



Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming

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Conflict sensitivity encourages organizations to understand and track the conflict dynamics in the contexts in which they are working. As these changes arise, organizations can adapt their programs to minimize their negative effects on conflict and build upon their positive effects. The application of conflict sensitivity usually does not require a major restructuring of a project or an explicit focus on peacebuilding; even minor adjustments to a project can have significant impacts on its interaction with the conflict context.

Conflict sensitivity is the ability of an organization engaged in any kind of intervention to:

1. **Understand the conflict dynamics** in the context in which it operates, particularly with respect to inter-group relations;
2. **Understand the interaction** between the intervention and the conflict dynamics in the context; and
3. **Act upon this understanding** in order to minimize unintended negative impacts and maximize positive impacts of the intervention on the context of conflict.

Overview

The key lesson of conflict sensitivity is that organizations and their activities will become a part of the context in which they are operating; they will have an impact on the relationships among people in those contexts. Food security projects—whether simple or complex—will affect the relationships among groups of people living in that context. When organizations bring resources into contexts of scarcity, they interact with authorities, and they select or target project participants based on specific criteria. Each of these programmatic choices has the potential to exacerbate existing conflict dynamics. They also have the potential to build upon positive and connecting factors in society, which can strengthen existing points of cooperation and collaboration among those groups and mitigate conflict. These effects—negative or positive—affect a project’s ability to achieve its food security aims and play a critical role in influencing conflict dynamics in a given context. A commitment to a conflict-sensitive approach can help organizations better plan for how their projects will interact with conflict dynamics to ensure that food assistance activities do not exacerbate underlying grievances, but instead support existing resiliencies.

Food security programming is designed to work within local systems in medium- to long-term engagements to help increase institutional and group capacities, and individual and household knowledge, skills and practices. This type of programming involves the transfer of resources and knowledge into contexts of scarcity. When food security programs are implemented in contexts of conflict or tension, the impacts of their programmatic choices can have far-reaching consequences. Fragile and conflict contexts are complex and highly sensitive. Communities have a heightened awareness of the distribution of resources coming into their context, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the people involved in the distribution of those resources.

Conflict Sensitivity in Different Conflict Contexts

Conflict sensitivity should be applied in all operational contexts, even those without overt violent conflict, but key concerns and entry points for planning and implementing a conflict sensitive project will be different in different types of contexts. The section below contains a brief overview of conflict sensitivity concerns in fragile contexts (with no active conflict), contexts of active conflict, and post-conflict contexts. There is also a list of key questions to consider for program planning in each of these contexts.

Understanding the key conflict sensitivity concerns in each type of conflict context will be important to designing programs that can work effectively in conflict, and respond to both changes in the context and people’s needs.

Fragile Contexts (No Active Conflict)

Every context can be characterized by dividing and connecting factors among groups of people, even if there is no conflict or violence present, and all interventions will have an influence on these factors. In contexts with no active conflict, it is important to monitor these factors and the intervention’s impact on them to ensure that latent tensions in society do not flare up into violence, or that the intervention does not diminish, overwhelm or undermine points of collaboration and trust among groups.

Key Questions

- Are there historical grievances or inequities in society? How does the project interact with those?
- Are there institutions (e.g. governing, market, service delivery, judicial, etc.) that do not perform in ways that are accountable and inclusive to all major societal groups that are relevant to future programming?

- What systems, structures or mechanisms (formal or informal; national, regional or local) exist that people of all groups use and trust? Will the project build upon these? Will it undermine their effectiveness?

Active Conflict

In contexts of active, ongoing conflict, whether widespread or localized, the sources of tension and dividing factors are easy to identify. It is important to remember that, in these contexts, there are also always connecting factors, although they can be very difficult to identify in the midst of violent conflict. Negative impacts on the forces dividing or connecting society (i.e. amplifying divisive forces and/or weakening connectors) can potentially worsen the conflict or increase violence among people. In these complex contexts, identifying and monitoring those forces that are dividing or connecting society can help when trying to track changes in the conflict context.

Key Questions

- Which sources of division are most likely to draw more people into fighting or increase levels of violence?
- How do people reach across the lines of fighting, even in seemingly insignificant ways? Who is able to do this? Are there ways the project could support those efforts?
- How would escalations in violence change risks to project participants? To staff? To others in the community?
- When operating environments become inaccessible due to violence, or when armed actors threaten the delivery of food assistance, what adjustments need to be made? How can implementation and monitoring of a project continue?

Post-Conflict

In post-conflict contexts, it is important to consider the residual effects of the conflict. The factors that drove fighting are likely to remain sources of tension, as are changed dynamics among communities. This is especially true in the case of returning refugees or IDPs, who will have had a vastly different experience of the conflict than their neighbors. These populations often have different needs and different priorities. Similarly, the return of former combatants to their communities or civilian life more generally can cause tensions.

Key Questions

- Are the drivers of the original conflict still being played out among groups in the community?
- Are aid resources being distributed equitably among groups or is the distribution favoring one group over another (or are their perceptions that aid distribution is inequitable)?
- How are the needs of various groups in the community different? Are there any shared needs and priorities?

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