding whom they may be legitimising by interacting with them, and whether this ultimately empowers those who have the capacity to maintain division and conflict or disempowers those seeking to bridge divisions and build peace.

LEVERAGE

Does non-humanitarian aid have the potential to act as political leverage? For example, will committing to reconstruction and controlling a significant volume of construction aid create opportunities for leverage in a conflict-sensitive manner?

SHORT-TERM VERSUS LONG-TERM VIEWS

Are the long-term negative conflict sensitivity consequences of assistance (e.g. supporting local war economies) outweighed by the short-term gains of saving lives?

INSTRUMENTALISATION AND MISAPPROPRIATION OF FOREIGN AID

This includes both the use of aid funding for financial gains of State institutions or organisations, companies directly connected to the State, as well as the granting of access in particular areas of Syria.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Acknowledging a lack of in-house expertise for conflict sensitivity, participants provided strong feedback on the need to have a safe and collegiate space to reflect on these conflict sensitivity challenges and dilemmas, and to benefit from the skills and resources of others in the community of practitioners. Recommendations, below, respond to these requests.

The report focuses on three key areas of analysis:

[1] CURRENT CONFLICT SENSITIVITY CHALLENGES IN SYRIA

It provides an overview of some of the specific conflict sensitivity challenges with which all three target groups are grappling.

[2] CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN SYRIA

It frames the potential conflict sensitivity commitments and guidance that are necessary to embed collaborative approaches to conflict sensitivity.

[3] KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

It sets out next steps to progress conflict sensitivity assistance at a political, strategic and operational level.

In addition, Annex One provides an overview of the concept of conflict sensitivity and Annex Two provides a summary of the specific discussions that took place within the three different participant groups. ■

AID DELIVERY

Syrian NGO participants, in particular, shared a number of experiences in which aid has been perceived as inadvertently disrupting local relationships within and between communities, and between other local stakeholders, including local NGOs. These issues centred around several clear themes:

AID DISTRIBUTION CAUSING LOCAL CONFLICTS

Particular concern was raised around the distribution of food and non-food items that at times appears to have led to direct conflict, sometimes even physical violence, within and between communities because some groups were perceived to benefit more or to benefit exclusively from the aid. Poor coordination and communication by the international community has exacerbated these perceptions by leaving local stakeholders suspicious of selection criteria for identifying beneficiaries, reinforcing a perception that the international community has "its own agenda" in supporting some communities and groups over others.

AID DISTRIBUTION PERCEIVED TO BE POLITICISED

Some international participants expressed concern that they have become strongly associated with either the Opposition or the Government side of the conflict based on: a) from where they base their operations and access their beneficiaries; b) the beneficiary groups that they are able to access. This perception of bias towards communities that are deemed to support one side or the other undermines beneficiary engagement and the provision of assistance according to needs. This situation is further exacerbated by access impediments caused by authorities, armed groups, or active conflict.

Donors also highlighted the risks associated with the provision of international assistance in government-controlled areas. International assistance in these areas is limited to activities and actors aligned with government priorities and further reinforcing its agenda. The increasing challenge of international assistance supporting and legitimising the government of Syria is a real and immediate risk to conflict sensitivity.

AID DISTRIBUTION UNDERMINING LOCAL MARKETS

Examples were provided of local pharmacies and factories going out of business when pharmaceuticals or goods such as blankets (sourced elsewhere) were distributed for free by international aid agencies. Such an approach to sourcing goods for distribution clearly undermines resources for community resilience by disrupting local markets.

'As local organisations, we often struggle to remain true to our values and principles as we face the dilemma of meeting the priority needs of our communities while working with international organisations that often have pre-determined priorities not based on evidence from the field. Yet, we need funding to maintain our offices and pay our staff. It's a real and growing issue for us.'

A key reflection from one of the participants from the CSO delegation

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

From a conflict sensitivity perspective, this underscores the potential of aid and other assistance to directly feed into and exacerbate grievances between community groups. Fostering more direct and robust communication channels around aid distribution criteria and the amount of aid available may be an important initial response to addressing this problem.

