

Conflict Sensitivity – 20 years of practice: A Critical Reflection

By Thania Paffenholz

This contribution critically assesses the achievements and failures of 20 years of conflict sensitivity in policy and practice. It concludes that despite tremendous conceptual, policy, and institutional achievements, the practice of conflict sensitivity on the ground in fragile conflict countries has still not changed much. This short contribution offers four explanations for the failure of conflict sensitivity to make the transition from policy to successful “on the ground” application in practice. These challenges need to be considered in future planning for conflict sensitivity interventions. This article will first look at the history of the debate and discuss conflict sensitivity’s main achievements; then, it will analyse the failure to implement larger change in the practice of conflict sensitivity around the world.

The Conflict Sensitivity Debate in Historical Perspective

The aftermath of the 1994 Rwanda genocide was the starting point for the contemporary debate on conflict sensitivity. The international community, in particular development actors, did not anticipate these tragic events and were taken by surprise. This sparked a massive debate about the role of development actors in conflict. The seminal works of Peter Uvin (Uvin, 1998) and Mary Anderson (Anderson, 1999) critically analyzed how the international development and humanitarian communities inadvertently exacerbated conflict in Rwanda, Somalia, and other places.

In response to this criticism, the international community devoted tremendous attention to the issue. Conflict sensitivity made its way, apparently successfully, into the donor and international NGOs community. Since the early 2000s, there has been increasing political commitments from multilateral and bilateral donors and INGOs alike, accompanied by numerous policy documents attempting to address these challenges. This was followed by expansive institutionalization of the topic across the international governance system: conflict units, networks, expert pools, and advisor positions were established within almost all donors and aid agencies. For example, the British conflict advisor pool has over 100 members across relevant ministries (DFID, Foreign Affairs and Defense).

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In Germany, not only was there a conflict unit established at the Ministry of Development Cooperation and at major agencies like GIZ, but a joint working group (FriEnt) was formed to foster collaboration on conflict sensitivity between government and non-governmental organizations. A similar development also took place in Switzerland.

Among others, these efforts led to the creation of a conflict sensitivity expert community. Conflict sensitivity rapidly became the top cross-cutting theme in development, outpacing traditional cross-cutting themes (such as gender or environment) in terms of budget and staffing capacity. Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment Guides (Bush, 1998; Paffenholz/Reychler, 2007), as well as countless training manuals, have been developed; “do no harm” and conflict sensitivity training has become a vibrant market. Today, so many tools to address conflict sensitivity exist that it has become hard to choose between them. Consequently, the quality of conflict analysis has tremendously improved over the years as more and more project proposals and country programs provide high quality conflict analysis.

Conflict Sensitivity: Institutional Success, Operational Failure?

How, then, can we explain the fact that the practice of conflict sensitivity on the ground in conflict countries has still not tremendously changed? Discussions with country program offices and geographical units today often continue to remind us - the expert community - of the 1990s, when conflict sensitivity debates had just begun. Why is it that staff in donor and NGO offices have still not embraced the concepts and tools we painstakingly developed and created over the past decade? Though analysis has improved, operational approaches to conflict sensitivity still appear more or less unchanged; or, at best, changes remain limited to a few successful pilot countries. What went wrong?

Four explanations are offered here as food for thought:

1. No real mainstreaming took place:

It is fair to say that conflict sensitivity has never made it into the mainstream of development, humanitarian action, and (surprisingly) peacebuilding. Though it has been declared to be a mainstreaming topic in development, conflict sensitivity has remained an expert talk shop far removed from everyday operations on the ground. The reasons behind this are related to the way the international aid system functions. Country programs are designed by geographically defined operational units, not by thematic units. These operational units, though well-versed in the specific challenges of their local region, are unlikely to be experts on novel topics in development cooperation, such as conflict sensitivity. Conflict units were seen as isolated entities disconnected from the geographical units that run the show. Some donors like the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) therefore abolished their thematic units altogether, and established instead thematic networks across agencies with mixed results.

The picture is even worse in humanitarian action. Conflict sensitivity started with the “do no harm” analysis of humanitarian action; however, this never made it into the system. The humanitarian system is still mainly driven by urgency and crisis response, and has not yet fully acknowledged that at minimum the management of long-term emergencies needs to be conflict sensitive. The conflict sensitivity expert community has directed the bulk of its efforts towards the development community, inadvertently marginalizing humanitarian action in their conceptual and toolbox thinking.

