

## DO NO HARM

### Key Messages

1. Development cooperation and humanitarian aid are part of the context in which they operate. Both types of assistance can have intended or unintended influence on the context.
2. Do No Harm is an attempt by humanitarian aid and development cooperation to monitor the intended and unintended impact of their activities in order to avoid contributing to instability and violence.
3. Implicit ethical messages are an important part of the assistance that is provided. The details of assistance programmes matter, i.e. the following aspects of assistance: questions about what, why, who, by whom, when, where, and how.
4. There are always options to change assistance programmes with the aim of eliminating negative impacts and/or increasing positive contributions to peace.
5. Both humanitarian aid and development cooperation often come into play in contexts of conflict, where the Do No Harm approach has special implications.
6. In every conflict situation there are two parameters: dividers and connectors. Dividers are the factors that cause tension and can be a reason for fighting. Connectors tend to reduce tension and/or bring people together. Humanitarian aid as well as development cooperation can have increasing or reducing effects on dividers and connectors.

### INTRODUCTION

In the years following the end of the Cold War some very complex emergencies challenged the system of international humanitarian aid. The disastrous examples of Rwanda and Sudan raised awareness for the fact that humanitarian aid not only can hardly be for the benefit of everybody but that – much worse – it can cause more harm than good.

In the light of such unintended and negative effects of humanitarian aid, the future goals of assistance were formulated with modesty: to do some good or – at least – to Do No Harm when offering assistance to areas in crisis. In order to Do No Harm, a prime condition is to make a thorough analysis of the context in which assistance is provided.

Do No Harm was developed into a concept that is applicable and vitally important in different contexts: humanitarian aid is needed after natural disasters as much as in situations of emergency because of violent conflict. Also, it has been realised that emergency assistance should no longer be drawn up separately from development cooperation and that both require a thorough analysis of the context. Finally, even peacebuilding efforts should take into consideration that they intrude into a given context and do not implicitly do good to the situation.

---

## DO NO HARM IN CONTEXTS OF CONFLICT

---

Discussions about current conflicts often highlight their complexity. Having largely moved away from interstate wars, conflicts nowadays often involve many parties, both civilian and military. The causes of such conflicts can be found in internal, intergroup histories and external, international interests; in short, they are driven by multiple and competing motivations. Conflicts cause complex humanitarian emergencies and prompt many types of international responses that range from humanitarian efforts to reduce suffering to high level and grass roots efforts to end fighting.

When international assistance is given in the context of a multi-layered and complex violent conflict, it becomes part of the system. Although external aid interventions seek to be neutral towards the winners and losers of a conflict, the impact of their aid is not neutral. In the worst case, aid assistance causes division and conflict escalation, in the best case, it supports connections between conflict parties and de-escalation. The Do No Harm analysis is a method to address this question. It can also be used for planning, implementing and evaluating development projects with regard to their impact on war or peace.

---

## KEY CONCEPT

---

The Do No Harm Project started in 1994. It is an experience-based learning process that involves international and local humanitarian and development agencies providing assistance in contexts of emergency. Its purpose is to learn how assistance that is given in such emergency settings interacts with the given circumstances that can be conflictive. In conflict situations, assistance is often used and misused by people who pursue political and military advantage. Understanding how this occurs enables agencies to prevent their assistance from being distorted for the promotion of conflict.

Do No Harm is based on field experience of many different programmes of International Organizations in different contexts that is gathered and compared. Through this process the project has identified clear patterns regarding how assistance and context interact. Do No Harm has developed a tool for the analysis of assistance in the context of conflict. The tool

- reveals the interconnections between programming decisions and context (about where to work, with whom, how the criteria for beneficiaries are set, how to relate to local authorities, etc.);

- heightens the awareness of intergroup relations in project sites and enables agencies to play a conscious role in helping people come together;
- provides a common reference point to assess the impacts of assistance on the context and possible conflicts. This brings a new cohesiveness to staff interactions and work with local counterparts;
- prompts the identification of conflict-exacerbating impacts of assistance much sooner than it could be expected without the analysis;
- enables to identify programming options when things are going badly.

## DO NO HARM

## RESOURCE TRANSFERS CAN CREATE OR EXACERBATE CONFLICTS

**Theft**

When the resources of international aid agencies are stolen by armies and militias, and then used either for their own purposes or sold to raise money for the purchase of arms, these resources directly feed into the conflict.

