Reflection V: A network approach to developing tools

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Working in this field we are all too familiar with the contradictory sense that on the one hand we need better guiding tools to do things better, while on the other hand there are so many resources out there we hardly have time to read or use them. And the need to be context specific can raise questions about when and where certain tools are sufficiently appropriate. Having worked on developing some of these resources with the members of our global network in GPPAC, I will share some of my thoughts on what we have learned worked well, and what can be done to 'connect' the vast amount of resources available.

Design

First, the approach. In line with practicing what we preach, involving the end-users / partners in the design and long-term vision of the material will have an impact on the extent to which it will be picked up afterwards, and by the people you intended it for. An inclusive design or a methodology that is based on human security principles (such as local ownership) enhances not only the content but also the ownership of the tools that are produced. See more on applying human security methodologies here.

What has been helpful is the fact that GPPAC works with a vast network of members who get involved in the process and can draw on each other's experiences "horizontally". Cross-regional learning allows for both focusing on the contextual differences, as well as drawing out the commonalities in terms of approaches and lessons, that relate from one context to another. An example of how this was done was for the development of the GPPAC's "Multi-stakeholder Processes for Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: A Manual", and the "Conflict Analysis Framework: Field Guidelines and Procedures". Both build on the vast experiences of practitioners and case studies from a diverse set of contexts, based on members' discussions on the contents.

In addition, we had good experiences with including persons in the design from other backgrounds. For instance, in the case of the "Handbook on Human Security: A Civil-Military-Police Curriculum" which is about the security sector, we ensured authorship from persons from all three backgrounds: civil society practitioners, military, and police. It attempts to bridge some of the gaps by making linkages between the different perspectives, and compares and explains the different terminology used by different actors regarding the same issues. It bridges or 'translates' some of the differences, to facilitate a conversation between them. More importantly perhaps, is the reception: the fact that it was co-authored by military makes it easier to communicate to them about it and get them interested in using the manual, than if it were a CSO-only endeavor.

What is already out there? Where to find it?

Second, linking to already existing mechanisms, resources, processes or institutions is necessary to avoid duplication of efforts and enhance each other's work. There are some initiatives such as peacetraining.eu attempting to bring various resources (on trainings) together in one place, as there was an identified lack of a one-stop shop for an overview of what tools are available and who is providing them. This is not to argue having overviews means it will automatically generate synergies between them, but it can make it easier to start conversations between different institutions on for instance methodologies for developing these tools, or measuring impact. Nevertheless, I have experienced that some actors are not always willing to share their methodologies and indicators, for instance on how they do 'conflict analysis'. It may therefore not always be possible to bridge the gaps.
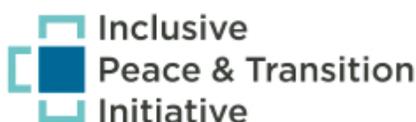
Context

Even if we have the right tools, the question is how and whether it can be appropriate for the specific context and actors that aim to use it, notably for training? Drawing from our network members' inputs recently at GPPAC's Improving Practice Working Group meeting, they identified the following strategies that can help contextualise training materials and approaches :

- Bring together a core multi-stakeholder group to design the training
- Situate the training content (for instance Human Security) in the context to ensure it relates to relevant policy context and the right terminology; and have a foreword/introduction by a subject expert from the context
- Co-facilitation between representatives from various perspectives in the context (military vs. CSOs) where possible from the context; or consider "insider/outsider" co-facilitation
- Case studies from the context/region

It is not "your tool"

Finally, tools are rarely, nor should they be, "owned" or fully within the control of its author or authoring organisation. Competent users will take what is useful, add their own experience and knowledge, contextualise, adapt and put them to use as they see fit. Of course there is also a risk of "incompetent users" and a framework or tool being applied in superficial and unintended ways – this risk has to be ever-present in the methodologies and development processes. Nevertheless, what is important is that the materials trigger users' own thinking and questioning about their realities, that they allow for a deep reflection and build on one's own experience and existing knowledge, and inspire new ideas and that can bring about a "happy marriage" of theory and practice.