Conflict analysis

Topic guide
May 2017

About this Topic Guide

This Topic Guide focuses specifically on the systematic approaches and tools for conflict analysis developed for policy and practice.

It looks at the analysis itself rather than at conflict (the subject of the analysis) or conflict sensitivity, conflict resolution, conflict prevention or peacebuilding (the application of the analysis).

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Infographics: Lucy Peers

Cover image: Military personnel of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) on patrol in an armored personnel carrier, 2007 (UN Photo/Jorge Aramburu).

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Contents

Lists of tables, figures and boxes

Tables

Figures

Boxes

Summary

Conflict analysis is a structured process of analysis to understand conflict. It focuses on the conflict *profile*, the *actors* involved and their perspectives, the *causes* of conflict, and the *dynamics* of how these elements interact (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012).

A huge amount of literature analyses conflict. This topic guide focuses specifically on the systematic approaches and tools for conflict analysis developed for policy and practice. It draws on reflective sections in conflict analysis toolkits, and where available on policy, practitioner and academic texts that critique the toolkits. This type of conflict analysis tends to be discussed as **part of conflict-sensitive approaches**, conflict resolution, conflict prevention and/or peacebuilding. This topic guide looks at the conflict analysis element (the *analysis*) rather than conflict (the *subject*) or conflict sensitivity, conflict resolution, conflict prevention or peacebuilding (the *use* of the analysis).

Conflict analysis toolkits aim to help policymakers and practitioners develop a comprehensive and accessible analysis of key conflict issues, a shared understanding of the situation and a process for updating the analysis. Conflict analyses often inform a conflict-sensitive approach – to improve the positive effects and minimise the negative effects of working in conflict-affected countries – and provide a baseline to help evaluate interventions' impact (OECD, 2008; Sandole et al., 2008; CDA Collaborative, 2013). Gender-sensitive conflict analysis identifies the gendered nature of conflict, the gendered impacts of conflict and the gendered dimensions of peacebuilding (Anderlini, 2006).

Systematic studies of the causes of armed conflict and political violence, linked to conflict resolution, emerged in the 1950s/60s. In the 1990s, increasing evidence emerged of the negative impacts aid and development could have in conflict-affected situations. Anderson's (1999) Do No Harm project led the way for the field of systematic conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity programming, with the development of numerous toolkits. By the mid- to late-2000s, development agencies were increasingly aiming to mainstream conflict sensitivity, of which conflict analysis is a key element.

Important **conceptual challenges** in using conflict analysis toolkits include the following:
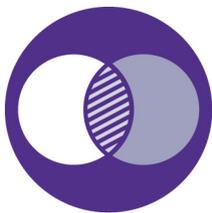
Differing overlapping worldviews of what constitutes and causes violent conflict and peace **influence the focus and conclusions of conflict analysis** and subsequent policy choices. Some argue that the toolkit approach prioritises certain worldviews, while being positioned as neutral (e.g. Mac Ginty, 2013).

Many peacebuilding and state-building approaches miss their goals, or lead to unintended consequences, despite international actors' increasing awareness of the need for conflict sensitivity. Understanding and working in, on or around conflict is complex. The toolkits aim to improve understanding of the context. But some critique the standardised approaches of analysis as creating the 'illusion of a replicable and predictable environment' (Duffield, 2001: 263).
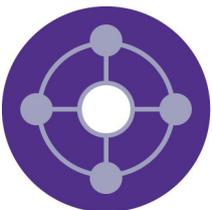
Understanding conflict requires analysis of issues broader than development. The scope of conflict analysis toolkits has expanded recently in line with the international development agenda, which has moved from a focus on aid and poverty to also include peacebuilding and state-building, fragile states, stabilisation and radicalisation and extremism. Some criticise the merging of agendas as the 'radicalisation of development' with the objective of 'liberal peace' (Duffield, 2001: 11). Others note that external actors are not neutral and that previous tools were out of date. They emphasise the importance of joint analyses and integrated action in conflict situations (across development, foreign policy, military, humanitarian and trade) (Barakat & Waldman, 2013).

Ultimately, violent conflict is about politics, power, contestation between actors and the (re)shaping of institutions for the benefit of some (at the expense of others). People and groups do not randomly fight each other, even if stark inequalities or other grievances prevail in a society; rather, they need to be mobilised. Understanding the politics and the processes of mobilisation is critical to understanding violent conflict.