In addition to potential interaction with economic incentives that maintain conflict (addressed in more detail below), a key concern of participants was that when aid distribution ends, it is extremely difficult, often impossible, for these businesses to restart, leaving the community poorer in terms of both services and jobs, and therefore less able to manage the impact of conflict. Syrian NGOs recommended that international aid organisations work with them to find ways to source aid items locally.

PARTNERING

I n Syria, the issue of *who* to partner with, *how* to partner, and the *what* and *how* of the work of partners presents local Syrian and international organisations alike with a set of complex considerations and dilemmas.

KNOWING WHO IS BEING EMPOWERED

For international organisations, conversations centred around the "lack of understanding" of where the partner is positioned within the broader and complex context dynamics, populated by multiple ethnic and religious groups, and armed state and non-state actors. Participants in all three retreats spoke of the dilemmas they face in selecting local partners and understanding whom they may be legitimising by interacting with them. Some participants spoke of the perceived imperative to work with or through groups and individuals with whom they would not otherwise be comfortable interacting. A web of sanctions and heightened compliance requirements underscores the challenging operating environment.

INSTRUMENTALISATION AND POLITICISATION OF SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

Several participants expressed concern that international engagement is, inadvertently, instrumentalising and politicising Syrian civil society, potentially undermining its ability to play a strong and effective role in Syrian peace and transitional processes. Participants provided the following examples of how this occurs:

Shifting international priorities

Participants explained that, at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, most civil society support was channelled into Opposition-controlled areas. There is a perception that now the tide of the conflict is turning and the Government is in the ascendancy, there is a sudden rush to work with civil society in those areas. In the absence of strong and coordinated messaging on this from the international community, this development unfortunately feeds a strong underlying fear that the international community will "abandon" previous partners, having "no further use" of them, and that the international community is primarily a "fair weather friend" that will place its support where it thinks the most power lies. This, in turn, feeds a sense of mistrust and competition amongst civil society organisations from different areas.

Shifting international perceptions of where it is possible to work

Significant critique was directed at decisions by the international community to stop all but humanitarian programming in some areas such as Idlib Province, when local governance structures changed to ones not supported by the international community. Decisions of this type reinforce a perception of abandonment and instrumentalisation of Syrian NGOs by the international community. From a conflict sensitivity perspective, it was argued, it also limits the ability of civil society organisations to play an active role in these areas to maintain and create civilian space and to promote dialogue-based approaches to problem solving and discussing differences. This, in turn, may create more room for extremist political or religious ideologies to take root.

Narrow focus on skills development

Syrian and international organisations alike expressed a concern that the international community has adopted an approach to capacity building amongst local partners that focuses too narrowly on the specific skills needed for service delivery. Broader civil society "soft" skill sets are not routinely embedded in capacity building curricula. If developed in this way, local Syrian civil society organisations become mainly a tool for the delivery of international aid, rather than fulfilling a wider role of becoming an important partner in peacebuilding and transition processes by facilitating links for communities with these processes.

EMBEDDING DIVISIONS BETWEEN SYRIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

Participants expressed concern that a lack of clarity about how the international community selects certain Syrian NGOs as partners, as well as a perceived lack of transparency about overall funding envelopes, contributes to an atmosphere of heightened rivalry between Syrian civil society organisations. A refreshingly frank discussion between Syrian NGO participants highlighted an underlying atmosphere of competition, thought to be exacerbated by, for example, the tendency of international organisations to "encourage" greater coordination and collaboration among Syrian organisations by establishing unsustainable networks and coalitions. Because there is a sense of urgency from the international community to forge these coalitions, the time and opportunity required to develop naturally is often unavailable. It was reported that, in this context, there is little space for expressing difference and properly addressing genuine disagreements.