**Distribution effects**

International aid agencies usually target their supplies to certain groups. This means that some people obtain aid while others do not. If the group receiving resources is congruent with one of the subgroups in a society that is in conflict with others, intergroup tension may increase. On the other hand, aid that is given across subgroups can serve to bridge the gaps between them.

**Market effects**

International aid has a significant impact on wages, prices and profits. These effects can either reinforce incentives to continue warfare or promote and support non-war economic activities.

**Substitution effects**

To the extent that international aid agencies assume responsibility for civilian survival in war zones, the aid they provide can serve to free up whatever internal resources exist for the pursuit of warfare. Furthermore, this can also permit local authorities to define their own roles entirely in terms of military control and, thus to abdicate their own responsibility and accountability for civilian responsiveness.

**Legitimation effects**

International aid legitimises some actors and activities, while delegitimising others. When the effects of aid are to legitimise war activities, aid worsens conflict; when the effects are to legitimise non-war activities, aid can lessen conflict.

---

## IMPLICIT ETHICAL MESSAGES CAN CREATE OR EXACERBATE CONFLICT

Assistance can affect the context through implicit ethical messages. Such messages can be conveyed by actions and attitudes of humanitarian and development assistance workers; by ways how they operate to emphasise cleavages, reinforce the modes of warfare or alternatively, by establishing non-conflictual relations, mutual respect and intergroup collaboration.

### **Arms and Power**

When international agencies hire armed guards to protect their goods from theft or their workers from harm, the implicit ethical message perceived by those in the context is that it is legitimate for arms to determine who gets access to food and medical supplies and that security and safety derive from weapons.

### **Disrespect, Mistrust, Competition among Assistance Agencies**

When agencies refuse to work together or even worse, bad-mouth each other, the message conveyed is that it is unnecessary to cooperate and that there is no respect for people you do not agree with. Further, such an attitude questions the importance of an effective use of means and resources.

### **Assistance Workers and Impunity**

When assistance workers use the goods and support systems for their own pleasure and purposes, the message is that if one has control over resources, it is permissible to use them for personal benefit without being accountable to anybody.

### **Different Value for Different Lives**

Agencies that adopt differential policies for two groups of people (e.g. expatriate and local staff) or whose actions suggest that some lives (and even some goods) are more valuable than other lives, present a message similar to that in warfare.

### **Powerlessness**

Field-based staff who disclaim responsibility for the impacts of assistance programmes, spread the message that individuals in complex circumstances cannot have much power, and thus do not have to take on responsibility.

### **Tension, Suspicion, Propensity to Violence**

Assistance workers who are nervous and worried about their own safety may approach situations with suspicion and a propensity to violence; their interactions with people can reinforce the modes of warfare and heighten tension. The message received is that power is, indeed, the broker of human interactions and it is normal to approach everyone with distrust.

### **Publicity**

When international agencies use pictures for publicity that emphasise the gruesomeness of warfare and the victimisation of parties, they can reinforce the demonisation of one side. The message is that in warfare there are clear categories of victims and criminals, whereas in reality individuals often switch between being perpetrators and victims. Reinforcing the conviction that there is a "good" and a "bad" side in war can strengthen the motivations of people to push for victory and can serve as a justification for their own behaviour.

## DO NO HARM

## THE DO NO HARM FRAMEWORK: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF SEVEN STEPS

The development of the Do No Harm analytical framework was based on the programming experience of many assistance workers. It provides a tool for the mapping of interactions between assistance and context and can be used to plan, monitor and evaluate both humanitarian and development assistance programmes.

The Framework is NOT prescriptive. It is a descriptive tool that

- identifies the categories of information that have been found through experience to be important for understanding how assistance affects the context;
- organises these categories in a visual lay-out that highlights their actual and potential relationships;
- helps to predict the impacts of different programming decisions.

### **Step 1: Understanding the Context**

Every society has groups with different interests and identities that are in conflict with other groups. Step one involves identifying such groups and understanding which conflicts are dangerous in terms of their destructiveness or violence. Many of these differences do not erupt into violence and have no further relevance for the Do No Harm analysis.

Do No Harm is useful for understanding the impacts of assistance programmes on the socio-political schisms that cause or have the potential to cause destruction or violence between groups.