Some argue toolkits support a technocratic analysis of conflict, which can disguise the political nature of conflict and conflict resolution, or can lead to analysis that is biased, inaccurate or does not resonate with local understandings (Mac Ginty, 2013). Yet the toolkit approach is important in consolidating a large amount of information in a succinct and accessible report. An 'ongoing tension' divides the policy community between those arguing for particularity and those arguing for policy-relevant generalisations (Woodward, 2007).

Conflict analysis by international actors can be meaningless to local communities. The drive to measure, monitor and compare peace and conflict across countries and cultures has led to the development of indicators and databases that some argue are not relevant to, or representative of, local views (Mac Ginty, 2013).

Many toolkits and manuals provide guidance on how to conduct conflict analysis. These largely converge on a set of common concepts, questions to guide research and easy-to-use methodologies. However, guidance on gender-sensitive conflict analysis is not well developed. Conflict analysis toolkits are designed to be illustrative and adapted according to the country context, the commissioning agent and the study's purpose.

Core analytical elements

The core analytical terms used in conflict analysis are conflict profile, actors, causes and dynamics. Guiding questions to explore these terms are set out below, with a diagram on how they interact.

Profile: **What is the context that shapes conflict?** Is there a *history* of conflict? What political, economic, social and environmental *institutions* and *structures* have shaped conflict?

Actors: **Who are the actors that influence conflict?** Who are the main actors? What are their interests, concerns, goals, hopes, fears, strategies, positions, preferences, worldviews, expectations and motivations? What *power* do they have? What are their *incentives and disincentives*? What *capacities* do they have? What are the *relationships* among actors?

Causes: **What causes conflict?** What are the *structural* and *proximate* causes of conflict?

Dynamics: **What are the current conflict dynamics / trends?** What are the current conflict *trends*? Which factors of the conflict profile, actors and causes *reinforce or undermine each other*? What *triggers* conflict? What *scenarios* can be developed?
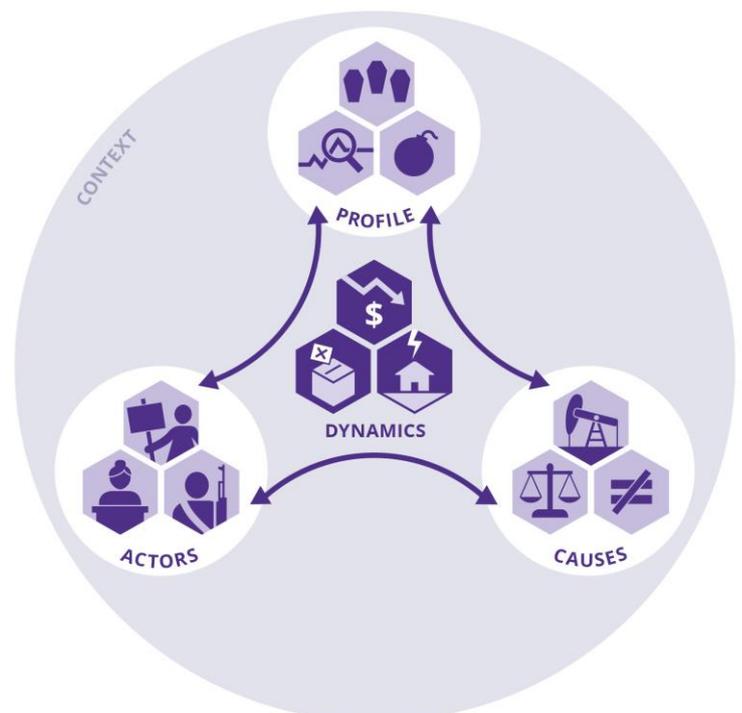
Source: Adapted from FEWER, et al (2004: 2)

Principles and lessons

The literature explores a number of common principles, lessons and practical challenges in using conflict analysis toolkits. It advises users to reflect on: the needs and capacities of the commissioning agent; the purpose of the analysis; the audience, focus and level of analysis; the schedule and timing constraints; the process for incorporating ongoing research; the available information, evidence gaps and data constraints; the conflict analysis team composition; the available research capacity and resources; research and policy ethics; participants for primary research; potential explicit and implicit biases; and linking conflict analysis with practice. Key findings include:

Conflict analysis should be dynamic and occur on an ongoing basis to refine and update the analysis to changing situations and to support consistent monitoring. Ongoing analysis focuses on the most critical/relevant issues or questions; tends to start with strong foundational knowledge of the conflict; and tends to generate short, regular, often informal outputs/updates, rather than stand-alone reports. The World Vision (2015) conflict analysis tool recommends setting up a dedicated context monitoring team.