Another area of concern for CSO participants was the challenge of maintaining their own organisational values and principles. This was mainly due to the ongoing compromises they feel required to make due to factors that are often beyond their control, such as shifting donor priorities and funding streams. There was consensus amongst the participants that, as Syrian CSOs, it was important for them to model values and principles of inclusivity, transparency, and a commitment to peacebuilding to the communities they support. However, participants articulated that there was often a disconnect between maintaining these values and principles and partnering with the international community.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

From a conflict-sensitivity perspective, shifting donor priorities often create conditions in which local civil society actors struggle to adopt long-term approaches to their programming; this can ultimately disrupt relationships on the ground, particularly when funding and resources for activities come to an end. Furthermore, an inconsistent approach to working with civil society limits the broad and deep development of these important actors as a resource for conflict resolution and peacebuilding across Syria.

Assistance is potentially further reinforcing divides within Syrian civil society by creating conditions that foster rivalries and competition.

Participants suggested that greater clarity around the processes and criteria used for selecting partners, as well as overall transparency, inclusive discussions, and decision making processes, may go some way to addressing these problems.

WAR ECONOMY

Many participants expressed concern that a flourishing war economy has developed in Syria and that humanitarian assistance forms a key part of these new markets. Syrian NGOs, in particular, shared examples of the many different points at which humanitarian assistance is "taxed", inadvertently supports corruption, or is otherwise manipulated by conflict parties to their benefit.

Donors in particular raised the issue of the channelling and diversion of aid by the Damascus government due to its influence on national aid organisations.

While there were high levels of awareness of this challenge across all three retreats, discussing the specific ways in which assistance is taxed and diverted was an extremely sensitive topic. Several organisations said they were reluctant to raise the issue directly with their partners and donors for fear of negative repercussions, thus limiting frank and open conversation about possibilities for concerted and coordinated action to tackle the issues.

Perhaps because of its "taboo" status, several Syrian NGOs reported that they are largely working "around" the issue. There was a strong ethos amongst these participants that if an activity can do short-term good today (for example, saving a life, providing much-needed aid, freeing a kidnapped civilian), then the longer-term consequences of the activity are given less consideration. Several organisations acknowledged that their work contributes to fuelling a local war economy.

Such is the sensitivity around this topic, it is important that nothing be said publicly that can be linked – actually or perceived – to a local CSO. An example of the local war economy in a particular area of Syria is the "tax" that local armed factions insist on collecting. According to participants, the factions have requested 20% of project budgets, but most local organisations have negotiated between 5—10% "tax". One participant explained: 'There is no choice but to pay something; if we don't pay, we don't work. If we don't work, then community needs are not met. This is our big dilemma.' ∎

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

Assistance may, inadvertently, be contributing directly or indirectly to an ongoing war effort, maintaining incentives for conflict and violence, and contributing to a culture of corruption and criminality. Participants recommended that, in order to tackle this problem, further thought needs to be given to:

- **Creating "safe" spaces to discuss this issue without fear of negative repercussions.**

- **Building strong M+E systems (in the context of remote management) to fully capture and understand – and then mitigate – the ways in which international assistance is contributing to local and national war economies.**

- **Strengthening analysis, so that international implementers can be more aware and better informed of exactly who is being empowered economically through their interventions.**

- **Reducing opportunities for corruption and "taxation" along supply chains by working directly with and through communities.**

There is increasing momentum around conflict sensitivity. For example, the October 2017 retreats coincided with a major analysts gathering convened by the UN, also aimed at fostering collaborative efforts towards conflict sensitivity. In addition, many donors and international organisations already have some level of policy commitment to conflict sensitivity, with some having developed specific guidance to support implementation.

