

## Local Wisdom as Our Compass: Conflict Sensitivity & Integration in Unarmed Civilian Protection

### Introduction

“*Conflict sensitivity* refers to the practice of understanding how aid interacts with conflict in a particular context, to mitigate unintended negative effects, and to influence conflict positively wherever possible, through humanitarian, development and/or peacebuilding interventions” (see [CDA](#)). *Do No Harm and Constructive Action* can be regarded as the negative and positive wings of conflict sensitivity.<sup>1</sup> *Risk management* (i.e. avoiding harm to own staff or organisation) is sometimes considered a minimalist approach to conflict sensitivity, *peacebuilding* as a maximalist approach.

As a humanitarian *and* a peacebuilding actor, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) has integrated the entire spectrum of conflict sensitivity in its operations and programme implementation. NP’s approach to protection, Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP), is people-centred and relational. It applies peacebuilding tools for the purpose of providing protection, enhancing safety and security through presence, trust, and relationship building. Conflict sensitivity is a prerequisite for NP as a nonpartisan third party, navigating a hostile environment, to identify opportunities for conflict mitigation and violence prevention. Therefore, conflict sensitivity is not considered separate, but woven into the fabric of UCP practice.

### Approaches and lessons learned by Nonviolent Peaceforce

#### **Living with communities reveals hidden conflict dynamics and allows for rapid response**

Expatriate NP (field) staff usually live within the conflict-affected communities they aim to protect. Local NP staff are members of these communities. It allows our teams to observe the subtle dynamics of conflict that are often hidden to actors who are not embedded in the context. Many of these dynamics are revealed in informal spaces between designated project activities;

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1. Note that Do No Harm was originally conceived as covering both minimising harm and doing good.



Women Protection Team members and NP Staff at the National Women Protection Team Conference, South Sudan, 2022  
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce

in a teashop, at the local market, or in conversations during a night patrol or a protective accompaniment mission. This gives our teams a nuanced understanding and ability to assess if and how our activities affect the overall conflict dynamic to maximise its positive impact. Operating from within communities puts us in a better position to be at the right time and the right place to make use of small windows of opportunity for constructive action.

### **Having a presence across conflict fault lines provides opportunities to mitigate conflicts**

Deploying a presence in both government and armed group controlled areas or across communal conflict fault lines has the potential to minimise the perception of favouring one side over the other. Moreover, it provides opportunities for connection. It's often much easier for outsiders to cross these fault lines than it is for local actors. Connecting our own local staff from these different localities is a relatively easy entry point for building bridges or establishing early warning early response networks.

### **De-centralised and bottom-up programming enhances conflict sensitivity**

Our non-hierarchical, decentralised mode of operation is an extension of our approach to follow the lead of local communities. By giving our country programmes space to re-imagine our global protection methods according to their own context, we are more likely to provide programming that is attuned to the dynamics on the ground. Moreover, it provides a nimbleness for rapid responses and de-escalation.

### **Ongoing analysis focused on threats and effective responses to conflict**

Ongoing analysis is essential, not just at the beginning of a mission or project. Many NP teams have monthly context analysis meetings and provide daily context updates. Morning security briefings are followed by fact checking that may lead to controlling rumours to de-escalate tensions or adjust planned activities. When analysis includes threats and the impact of threats on different actors as well as effective responses to conflict (by local communities), it becomes easier to identify opportunities for violence prevention than when analysis is single-mindedly focused on vulnerability.

### **Conflict sensitivity is the responsibility of all staff**

As conflict sensitivity is an integral part of NP's protection programming, like security management, it is not outsourced to a designated point person, but the responsibility of all staff members. Staff are expected to gather information directly from the community. As expatriate staff live in communities and local staff are members of these communities, they bring the perspectives of communities on conflicts into daily security briefings. When reports appear conflicting, we seek further clarity from additional actors in the community. National and global support staff play a role in reminding field teams of this shared responsibility and re-invigorating conflict sensitivity through targeted staff training, reflection, and collaborations with local or external researchers.

### **Community self-protection strategies are the beginning middle and end of programming**

Local actors know their own context best, their wisdom is our compass. When we follow their lead, we are less likely to do harm. It means that existing self-protection strategies within communities are the starting point for NP's protection programming. This is where localisation and conflict sensitivity meet.