### **Step 2: Analysing Dividers and Tensions**

Once the important schisms in a society have been identified, the next step is to analyse what divides the groups. Some dividers or sources of tension between groups may be rooted in deep-seated, historical perceptions of injustice (root causes) while others may be recent, short-lived or manipulated by subgroup leaders (proximate causes). Dividers may arise from many sources including economic relations, geography, demography, politics or religion. Some may be entirely internal to a society; others may be promoted by outside powers. Understanding what divides people is critical to understanding, subsequently, how assistance programmes can fuel or mitigate these forces.

### **Step 3: Analysing Connectors and Local Capacities for Peace (LCP)**

The third step is an analysis of how people, although they are divided by conflict, also remain connected across subgroup lines. The Do No Harm Project found that in every society in conflict, people who are divided by some things remain connected by others. Markets, infrastructure, common experiences, historical events, symbols, shared attitudes, formal and informal associations; all of these aspects provide continuity with non-war life and with former colleagues and co-workers now alienated through conflict. Similarly, Do No Harm found that all societies have individuals and institutions whose task it is to maintain intergroup peace. These include justice systems (if they work), police forces, groups of elders, school teachers or clergy and other respected and trusted figures. In warfare, these local capacities for peace (LCP) are not adequate to prevent violence. Yet, in conflict-prone, open conflict and post-conflict situations they continue to exist and offer one avenue for rebuilding non-war relations. To assess the impacts of assistance programmes on conflict, it is important to identify and understand connectors and LCPs.

### **Step 4: Analysing the Assistance Programme**

Step four of the Do No Harm framework involves a thorough review of all aspects of the assistance programme. Where and why is assistance offered, who are the staff (external and internal), how were they hired, who are the intended recipients of assistance, based on what criteria are they included, what is provided, who decides, how is assistance delivered, warehoused, distributed? It is important to remember that it is never an entire programme that goes wrong. The details matter because they determine the impact.

### **Step 5: Analysing the Assistance Programme's Impact on Dividers and Connectors by using the Concepts of Resource Transfers and Implicit Ethical Messages**

Step five is an analysis of the interactions of the assistance programme with the existing dividers / tensions and connectors / LCPs. Each aspect of pro-

---

programming should be reviewed for its actual and potential impacts on dividers / tensions and connectors / LCPs.

One question to be asked is: who gains and who loses (or who does not gain) from the assistance? Do these groups overlap with the divisions identified as potentially or actually destructive? Does the programme support military activities or civilian structures? Does it miss or ignore opportunities to reinforce connectors? Are LCPs inadvertently undermined or weakened?

Another question is: what resources are brought into the conflict? What impact do the resource transfers have?

Finally, the question to be asked is: what messages are conveyed through the way in which an organisation works? Are there impacts that stem from implicit ethical messages?

#### **Step 6: Considering (and Generating) Programming Options**

Finally, if the analysis of 1) the context of the conflict; 2) dividers and tensions; 3) connectors and local capacities for peace; and 4) the programme shows that assistance exacerbates intergroup dividers, it has to be thought about how to provide the same programme in a way that eliminates its negative, conflict-worsening impacts. If local capacities for peace or connectors have been overlooked, the programme should be redesigned in order not to miss out on these opportunities to support peace.