However, participants acknowledged the lack of realisation of these commitments in the field, including the commitment to assist local partners in adopting conflict-sensitive approaches. To meet the conflict sensitivity challenges that the current and ongoing operating environment presents, participating international implementing agencies engaged in a brief analysis of the internal and external factors that must be strengthened to enable them to apply a conflict-sensitive approach to their work:

- Increase capacity for analysis amongst Syrian and international agencies;
- Develop networks for accessing and cross-checking reliable information;
- Continue to improve relationships with local communities;
- Engage more consistently and strategically with existing networks and hubs that work on conflict sensitivity;
- Dedicate human resources for conflict sensitivity within organisations;
- Build external networks with organisations and colleagues who can act as a critical friend on conflict sensitivity;
- Improve the flexibility of some donors;
- Set longer term timeframes for projects;
- Develop shared conflict sensitivity guidelines or principles;
- Build trust for information-sharing and coordination between operational hubs in the region. ∎

On day two, implementers highlighted the "**need for an evidence-based approach to conflict sensitivity to ensure that international programming is responsive to the conflict context through careful and joined-up planning with local partners when providing assistance.**"

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

An emerging and shared consensus arose across all three retreats: that there is a need to develop a process for promoting conflict sensitivity assistance in Syria. The essence of this emerging understanding is captured in the following key recommendations:
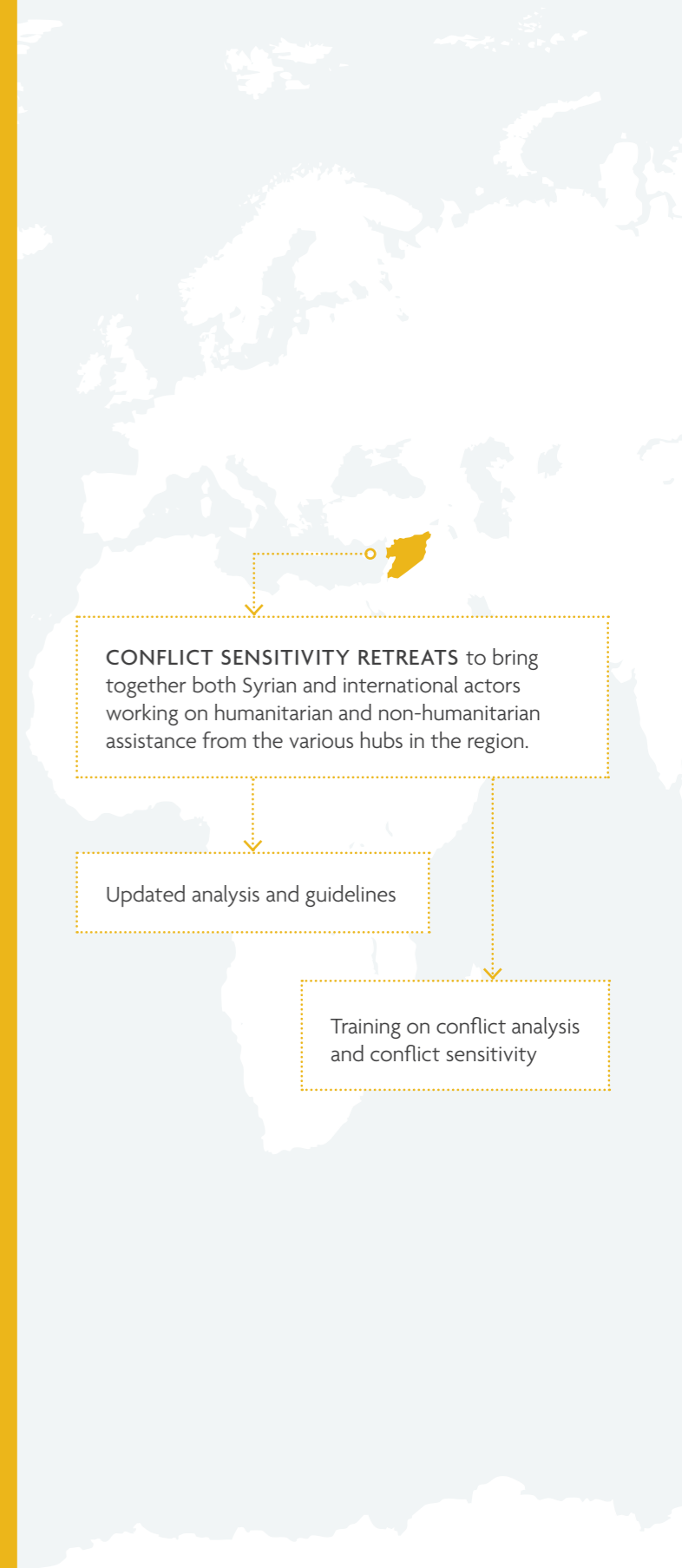
- **Develop platforms for sharing analysis** and for reflecting critically on what the analysis means for the kind of work that international agencies should be doing. Such platforms should create **"safe" spaces** for engaging in frank discussions about instances in which assistance is doing or has done harm, and for agencies who work in Opposition and Government-controlled areas to meet and share reflections on how their work may be made maximally sensitive to conflict.