The peacebuilding community has only recently recognized that conflict sensitivity is also a pertinent issue for peacebuilding projects and programmes - although, strangely, still struggles with an understanding of what it means.

2. Excessive focus on tool boxes:

Conflict sensitivity is an overtly political issue that has been neutralized by being detached and insulated within tool boxes. As a consequence, conflict sensitivity is seen as a technical issue best addressed by applying tools or ticking boxes. A lot of efforts by the conflict sensitivity expert community have gone into developing check lists to apply conflict sensitivity as a tool in projects and programmes. However, this has not necessarily led to more conflict sensitivity in practice. The reasons behind this are associated with the way the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity has been pursued outside of the aid system’s standard operational procedures.

Overall, change in the global aid system will only occur if the change management process is effectively integrated within existing structures and instruments, and if changes are easily understood by operational staff. However, the dominant mainstreaming approach of the expert community has been to develop extra tool kits that practitioners may then find difficult to integrate in the field, as these represent an additional task in an already-overloaded work environment with competing requirements from headquarters.

As a consequence, the Swiss Development Cooperation, for example, has tried out different approaches to make conflict sensitivity a management task instead. Some 10 years ago, Conflict Sensitive Programme Management (CSPM) was introduced to show that it is a real management responsibility, and not just an additional tool for experts. Though CSPM was successfully implemented in a few countries with committed leadership, it was not mainstreamed within the agency. Recently, SDC made conflict sensitivity an integrated part of the obligatory country strategy planning for all fragile countries. However, even in this case, concepts and practices still do not match, as geographical units generally still grapple with how to understand and operationalize these concepts, and accountability for ignoring them remains weak. Agencies like DFID and SDC have also tried to provide career incentives for professionals that effectively apply conflict sensitivity approaches.

3. The debate on state fragility has quietly overtaken the conflict sensitivity debate without the expert community fully realizing it:

With the New Deal and fragility debates, conflict sensitivity has transitioned from a mainstreaming topic to a strategic focus and policy goal. In the New Deal, the G7+ countries and partners committed themselves to a holistic approach to conflict as a precondition for development and the transition out of fragility. The Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSG), an important component of the New Deal, include the implementation of peace agreements, representation in security forces (PSG1 Legitimate Politics), as well as the incidence of cross-border violence (PSG 2 Security). The New Deal also addresses internal social conflict, in terms of homicides, assaults, and sexual assaults, as important components of security, completing the holistic picture of conflict.

More recently, with the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in particular the targets (16.1, 16.2, 16.7, 16.a) of Goal 16 related to inclusion and the prevention of violence, the link between conflict and underdevelopment is commonly agreed now by the international community. This approach has been made possible by prior work on conflict sensitivity, but has largely been generated from outside the community of conflict sensitivity specialists. As a result, the two debates on fragility and conflict sensitivity have never been fully linked.

Conclusion

While fragility is the new term du jour in the donor community, it is not clear how this relates to conflict sensitivity. Is an approach of development to support countries “out of fragility” the policy answer and conflict sensitivity the tool kit, or is there more to both of them? This article has tried to shade into these questions in providing the reader with a critical analysis of the achievements and failures of 20 years of debates around conflict sensitivity.

In summary, since 1994 broad recognition of the ways in which the international system may inadvertently exacerbate conflicts on the ground has produced numerous policy documents and operational tool kits, but did ultimately not lead to substantive changes in practice. This article presented three explanations centering around the argument that conflict sensitivity has never entered the mainstream aid system and remained an add on packed in tool boxes deprived of political meaning until the fragility debate took off and quietly sidelined the conflict sensitivity expert community.

The expert community must therefore find a response to these challenges if it is to remain relevant into the future.

About the author

Dr Thania Paffenholz is the Director of the newly created Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (IPTI) at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva (www.inclusivepeace.org). With over 25 years of experience as both an academic

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Dr Paffenholz previously held positions as Project Director and Senior Researcher at the Graduate Institute, was Director of the Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF) at swisspeace in Berne, Switzerland (until 2003); served as peacebuilding advisor to the EU Special Envoy to Somalia at the Delegation of the European Commission in Kenya (1996-2000). From 1992 to 1996 she was research fellow at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, Germany. Dr Paffenholz has participated in different UN missions in Africa. She advises different UN agencies, the EU, the OSCE, the OECD/DAC as well as governments and non-governmental organizations. She is member of international boards and research associations. Her publications are widely used by scholars and practitioners and include, 'Peacebuilding: A Field Guide' Boulder (2000), 'Aid for Peace' (2007) and 'Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment' Boulder (2010).

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