### **When training is participatory and experiential, conflict sensitivity naturally emerges.**

We start protection programming by drawing out the personal and collective experiences of security and insecurity among conflict affected communities and the various ways they are already responding, before introducing our own methods. Local experiences are then used as the reference points for learning exercises, case studies, and tools. Any external methods we bring into the process are introduced in relation to these local experiences. From this interplay it becomes easily apparent what local partners believe will work or won't (yet) work within their communities.

### **Proactive engagement pre-empts insensitive or harmful programming**

An important aspect of minimising harm and contributing to peace is to engage with parties proactively about our own programming. A large percentage of harm can be prevented or addressed through transparency, ongoing communication, and managing expectations. These ongoing engagements allow us to assess where our actions, positioning, and power positively impact the peace ecosystem and where we need to take a step back.

### **Too many policies and guidelines deprive conflict sensitivity of its oxygen**

NP reminds its staff that conflict sensitivity is not a technical issue. It is best seen as part of organisational culture. While it is tempting to minimise risk and ensure quality by codifying programmes into well-articulated guidelines and policies, it easily leads to unimaginative and stale programming that is not in tune with local culture and context. Within NP, our organisational values are the primary source of guidance and decision making for leadership on the ground. These values are unpacked within staff training and strategic planning meetings.

### **Creating space for reflection goes a long way in allowing constructive action to manifest**

Creative ideas for constructive action tend to manifest when we slow down and create the time and space for reflection. Pick a couple of key questions and repeat them for a sustained period. This allows staff and partners on the ground to identify or articulate trends and patterns. Critical self-reflection and conversations about the role of power and privilege require a conducive and supportive environment.

### **Choice and vetting of local partners is an important strategy for minimising harm**

Humanitarians are often eager to get started (funding cycles are short), but the first, most qualified or well-connected partner is not necessarily the most appropriate choice. Lots of conflict and mistrust within communities can be avoided through careful selection of partners, followed by managing expectations with these partners and the communities they support.

### **Pay attention to local actors**

We can increase conflict sensitivity and manage risk by paying close attention to the attitudes and behaviour of local communities. When actions appear irrational or out of step with international standards, look into it instead of dismissing it. This may lead to unearthing a hidden conflict dynamic.

### **Listen to local staff**

Local staff members often have deep insights in conflict dynamics. They may not articulate it in a

way that fits the latest analysis framework, but that doesn't mean they don't know. For local staff to share with expatriate staff an organisation needs to build trust, level power dynamics, create space for reflection, and for non-local staff to let local staff take the lead in context and conflict analysis.

### **Being sensitive and being perceived as sensitive is the not the same**

Doing the right thing with the right intentions is often not enough. An organisation may display perfect nonpartisanship by not taking sides, not expressing political opinions, engaging equally with both sides of the conflict, only to find out that each of them still perceives the organisation as supporting the other side. Clarity about mission objectives, transparency about activities, combined with ongoing communication, aid in reducing perceptions of insensitivity or harmfulness.

### **Language, symbols, and imagery are easy triggers for perceptions of insensitivity**

Colours are often associated with specific groups and institutions or have associations with historical conflict events. "Self-protection" is typically associated with armed self-defence. Peace is an often-abused word. A great deal of harm can be avoided by engaging with communities about the terms we use and how these terms are being translated in local languages. These conversations about symbols and cultural imagery often reveal what connects or divides people across conflict fault lines. This knowledge can be leveraged for constructive action.

### **Lean into sensitivity failures and transmute them into peacebuilding opportunities**

It is near impossible not to stir up any tension while operating in deeply divided societies. Often the mere presence of an external organisation is enough to trigger or resurface tension. Not engaging out of fear of doing harm can seem like an easy way to avoid risk, but inaction is not neutral ground and may even cause greater harm. Sustained presence and engagement provide opportunities for staff to fail, try again, then fail better. Outsiders are often given a pass if they say or do something that is culturally inappropriate or insensitive. Sometimes it creates opportunities to surface sensitive issues that simmer under the surface. Rather than going into paralysis, external actors can play a useful role in absorbing some of the heat, deflecting it away from vulnerable groups, then modelling a more constructive response than shame, blame or revenge.

## **Key Takeaways**

1. Maintain ongoing relationships and communication with all local actors, especially on different sides of a conflict.
2. Bring local perspectives, information, and analysis into your context and conflict analysis at every stage.
3. *All* programme staff should conduct context and conflict analysis *frequently*, organically, not through formulaic tools or guidelines.
4. Reflect and learn from your conflict sensitivity efforts and mistakes as you go.