- **Widen representation** in the process to include humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors, and representatives from different geographical hubs, as well as local Syrian NGOs, international implementing agencies, and donor organisations.

- Identify a relatively **impartial initiator/convenor** to instil confidence among participants and ensure the integrity of the process.

On issues of substance, recommendations focused on:

- The importance of ensuring that the process is able to **address the strategic questions** around conflict sensitivity, including testing and planning recommendations. **To this end, participants on day three expressed the need to ensure that conflict sensitivity has strategic visibility in programming for Syria.** In the first instance this could be achieved by encouraging donors to formulate and endorse a statement of commitment to conflict sensitivity at a strategic level. Encouraging donors to play a visible leadership role will ensure that strategic decisions of how to provide long-term peacebuilding support to Syria are conflict sensitive.

- The importance of **developing "standard operating procedures"** and shared parameters on conflict sensitivity that guide assistance for Syria, ensuring that programming and support reduce harm to communities and provide leadership on implementing conflict-sensitive approaches and practices. ▪

NEXT STEPS

In response to these recommendations, PCi proposes to convene regular conflict sensitivity retreats that bring together both Syrian and international actors working on humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance from the various hubs in the region. These structured sessions will contribute to updating overall analysis and tackling specific conflict sensitivity challenges and dilemmas through the articulation of guidelines for SOPs.

The format for these retreats will be shaped together with participants to best cater to needs (perhaps, for example, eventually moving from a full-day format to a half-day format).

In addition, trainings on conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity will be built into the process as an offer of technical support of which participants may take advantage. PCi will coordinate closely with UN-led and other conflict sensitivity processes to ensure that the retreats sit supportively alongside other conflict sensitivity efforts. ▪

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY RETREATS to bring together both Syrian and international actors working on humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance from the various hubs in the region.

Updated analysis and guidelines

Training on conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity

ANNEXES

Assistance has the potential to do harm by inadvertently disturbing social cohesion and reinforcing conflict dynamics. Conflict Sensitivity refers to the ability of an organisation to:

- Understand the context in which it works;
- Analyse the interaction between the conflict context and its intervention;
- Act upon this analysis and adjust its assistance to minimise harmful effects and to maximise opportunities to strengthen peace and project effectiveness.

In practice, conflict sensitivity can be broken down into the following steps:

What to do?	How to do it?
Understand the context in which you operate.	Carry out a conflict analysis. Work with others to triangulate your information and update your analysis regularly.
Understand the interaction between your intervention and the context in which you are working.	Link your conflict analysis with the programming cycle of your intervention. Ensure that your regularly updated analysis informs not just your planning but also your implementation.
Use this understanding to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts.	Plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate your intervention in conflict-sensitive fashion. Adjust or redesign your programming when necessary.

Conflict sensitivity is important because it:

Minimises harm while harm can never be completely eliminated, applying a conflict-sensitive approach enables organisations to minimise potential harm.

Enhances assistance effectiveness violent conflict is a major obstacle to an intervention. Conflict sensitivity supports development and peace.

