

Ways of moving forward: A community of practice and learning

A Response by

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1 On further developing the methods and instruments of impact assessment

Tools for Conflict-Sensitive Approaches (CSA) and Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA)

It is clear from the articles and exchanges between the authors that the issue of labels or names for what we want to achieve when we do CSA/PCIA work is far from resolved. Intertwined with this is the existing and continuously developing body of work on defining tools for CSA, PCIA and related work. For us, this discussion brings two important points to mind.

First, the question of names or labels goes far beyond 'branding' – it actually impacts on people's understanding of, and willingness to choose, some sort of conflict-sensitive approach to their work. In addition, it is never really possible to 'brand' something that is intended for use by a wide-ranging audience, as different individuals and institutions would (and certainly have in the case of CSA and PCIA) appropriate the terms and develop their own understanding of it. As we have argued in our initial article¹, being conflict-sensitive goes far beyond tools, so that it is not only deceptive, but also restrictive, to pretend that there is a 'brand name' that could include all the aspects and nuances of undertaking conflict-sensitive work.

Second, although it is very useful to have tools that enable people to put into practice

¹ Barbolet et al. 2005 at www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/PCIA_addBarboletetal.pdf .

the theory of CSA and PCIA, there may be diminishing returns at this point in the development of the field to continue fine-tuning existing tools and inventing new ones. The question now needs to become whether people are using the existing tools, at what level, and with what outcomes.

The danger of asserting propriety over a tool or process is that it makes it difficult for others to adopt, adapt and use that tool or process in a way that makes sense for them, their organisation and their operational context. This exertion of ownership robs the global community of concepts that can only work if they are collectively owned. While we may not always be comfortable with the way concepts that we have contributed to get used by others, the important thing is that others are using them. We can choose to impute malicious intent when they use it in ways we do not like, or we can humbly accept that ideas can (and must) change and grow over time in ways that we have little control over. Thus, when we pose the question whether a tool or process is working or living up to its potential, we need also to consider: Working for whom? Living up to whose definition of ‘potential’? The question is not only “useful for whom?”; the next question is: “who asks the question and who is allowed to answer it?”

Objectives of CSA and PCIA

A central question in the CSA and PCIA discussion is therefore: what are we really hoping to achieve? Are we aiming only for development assistance not to do harm or are we actively seeking to ensure that all the resources at our disposal (including development assistance) are aimed at ending violent conflicts? We probably need to think of it more as a continuum with, on the one end, those who aim for the minimum in terms of conflict sensitivity, i.e. not causing harm or aggravating conflict, and, on the other end, those who aim to actively contribute to peacebuilding. At this point, all positions on the continuum would probably be an improvement in practice, as so many organisations are not even on the continuum yet. And of course the question of where they place themselves relates strongly to their roles, mandates and skills.

Yet those of us considering ourselves to be peacebuilders may wish to push everybody to the peacebuilding side of the continuum. In doing this, we need to be critical of the ideas and concepts that underpin our work – our own as well as those of our colleagues – but that criticism needs to focus on improving the peacebuilding field and the peacebuilding impact of development and humanitarian assistance. That includes being willing to learn from our own and other’s mistakes without creating an aggressively competitive environment where only one set of tools or one approach is portrayed as being correct. The unfortunate reality is that even peacebuilding practitioners do not know for certain how to stop violent conflicts. Some ideas and some important sign posts do exist, but at the end of the day no-one can say for certain how to prevent a Darfur or stop an Afghanistan. It therefore seems to be much more important to let a thousand flowers bloom rather than to insist on one particular tool or approach.

2 On coming to a theory of impact assessment

Different levels of impact

It is clear that there are strong linkages between the social, economic and political spheres of conflict, as well as the macro, meso and micro levels. However, linking need not mean conflating. For example, an irrigation project in rural Kyrgyzstan cannot be expected to counteract the post-Soviet malaise and decade-old economic collapse of the region. That is why we need to encourage development actors out of thinking only in terms of projects, and thinking more strategically.

Similarly, the peacebuilding field's preoccupation with the 'attribution gap' is symptomatic of the existing confusion between the political and the social. It is also symptomatic of a lack of resources – and perhaps lack of willingness? – to systematically conduct baseline data collection and regular reviews that would enable both peacebuilding and development practitioners to start understanding and overcoming the 'attribution gap'. At the same time, we need to be realistic about what we are attempting to assess. For example, the impact of a shallow tube well project on large macro-political conflict is bound to be limited. Although it is clearly important to understand the project within the national political framework, there is also a need to acknowledge the limited impact such a project can have on issues well outside its sphere of influence.

Acknowledging the clear separation between the national (macro) and grassroots (micro) spheres will also require peacebuilders and development actors alike to rethink how we use the tools at our disposal to affect positive change on the macro/national aspects of conflict. Again, there is a need to link these approaches to the micro/grassroots spheres, but different spheres require different approaches. Nevertheless, as pointed out by the Utstein papers and by Thania Paffenholz, the need still exists to try to assess the local level work in terms of its impact on peace writ large.

3 On improving the practice of impact assessment

Ownership, legitimacy and influence

All the articles that form part of this dialogue/discussion refer in some way to the questions of how local communities can own PCIA or CSA and what their role and influence is on their conflict vis-à-vis that of external actors. This is particularly important as both peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive development or humanitarian assistance aim to bring about social change and contribute to long-term peace. In the process, sensitive choices need to be made and the question arises as to which actors have the legitimacy as well as the ethical standards and professional standing to make these decisions.

