

Guidance Note: Conflict Sensitivity in Private Sector Disaster Management

Key Takeaways:

- Conflict sensitivity is an obligation and a commitment to *Do No Harm* that CBI Member Networks must consider in their disaster management interventions before, during and after crises.
- Initiatives and interventions that adopt a conflict-sensitive approach are more effective, and help to strengthen social cohesion.
- To be conflict sensitive, CBI Member Networks and other private sector stakeholders need to actively assess and monitor the potential impacts of their activities on different groups, and make adjustments to mitigate risks and strengthen local capacities for social cohesion.

Introduction

The Connecting Business initiative (CBI) was established to support coordinated, collective private sector action before, during, and after disasters. However, when businesses respond to emergencies in fragile or volatile environments, it is of the utmost importance that they have a clear view of the broader [political, social and economic drivers of conflict](#) – that is, that they adopt a ‘conflict sensitive’ approach. Indeed, [as CARE International highlights](#), “even in contexts where there is no obvious conflict, aid has the potential to create division, tensions and ultimately violence if it is delivered without regard for local realities”.

As a minimum obligation, disaster management and humanitarian response activities should always take into account the risk of unintentionally exacerbating existing tensions or sources of conflict, or leading new tensions to arise. Private sector partners should take steps to avoid unintended consequences in the design and implementation of their activities. This is the basic premise of the [Do No Harm](#) approach.

The impact of aid on local markets: an example from Pakistan

After the 2010 floods in Pakistan, humanitarian efforts to help people build temporary shelters using bamboo as the common, local building material led to the aid community setting higher quality standards, significantly increasing prices but also shortages in supply. The affected population was no longer able to purchase bamboo for their own use. Furthermore, as the aid agencies no longer needed the product, they pushed businesses deeper into debt as they were left with expensive stock that nobody purchased. (Source: [ODI](#))

The concept of conflict sensitivity starts with the recognition that humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities cannot be separated from the peace and conflict context in which they are implemented. For any organization – private sector or otherwise – conflict sensitivity requires:

1. Understanding the operational context;
2. Assessing interaction between the organization’s operations and the broader context (including positive and negative impacts); and
3. Adjusting operations to minimize the negative – and where possible maximize the positive – impacts on peace and stability.

Selecting beneficiaries, engaging with certain member companies or partners, liaising with national and local authorities, procuring and distributing relief items, timing of interventions, and many other considerations may change the local dynamics. Oxfam notes that the [risk of fueling conflict is particularly high when resources are introduced to resource-scarce environments](#), changing the power dynamics, affecting perceptions of justice, and challenging established societal roles. These are important considerations for all private sector organizations – not just those operating in the midst of violent conflict.

Unintended consequences of humanitarian assistance: an example from Indonesia

At the time of the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004, Indonesia's Aceh Province had been under a state of emergency after decades of conflict between Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) and the Indonesian government. Huge levels of aid subsequently flowed into the newly opened-up province to assist victims of the tsunami, but little was available to assist other areas affected primarily by the conflict. This led to a disparity in assistance and increased insecurity as former GAM fighters returned to tsunami-affected areas where others were receiving assistance. (Source: [Care International](#))

Fundamentally, failing to understand the interactions between an organization's operations and the context in which it operates can result in well-intentioned interventions becoming part of the problem. Failing to adopt a conflict sensitive approach can put communities at risk and thus reverse the impact that was the reason to engage in the first place. For private sector networks, this means considering their own operations as well as those of their member companies.