Related work on Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) suggests focusing ongoing political analysis on understanding interests (what makes people tick?) and understanding change (what space and capacity do people have to effect change?) (Hudson, Marquette & Waldock, 2016: 1).

Understanding different perceptions and potential biases is central to understanding conflict. Conflict analysis should consider the experience of conflict from a variety of perspectives, and critically examine the rigour, accuracy and potential biases (explicit or implicit) of information sources. The inclusion of gender perspectives can highlight the gendered nature of the causes and impacts of conflict, providing a deeper understanding of the structural issues that peacebuilding needs to address.

Conflict analysis that is integrated into strategic and policy processes is more likely to influence policy and practice. Yet, when policy/political priorities frame the focus of analysis, there is a risk that the analysis overemphasises donor priorities, rather than the priorities of local communities, or the country as a whole, or priorities for securing peace. To tackle these challenges, conflict analysis approaches typically draw on and commission a range of information sources – both independent from, and embedded in, policy processes.

1. Definitions, concepts and challenges

1.1 Definitions[1] and concepts

Conflict is the result of a disagreement between actors on the basis of perceived incompatible goals (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012: 2). Disagreements and conflicts are inevitable everyday occurrences – and their resolution can result in constructive change. Conflicts are often analysed at different levels – interpersonal, group/community and national – and in terms of how the levels interact with each other. They can turn into **violent conflict** when 'there are inadequate channels for dialogue and disagreement'; when 'dissenting voices and deeply held grievances cannot be heard and addressed'; and in environments of 'instability, injustice and fear' (Fisher et al., 2000: 6). Conflict prevention and resolution approaches aim to resolve conflicts through non-violent means.

Conflict analysis is a structured process of analysis to understand conflict, focusing on the conflict profile (history of conflict), the actors involved and their perspectives, the structural and proximate causes and the dynamics of how these elements interact (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012). A conflict analysis examines **open conflict** (conflict that is very visible and deep-rooted), **surface conflict** (visible but shallow or with no roots), and also **latent conflict** (below the surface with potential to emerge) (Fisher et al., 2000). The important distinction between a *conflict* analysis and a *context* analysis is that conflict analysis always addresses the relationship of the issue with conflict, instability and peace.

This Topic Guide looks at violent conflict at the national and community/group level, particularly armed conflict and political violence, rather than other forms of conflict (e.g. interpersonal conflict, criminal violence or structural/indirect violence),[2] as this is the focus of the typical policy/practitioner conflict analysis. These concepts overlap. **Political violence** is the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation (ACLED, 2015). **Armed conflict** is 'a contested

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[1] While each of these definitions is subject to debate and many are irreconcilable, for simplicity this Topic Guide has selected definitions from key practitioner or academic literature and does not explore the deeper debates.
[2] Structural/indirect violence is injustice and exploitation derived from a social system that privileges some classes, ethnicities, genders and nationalities over others, and institutionalises unequal opportunities for education, resources and respect. Personal/direct violence is physically experienced violence (war, murder, rape, assault, verbal attacks), but with its roots in cultural and structural violence (Galtung, 1969).

incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory' and involves 'armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state'.[3]

Conflict analysis as part of a conflict-sensitive approach

Conflict analysis tends to be discussed as part of conflict-sensitive approaches[4] (in policy/practitioner literature), conflict resolution, conflict prevention and/or peacebuilding. While it can be used for all of these purposes, this topic guide focuses on the conflict analysis element (the *method of analysis*) rather than on general aspects of conflict (the *subject*) or on conflict sensitivity, conflict resolution, conflict prevention or peacebuilding (the *operationalisation* of the analysis). It is a companion paper to a number of the GSDRC Topic Guides on Conflict Sensitivity and Conflict.