Promotes cost effectiveness "prevention is cheaper than cure". Conflict sensitivity is cheaper than crisis reaction.

Represents development good practice consultation and ownership helps make programmes more sustainable.

Promotes risk management reduces risk of having to terminate programmes or close offices due to violence/instability. It also reduces danger to staff and beneficiaries.

Is consistent with a range of policy commitments: *Principles of Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations,[1] the Accra Agenda for Action,[2] and the Joint Declaration on Post-crisis Assessments and Recovery Planning[3]* commit the international development community to the following activities in fragile or conflict-prone environments:

- Develop a shared understanding of the context in which assistance is delivered, including an examination of the causes of conflict and fragility;
- Agree a set of shared peacebuilding and conflict-prevention objectives addressing the root causes of conflict and fragility;
- Better link the stages of assistance, in order to bridge the gap between immediate humanitarian/recovery, stabilisation, and longer term development;
- Recognise and plan for the interaction of political, security, and development objectives;
- Increase participation in, and accountability of, post-conflict/ crisis development programmes by national governments, parliaments, and civil society;
- Increase the capacity, legitimacy, and accountability of state institutions, as a prerequisite for peace, by addressing issues such as democratic governance.

WHEN ASSISTANCE CAN DO HARM

Assistance can reinforce conflict dynamics and do harm when it:

REINFORCES OR CREATES GRIEVANCES

Agencies need to be aware of how assistance and distribution of goods/services/opportunities are targeted. Who is your action empowering/benefiting and who is it excluding?

ALLOWS ELITES TO CAPTURE RESOURCES

Agencies need to understand whether resources and benefits will be diverted to particular groups. Could this reinforce inequalities and patronage and undermine inclusivity?

DISTORTS LOCAL ECONOMIES

Assistance can reinforce corruption through multiple layers of subcontracting, or generate competition and conflict. Aid can also inadvertently become part of economic incentives for conflict.

SENDS MORAL AND ETHICAL MESSAGES THAT CONTRADICT PEACEBUILDING VALUES

Agencies may be inadvertently undermining peacebuilding prospects when their operations support or allow impunity, corruption or unaccountability to go unchallenged.

SUPPORTS POLITICAL SETTLEMENTS THAT ARE NOT INCLUSIVE

Striking a deal may be a priority in the short term, but the exclusion of key groups may enhance grievances.

WORKS WITH OR BYPASSES THE STATE

Working through a government or military that is (or is perceived to be) exclusionary, corrupt, or party to the conflict can cause resentment and reinforce conflict actors. Not working through the state can in some contexts be equally harmful.

REINFORCES DIVIDERS

Aid can be delivered in ways that reinforce the different experiences that groups have, or highlight divisive traditions/ practices/symbols.

UNDERMINES CONNECTORS

Intervention can undermine the things that connect groups across conflict lines such as shared experiences, or traditions/ practices/symbols that bring people together. ▪

1. *OECD, 3—4 April 2007, http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/61/45/38368714.pdf*
2. *2—4 September 2008, https://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/45827311.pdf*
3. *Joint Declaration on Post-Crisis Assessments and Recovery Planning, 25 September 2008, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/file/55444/download_en?token=Bfmg46fh*

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS
SYRIAN NGOS, INTERNATIONAL IMPLEMENTING AGENCIES, AND INTERNATIONAL DONORS
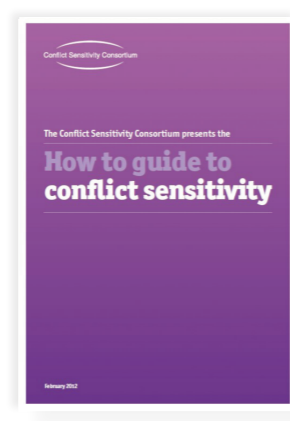
RESOURCES
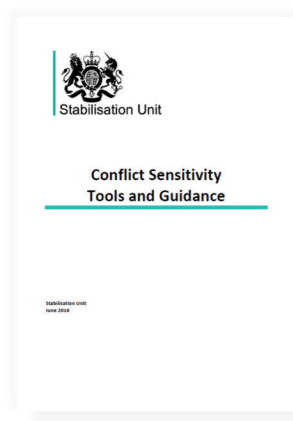
Conflict Sensitivity Tools and Guidance

Stabilisation Unit, June 2016.