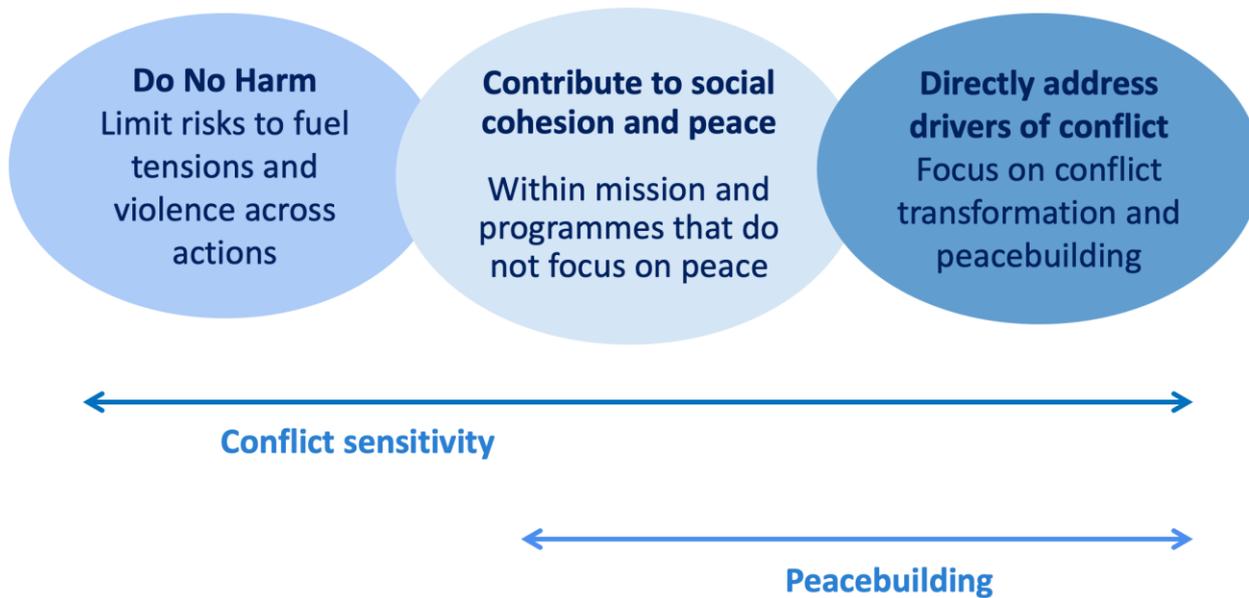
For example, a private sector network might decide to provide livelihood assistance to people displaced by conflict or a disaster but in doing so overlook the high poverty and unemployment rates of the host community. Hence the operations of a member company or the network itself have the potential to drive instability – even if unintentionally.

Identifying locations for water pumps and tanks: an example from Sri Lanka

Together with partners, the Asia-Pacific Alliance for Disaster Management in Sri Lanka (A-PAD SL) decided to provide water for displaced people living in a camp setting. Some companies had suggested installing water pumps and tanks in certain areas, but the network highlighted the increased risks of harassment and violence towards vulnerable people, particularly women, if they needed to get water from a distance. As a result, the companies understood the importance of adapting their approach and placing the water tanks closer to people's homes. This helped ensure compliance with the [SPHERE standards](#) and protect the community from unwanted, adverse impacts of an otherwise well-intended private sector intervention.

The reputation and effectiveness of business networks is also affected by the behaviour of individual members. For example, if a member company engages in corruption or violates human rights, it might limit access to communities and could trigger violence towards members or exacerbate social tensions.

There is a spectrum of ambition from 'do no harm' to directly addressing the drivers of conflict. While the primary objective of humanitarian response is to save lives and address humanitarian needs, any disaster management interventions should be designed to be conflict sensitive and where possible, also seize opportunities to positively contribute to social cohesion and peace.



Coordination between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding practitioners is important to ensure alignment and move from minimizing harm to maximizing positive contributions to peace. CBI Member Networks who participate in UN Country Team (UNCT) meetings or are members of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) are particularly well positioned to leverage these connections.

Building bridges across communities: an example from Nigeria

ZOA, an international relief and recovery organisation, realized that many aid interventions in resource scarce north-eastern Nigeria had increased tensions between internally displaced people and their host communities because priority had been given to the displaced. When designing their water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and cash-for-food programs, they decided to assist the most vulnerable people from both groups. ZOA introduced group education sessions for women from both communities to learn about diet diversification, nutrition, child feeding and hygiene that would help address malnutrition. The women reported having built friendships among the group members, regardless of the side. Hence, in addition to making the WASH and cash distributions more effective, this program also helped create social cohesion. (Source: [PeaceNexus and ZOA](#))

Recommended actions and key points to consider

1. Understand the context

Does the network have a solid understanding of the context, including (potential) root causes of conflict and instability?