For example, a national NGO can decide to conduct civic education work in an undemocratic society, based on an analysis that lack of civic education is a key structural cause of conflict in that society and that civic education will contribute to longer-term, sustainable peace. However, in the context, civic education may in the short term lead to an increase in tensions. Assessing such a project would raise a number of questions about the organisation and the way they work:

1. Is their analysis accurate, i.e. is weak civic education an important enough structural cause of conflict to justify the increase in short-term tensions?
2. Does the organisation in fact have an agenda that aims to promote peace (or are there other motives in play)?
3. Is the organisation rooted in the context? Is this consistent with the scope of the project, i.e. are they genuinely national and working countrywide rather than capital city-led?
4. Do they have a track record of doing good research and successfully engaging communities?
5. Do they connect the project's message with their organisational ethics and mandate?

These questions become even more difficult if there are external actors involved, or a multitude of actors who may have different points of view. Yet it is exactly this murky reality within which the majority of local and international actors find themselves having to make difficult decisions.

Similarly, it is very difficult to assess the impact of a project if the project is not based on an explicit analysis or assumptions and does not make clear the theory/theories of change or conflict transformation that inform the project design. The reason being that if a project does not achieve its intended impact, the answer may lie in a variety of different places. Yet, who judges what would be the appropriate analysis, assumptions and theories of change or conflict transformation?

This leaves us with the question of roles and contributions among different actors. On the one hand, some of our experience suggests that, left to their own devices, those committed to increasing the efficacy of their work on conflict will adopt the tools at their disposal in locally appropriate ways. Issues of institutional support and individual confidence cause more problems than the lack of any particular expertise. Those of us who work on peacebuilding issues for a living have a tendency to make things more complicated than they need to be, including using all kinds of tables, charts and language that makes perfect sense to us, but little to anyone else. The issues around the development/conflict nexus, particularly at the project level, are not particularly complicated. So while it is sometimes helpful to have an external perspective, that help need not come in the form of an external Western consultant. Where agencies simply do not have the time on a day-to-day basis for staff to engage on these issues, external assistance can make an important contribution, but only if it assists in developing relevant internal capacity. We all agree on that.

Clearly, community involvement is paramount in terms of testing analyses and assumptions as well as trying to determine impact. One way to do this more systematically may be to adapt some of the methodologies used in public opinion polls for the purpose. Such processes actually consult people on their views, and – although used for a different purpose – have been undertaken in reference to conflict issues and international agencies' engagement in Kosovo and Bosnia. But even in these cases, political agendas may still interfere and the interpretation of results of such consultations or polls will still be subject to people's position in the conflict.

In terms of community ownership, it is indeed crucial that people affected by conflict are empowered by their involvement in conducting conflict analysis and shaping interventions that influence their lives. Their agency is essential to ensuring that they have a peaceful future. At the same time, we should not over-estimate the influence of empowering local populations, as their ability to “assert control over those decisions and initiatives (internal and external) that affect their lives and livelihoods in violence-prone regions around the world” is often extremely limited. Are we not creating unrealistic and false expectations if we lead people in rural villages of Bangladesh to believe that they have any agency at all over decisions by Washington legislators on the “Global War on Terrorism”? Even at the more local level, a sense of realism has to underpin any evidence-based advocacy towards changing the un-conflict-sensitive practices of international or, for that matter, national institutions.

The ideological ethos of peacebuilding lends itself to us calling for the empowerment of communities, but setting aside for a moment what specifically we mean by ‘community’, individual communities have agency over a very limited scope. Other approaches beyond community development projects and work on other levels of the conflict are required to address these more macro political issues.

A community of practice

While all the authors raise issues around ethical standards, professional standards, accountability, learning and capacity development, we need to try and find way in which to address these practically. One way forward certainly seems to be more widespread sharing among

practitioners at all levels of their experiences and findings from conflict analysis processes, as well as identifying and evaluating their theories of change or conflict transformation (as aimed for in the work of the Collaborative for Development Action on the Reflecting on Peace Practice project²).

A possible approach could be to establish a network – a community of practice, a broad, inclusive group of practitioners. The network cannot be dominated by any individual or organisation and their interests, especially not Northern ‘experts’ or institutions. The aim of the network would be to work towards articulating ethical and professional standards and capacity development in communities affected by conflict all over the world. While experience and expertise would be an asset, commitment to agreed principles would be the criterion of membership, in order to avoid alienating a new generation and those with an interest but little or no experience. The members would have to be a cross-section of people from conflict-affected communities as well as project implementers, trainers and those developing methods.

The network could also provide a useful information point for its own members and others alike on PCIA/conflict sensitivity and could even do advocacy work on challenging donor-imposed parameters on undertaking PCIA/conflict sensitivity related work.

One of the abiding principles of the network should be developing capacity in conflict-affected areas throughout all the activities of its members. This could even be complemented by a ‘conflict communities capacity development fund’ – into which all international consultants would pay a percentage of their earnings from relevant consultancies. The broader membership – or a committee comprised only of people from conflict communities – could then decide what type of activities the fund would support.

In articulating ethical and professional standards, the network can also be used as a forum to voice concerns about breaches of these standards, which the network can then investigate. Perhaps the network should even be able to name or expel members who maliciously break these standards, although it would be hoped that this type of occurrence would be a rarity.

In addition to holding its members to account to certain standards, we think there must be a strong reflection, learning and professional development component to the network. However, care will have to be taken that emphasis is placed within the group on joint learning and improvement of practice, rather than creating an atmosphere of aggressive criticism, which would make practitioners hesitant to share learning and discuss failures.

We believe that such a network could create a forum for starting to address the ‘big’ questions around impact and go some way to promoting better ownership, standards and accountability in our work. It, however, could only achieve this if it had widespread buy-in across the field.

² See www.cdainc.com/rpp/