Accessed 18/01/2018 at web address:
http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/publications/program-ming-guidance/1037-conflict-sensitivity-tools-and-guidance/file

How to guide to conflict sensitivity

The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, February 2012.

Accessed 18/01/2018 at web address:
http://local.conflictsensitivity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/6602_HowToGuide_CSF_WEB_3.pdf

RETREAT WITH SYRIAN NGOS

11 Syrian NGO representatives participated. They represented organisations working in both Opposition and Government-controlled areas and engaging in both humanitarian and non-humanitarian assistance.

KEY CHALLENGES OF CONFLICT-INSENSITIVE PRACTICE IN INTERNATIONAL AID DELIVERY

Perceived instrumentalisation of Syrian civil society organisations to suit shifting international political priorities:

- Priorities identified by NGOs sometimes differ from those identified by donors, leading to NGOs having to shift focus of work to obtain funding, while other projects perceived as more urgent remain unfunded.

Shifting donor priorities and lack of transparency around available funding lead to:

- Formation of sometimes "desperate" alliances to maintain work and presence in geographic areas from which international donors have pulled out.
- Perception that, when donors pull out of specific areas, this creates more space for extremist political or religious ideologies.
- Competition and conflicts between Syrian NGOs.
- Inability to adopt long-term approaches, and disruption of local relationships.
- Reinforcing divisions and "embedding" positions.

Multiple instances of aid causing direct conflict or other harm, for example:

- violence between community groups due to selection of beneficiaries.
- existing markets being disrupted by aid (and when aid is discontinued in particular areas, those markets are difficult to re-establish, leaving local population without access to essential goods such as pharmaceuticals).

KEY CHALLENGES IN SIGNIFICANT CAPACITY BUILDING NEEDS TO EMBED CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN PRACTICE AMONGST SYRIAN NGOS

There was a strong understanding amongst participating NGOs that conflict analysis is a core element of working in a conflict-sensitive way, but less evidence of a strong practice of using that analysis to think through the two-way interaction of context and intervention.

- Internal processes described by several participants suggested that participating NGOs tend to use their analysis mainly to carry out risk assessments to ensure staff and beneficiary safety.

There is a strong ethos amongst participating NGOs that if an activity can do short-term good today (e.g. saving a life, providing much-needed aid), then the longer term consequences of the activity or implementation methodology are considered less of a priority.

- Clear descriptions were provided of how this trade-off approach, for example, means that Syrian NGOs' activity feeds local war economies. →

RETREAT WITH INTERNATIONAL IMPLEMENTERS

25 representatives of international NGOs and UN agencies participated in the retreat, representing diverse fields of work (humanitarian, non-humanitarian, peacebuilding), as well as activities in both Opposition and Government-controlled areas. The group identified a number of conflict sensitivity challenges, but focused their discussions on:

GAPS IN ANALYSIS NEEDED
TO DRIVE CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

Little direct access to many areas means that international actors are reliant on a network of local interlocutors.

These interlocutors will, inevitably, be biased in the information they share and have their own incentives for not raising red flags around conflict sensitivity (e.g. concern that this will stop the flow of aid).

Even when strong analysis is available, it is not always shared because of competition between NGOs.

Even when analysis is shared between NGOs, there are few opportunities to convene and engage in shared frank and critical reflection on what the analysis means in terms of what the international community should be doing, where, and how.

There is little understanding of broader geopolitical perspectives on conflict (e.g. no engagement with Russia or Iran to understand how their stabilisation/reconstruction/peacebuilding activities may interact with what is being done by "Western" actors).