- Assess the context (national, local or other) in which you operate, ideally in partnership with others. This can be achieved in various ways:
 - Access and review preexisting conflict analyses and resources developed by international and local agencies and analysts. Resources and networks such as the UN Common Country Analysis (CCA), UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF), and Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments (RPBAs) can provide a foundation for more tailored contextual analysis. International civil society organisations (CSOs), such as the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch,

Saferworld, International Alert and Overseas Development Institute often publish country specific analysis, or can be contacted for support in developing contextual analysis.

- Draw upon the knowledge and expertise of local analysts and perspectives. Local networks are often the best source of context specific analysis. Networks can get in contact with, and potentially form partnerships with local thinktanks, universities, and CSOs, many of which are likely to have deep networks across the country, and access to diverse grassroots perspectives on what drives conflict at the local, national and regional levels. Where a civil society forum has been established, this can be a useful single entry point for accessing a wide range of local and international organisations.
 - If possible, seek to also feed into planned or ongoing analyses and strategic planning processes that the UN, EU, World Bank or others are conducting (such as Recovery and Peace Building Assessments or Humanitarian Response Plans). The private sector is often not included, but could provide valuable insights.
 - Try to ensure a common understanding among stakeholders of what drives conflict in the context, and the implications for the network. This can be done by convening members to work through a series of participatory conflict analysis tools, setting up a series of consultations, or developing other participatory processes that bring network members and relevant other stakeholders together to jointly analyse the context.
 - Make sure any participatory analysis focuses on the most relevant issues for the network, identifies risks and opportunities for network members, and the network as a whole, when working in the context.
- The [CBI Man-Made Disaster Guidance Toolkit](#) provides a helpful starting point for understanding the context and planning for network activities. Other, more detailed conflict sensitivity resources are listed on page six, under *Additional resources*.
 - Note that language matters. The term “conflict” may be problematic in some contexts and as a result it might be advisable to frame or contextualize words or even use different terminology to generate interest and increase acceptability of the assessment exercise. For example, it could be framed as a context analysis or social cohesion impact assessment.
 - Remember to also monitor the situation on the ground regularly during your intervention(s). This should help alert the network to unintended consequences of operations or of changes in context that may require programme adaptation.

Does the network have sufficient understanding of its member companies and their operations?

- Identify potential high-risk sectors and/or companies to pay heightened attention to.
- Gather and share lessons learned on how companies gather information on the context through political risk analysis, environmental and social impact assessments, supply chain assessments, etc.

Some guiding questions¹ to consider:

- What existing analyses exist that you can build on, including assessments by network members?
- Does the area (national, regional, subnational, local) have a history of conflict or violence? If so, what were the key characteristics and dynamics?
- Who are the key stakeholders or actors and what are their relationships?
- Which companies have operations in the area and what are their relationships with other actors?
- Who are most vulnerable?
- What are the key factors that drive social divisions and conflict and what factors can connect people and strengthen social cohesion?

¹ Adapted from the UN Sustainable Development Group *Guidance Note on Conflict Sensitivity, Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace* (forthcoming).

Understanding the context: an example from the Philippines

The Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation (PDRF), the CBI Member Network in the Philippines first started working in the conflict-affected area of Marawi City in 2017. They sent a small team to assess the situation on the ground and conducted a limited analysis on the factors that could increase tension in the society or contribute to social cohesion. The team talked to local leaders and community members as they were designing different projects, but also collected feedback during implementation to ensure they were able to take corrective action if any elements of their projects needed to be adjusted. For example, when considering different options for providing water to affected populations, jerrycans were ruled out as one of the options as the team acknowledged that aid supplies had previously been a source of tension and there was a risk that community members would not have equal access to the cans. As a result, PDRF and Pepsi-Cola Products Philippines Inc. decided to install water tanks in underserved transitional shelter sites and selected elementary schools across Marawi City. For more information, please see the [CBI Case Study](#).