#### **Step 7: Test Programming Options and Redesign Project**

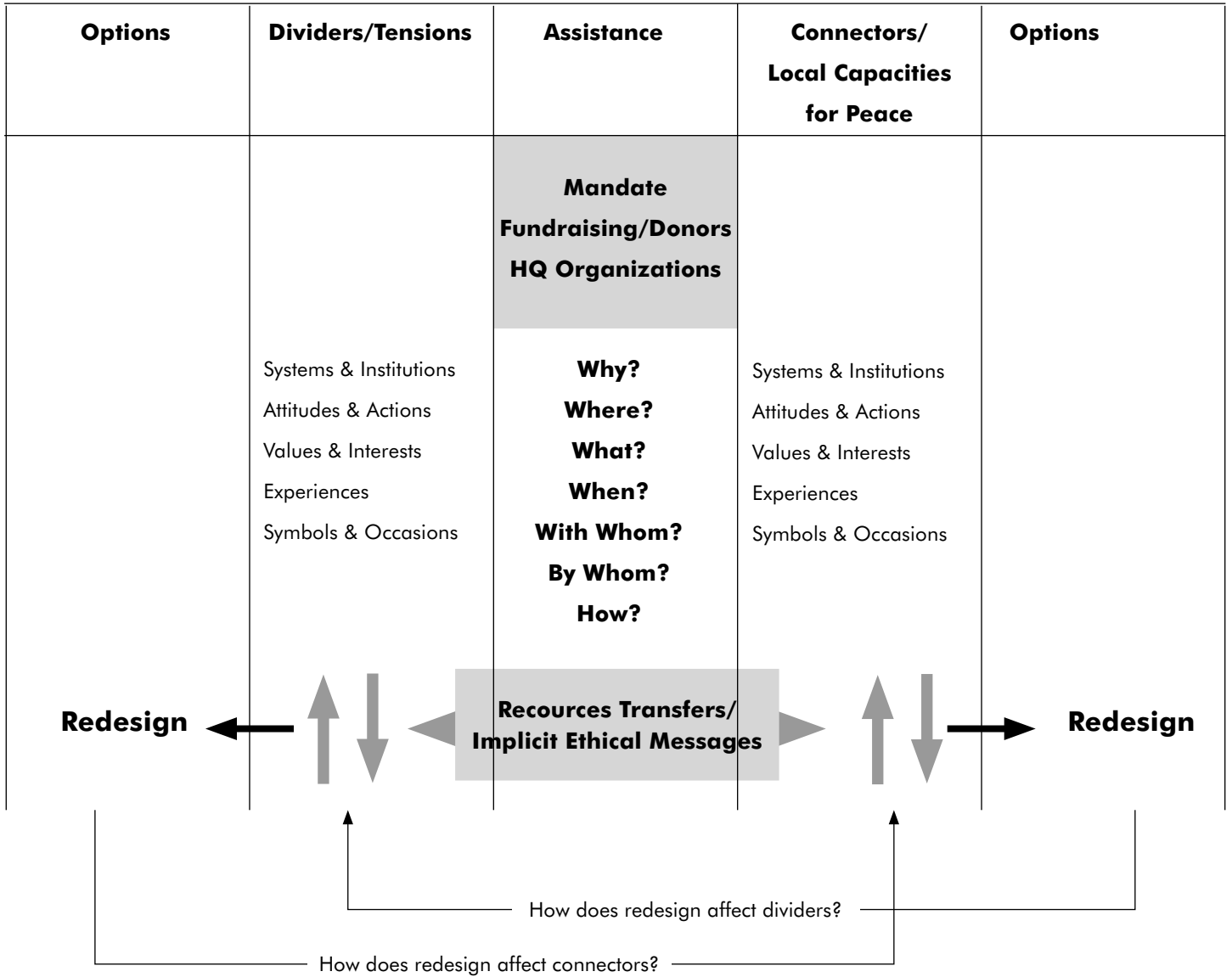
Once a better programming option has been selected, it is crucial to reassess the impacts of the new approach on dividers and connectors.

**Following steps 1 to 6 does not make sense if step 7 is left out!**

DO NO HARM

«DO NO HARM FRAMEWORK» FOR CONSIDERING THE IMPACTS OF AID ON CONFLICT

**Context of Conflict**



---

## CONCLUSION

---

Conflicts are never simple. Do No Harm does not, and cannot, make things simpler. Rather, Do No Harm helps to understand more clearly the complexity of conflictual environments where humanitarian and development assistance programmes operate. It helps to see how programme decisions affect intergroup relationships and to think of ways

to optimise the effects of assistance. The aim is to support assistance workers in handling the difficulties of their task. It is hoped that providing assistance in conflictual situations can happen with less frustration and more clarity and with better outcomes for the societies in need.

## FURTHER READINGS AND LINKS

---

Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace-Or War*, Cambridge 1999.

Mary B. Anderson, *Options for Aid in Conflict: Lessons from Field Experience*, Cambridge 2003.

Mary B. Anderson, *Experiences with Impact assessment: Can we know what good we do?*  
In: *Berghof Handbook* ([www.berghof-handbook.net](http://www.berghof-handbook.net)).

Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP).

[www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com).

### **Editor:**

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC  
Conflict Prevention and Transformation Division (COPRET)  
Freiburgstrasse 130  
CH-3003 Bern