DIFFICULTY IN ASSESSING WHAT TYPES OF INTERVENTION ARE APPROPRIATE, WHERE AND WHEN.

Discussion echoed points above: a lack of analysis at the strategic level reduces ability to make conflict-sensitive judgements about what kind of work to engage in.

- Key concern around the geographic distribution of work in Syria with a perception that participating NGOs work mainly in opposition areas, with limited capacity and access to work across conflict lines.

- Key concern around reconciling conflicting interests around short-term gains versus longer-term conflict sensitivity implications (similar to concerns raised by Syrian NGOs).

- Key concern around current activities and modalities ultimately supporting a return to *status quo ante* in Syria, because agencies do not work on drivers of conflict.

FORMING CONFLICT-SENSITIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH SYRIAN ACTORS

- Concern that partnership funding has been politicised and that partnership approaches have, ultimately, led to further mistrust and division between Syrian NGOs/CSOs. Further, approaches to building networks between Syrian CSOs may have reduced perceived space for expressing difference, creating "fake" or very shallow networks.

- Concern that current donor approaches and international implementers' approaches may not appropriately contribute to or support the maintenance of civil society space in Syria.

LIMITED ACCESS

- Current access restrictions limit beneficiary communities that receive support – this can lead to conflict insensitivity. Access issues similarly limit reliability of analysis and information, which further undermines conflict sensitivity.

- Limited access compromises agencies' basic principles – which can inadvertently disseminate a set of "moral" messages within communities that undermine conflict sensitivity.

CONTRIBUTING TO WAR ECONOMY

There was acknowledgement of the almost inevitable risk of aid and assistance contributing to the war economy in Syria. However, as well as exploring the "limiting negative consequences" of interventions, participants also explored the "maximising positive opportunities" side of conflict sensitivity, highlighting:

- The possibility of transforming war economies by building legitimate businesses and encouraging market competition.

- The possibility of promoting economic exchanges and common initiatives among divided communities.

13

humanitarian and non-humanitarian donors representing Canada, EU, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and UK participated in the retreat.

The group focused its discussions on the following key conflict sensitivity challenges:

POTENTIAL CONFLICT BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN AND NON-HUMANITARIAN AID

Non-humanitarian assistance poses a number of risks:

- Perception of political bias because more non-humanitarian assistance is provided in Opposition areas. More thought needs to be given to how to eventually "blend" areas that have received different kinds of assistance.
- Need to carefully think through who is being legitimized by non-humanitarian support.
- Potential to reinforce a "normalcy" narrative.
- Funding can politicise and divide identities.

It is important to be honest about conflict sensitivity risks in humanitarian programming.

It is important to think through how the two forms of assistance can also be supportive of each other.

ASSISTANCE AS LEVERAGE

- Acknowledgement of potential of aid to do harm by harming local economies and fuelling war economies.
- Concern that time is of the essence in thinking through the potential of aid to act as political leverage, but agreement that further information and analysis are needed to make decisions: e.g. will committing to reconstruction and controlling a significant volume of construction aid create the potential for leverage?
- Need to better understand how to work with local structures and to understand the conflict of interest that local actors may have.

ASSISTANCE SHOULD SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE PROCESSES

- How to ensure that those that assistance legitimises are supported by structures and institutions that promote inclusion and accountability?
- How to ensure that donor instruments do not increase the power of current gatekeepers?
- Strengthen engagement at the community level beyond funding – for example through more systematic accountability mechanisms.
- Build stronger links between the project/programme and strategic level.

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT COORDINATION HUBS

While several assistance and policy coordination hubs exist, analysis revealed that there are few systematic opportunities for:

- Humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors to convene and engage in shared analysis and planning around conflict sensitivity issues.
- Actors based in different regional hubs to convene and triangulate analysis to better inform and conflict-sensitise programming.
- A broad range of donors to convene and engage in shared analysis around their assistance (e.g. Japan, Switzerland and the Netherlands do not participate in some of the key coordination forums that were identified by the group). ∎