2. Assess your intervention against the context

Does the network understand how its programmatic interventions interact with the context?

- Assess programmatic work against the context. Dedicate sufficient time to reflect how the network's programming could have an impact – intended or unintended – on different groups and on existing tensions within communities. Consider your programmes' geographic focus, beneficiaries, and partner selection. Also consider the impact of how you work e.g. hiring practices and staff representation, procurement policies, security). Pay particular attention to the most vulnerable people or marginalised groups.
- Include multiple stakeholders in discussions and gain knowledge on how the network, its members and partners are viewed by the beneficiaries, as well as other influential stakeholders in the area (such as local government, informal or traditional leaders etc.). While honest participatory assessments may require confidential consultations, the outcomes should be documented and shared. Providing relevant information and communicating, including on relevant emergency preparedness measures, with the affected populations and local communities is also important for building Accountability to Affected Populations.

Has the network ensured that none of the member companies are engaged in harmful practices that could aggravate the conflict dynamics in the area?

- Conduct due diligence on member companies (if and as possible) and/or ask if partners have already conducted due diligence on them.
- Encourage companies to sign on to the UN Global Compact Ten Principles (and ask *why not* if they are not willing).

Some guiding questions to consider:

- How did we integrate local perspectives into program planning?
- Who was involved in the decision-making?
- Is the intervention (e.g. activity type or relief items) appropriate for the context? Is there something else we could do?
- Who are our beneficiaries and why? Is our criteria for selecting beneficiaries transparent and fair?
- Who are our partners and why?
- Does our intervention legitimize or undermine some parts of the population?
- Is the location of the intervention accessible to all those affected by a crisis?

- Does the timing of our intervention make it possible for everyone in the affected community to participate?
- Do the goods and services that we provide distort local markets? If so, who is most likely to benefit/ lose out as a result? What impact might this have on relations between groups in the focus area?
- How does the intervention impact different people, including women, youth, elderly and people with disabilities?
- Who was involved in implementing the project?
- Who are we (not) hiring? How does our staff interact with others? From whom are we (not) procuring? Will some groups benefit disproportionately/ others lose out? What impact might this have on social relations in the area?
- Have we checked all our member companies against some basic due diligence criteria?
- Do our members report on their social, environmental and governance impact?

The importance of selecting the right partners: an example from Sri Lanka

The Asia-Pacific Alliance for Disaster Management Sri Lanka (A-PAD SL) partnered with Union Assurance Plc to provide cooked meals to thousands of families who had been placed in safety centers as heavy rains caused flooding and landslides in Western, Central and Southern Provinces of Sri Lanka in May-June 2021. A-PAD SL had to liaise with the Government and local authorities to identify the most vulnerable families who would be targeted, but also to arrange delivery as the intervention took place during COVID-19 lockdown. The private sector partner was selected as it was recognized that their 5-star hotel kitchen could cater to people from different religious backgrounds (halal) but also because “hotel food” was considered a luxury among the people – thus bringing people together around a positive experience. In fact, the local population had started to display frustration towards the handling of the flood response, but the distribution of the warm lunches (instead of the typical cold ration packs provided by the Government) had a visibly calming effect and community leaders, women and children came to thank the partners for their contribution.

3. Adjust your operations if and as needed

Does the network have mitigation measures in place to minimize any negative impacts of its interventions?

- It is important to recognise that conducting relief efforts in complex and ever changing contexts inevitably requires making difficult decisions about who will, and will not, benefit, when and how. These often are taken in the absence of sufficient information, and amidst great uncertainty. It is important to seek to identify and recognise some of the tensions and trade-offs inherent when working under such conditions, and to have mechanisms in place to allow for programmes to be flexible, and continuously adapt what they are doing as these issues become apparent.
- Identify indicators and agree on benchmarks to monitor and measure change. For example, if using the [Dividers and Connectors analysis](#) to originally assess the context, review the key dividers and connectors regularly to observe potential change. As there is no one standard for measuring conflict sensitivity, combining objective information with perception-based indicators² may provide helpful insights to understanding the evolution of the context and its interaction with the interventions.
- Identify the key risks and potential mitigation measures. Recognize that network interventions can impact the context in two main ways: by changing the peace and conflict factors (e.g. increasing tension or fostering peace) and by affecting stakeholders (e.g. legitimizing or undermining them).

² Views, beliefs and feelings of respondents, for example the affected population. For more information, please refer to the International Alert Resource Pack on [Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding](#).

- If necessary, adjust your operations to deliver the intended outcome. It is advisable to consider who (which organizations, including partners) is doing what (which activities), where (in which locations), when (timing of the intervention) and for whom (beneficiaries). Sometimes for example the intervention itself (*what* you do) might be fine, but you may need to adjust *how* you do it.
- Provide a feedback mechanism and take corrective action if complaints are raised by any stakeholder group. Remember to also communicate about the corrective actions.
- In circumstances where it is impossible to be completely conflict sensitive (i.e. any action could cause harm and aggravate the context), the network and its partners need to weigh the potential benefits against the harm of implementing the intervention (tradeoffs). It is critical to acknowledge that a decision to do nothing might also cause harm.

Do member companies have mitigation measures for addressing potential grievances?

- Check if companies have grievance and remedy mechanisms for victims of breaches, whether they report on their impact on the society and if their operations have been externally verified.

Some questions to consider:

- Is our intervention still relevant, appropriate and timely? Are our underlying assumptions about the context still valid?
- What measures have we taken to reduce the risk of having a negative impact on the conflict dynamics?
- Can we continue to implement the planned activities safely and with the original intended impact?
- Do member companies have grievance mechanisms and have they taken steps to address potential grievances?

Additional resources

- The CDA Collaborative [Do No Harm Guidance Note: Using Dividers and Connectors](#) organizes a broad context into two categories: elements in societies which divide people from each other and serve as sources of tension and elements which connect people and can serve efforts to sustain peace.
- The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium [How To Guide to Conflict Sensitivity](#) provides practical advice and guidance to development, humanitarian and peacebuilding agencies on how to integrate a conflict sensitive approach across the project cycle.
- The World Vision International [Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response \(GECARR\)](#) is a context analysis tool that provides a macro-level analysis of a country or a specific region during or in anticipation of a crisis.
- ILO's [Peace and Conflict Analysis: Guidance for ILO's programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts](#) recognizes the importance of understanding the interactions between decent work and peace and conflict dynamics and explains how ILO can integrate such analyses into its country programs.
- FAO's [Guide to context analysis: informing FAO decision-making](#) is a learning tool for their non-conflict specialists to document and institutionalize their knowledge of the local context, and thus inform conflict-sensitive design of FAO interventions.
- WFP's [COVID 19 and conflict sensitivity Rapid Operational Conflict Risk and Prevention Tool](#) outlines some of the key risks that COVID-19 gives rise to and provides a list of 16 questions to help operational staff in analyzing how programming can be affected, along with examples of suggested program adjustments.
- CARE's [Emergency Toolkit on Conflict Sensitivity](#) provides a comprehensive overview and also includes practical questions to help determine a "[good enough approach](#)" for rapid onset crises and a [more detailed analysis](#) for slower onset crises.

About the authors

This Guidance Note was drafted by Tiina Mylly with the support of Catriona Gourlay and Tim Midgley from PeaceNexus and Gregory Connor from the UNDP Crisis Bureau.

The [Connecting Business initiative](#) (CBI) was established by the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA) and the [United Nations Development Programme](#) (UNDP) to strategically engage with the private sector before, during, and after an emergency. To learn more about CBI, or if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions about how to integrate conflict sensitivity into private sector disaster management, please contact us at connectingbusiness@un.org.