In practice, conflict sensitivity is often applied to specific activities, building on the core 'Do No Harm' principle and the dividers/connectors approach. Conflict analysis and political economy analysis (PEA) are analytical methods that can be used to guide conflict sensitivity. Because conflict takes many forms on a spectrum from 'structural violence' to conventional war, and often these forms are mixed together in the same overall conflict, conflict analysis tends to start from a comprehensive review of all different aspects of conflict before focusing down to what is relevant. Standalone conflict analysis reports can also be used more directly to guide overall policy. As development actors tend to handle these issues internally, there is no clear consensus on these distinctions.

> **Box 2: Key concepts – structural and proximate causes of conflict**
>
> The **structural causes** of conflict (also called **root causes or underlying causes**) are long-term or systemic causes of violent conflict that have become built into the norms, structures and policies of a society.
>
> The **proximate causes** of conflict (also called **immediate causes**) are more recent causes that change more quickly, can accentuate structural causes and lead to an escalation of violent conflict (see Section 2.1).

The emergence of conflict analysis

There is a long and rich history of studies about the nature, origins and experiences of conflict. However, the systematic (or some call it 'generic') study of the causes of armed conflict and political violence, linked to conflict resolution, is a relatively recent development, emerging in the 1950s/60s (Tillet & French, 2000; Sandole et al., 2008).

This area has grown rapidly as a response to, among other things, the huge financial and human costs of conflict, as well as policy interest (Tillet & French, 2000). This perspective has directed conflict analysis to be (Ramsbotham et al., 2011: 8):

- *Multilevel* – looking at the intrapersonal (inner conflict), interpersonal, intergroup (families, neighbourhoods, affiliations), international, regional and global levels, and the complex interplays between them;

- *Multidisciplinary* – drawing on psychology, anthropology, politics, sociology, history, law, economics, management, philosophy, religion, social work, etc.;

- *Multicultural* – identifying conflict as a worldwide phenomenon and conflict resolution as a cooperative international enterprise;

- *Both analytical and normative* – combining systematic analysis and interpretation of statistics with the aim of transforming violent conflict into non-violent political, economic and social processes;

- *Both theoretical and practical* – with an interplay between theory and practice.

In the 1990s, increasing evidence emerged of the negative impacts aid and development could have in conflict-affected situations (e.g. Uvin, 1998). Anderson's (1999) Do No Harm project led the way for the field

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[3] See http://www.ucdp.uu.se/database/definitions_all.htm
[4] Conflict sensitivity is the ability of an organisation to 1) understand the context it operates in; 2) understand the interaction between its intervention and that context; and 3) act on this understanding to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012: 2) (see GSDRC Conflict Sensitivity Topic Guide).

of systematic conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity programming, and the development of numerous toolkits. Bush (1998) developed the Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) tool, learning from environmental and gender impact assessments. A number of similar tools emerged shortly after, including for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (Goodhand, et al., 2002) and by Fisher et al. (2000) (see Section 2.2).

These conflict analysis toolkits have largely converged on a set of practical common concepts, questions and adaptable processes. While the thinking behind the tools comes from the interplay of theory and practice, they themselves do not include discussions about theory.

A huge number of these systematic conflict analyses have been carried out, with some published but many more confidential (Barakat & Waldman, 2013). By the mid- to late 2000s, the term 'conflict sensitivity' was being used extensively in the development field and agencies were increasingly aiming to mainstream conflict sensitivity, of which conflict analysis is a key element (Haider, 2014b).

The rationale for conflict analysis

The literature widely states that systematic conflict analyses are an important element underpinning policy and practice in conflict-affected countries. Conflict analysis aims to provide a comprehensive and easily accessible assessment of the issues and documentation for policymakers/practitioners who are newly working on a country/issue. For policymakers/practitioners who already have knowledge/experience of the context, it can offer an overarching/shared understanding and narrative on the situation. It also presents a model and process to facilitate more frequent and updated conflict analysis. When used in combination with programming decisions and a conflict-sensitive approach, it aims to improve the positive impacts and minimise the negative impacts of working in conflict-affected countries by ensuring practices are conflict-sensitive, and it can provide a baseline analysis to evaluate the impact interventions have had on the relevant aspects of the conflict (OECD, 2008; Sandole et al., 2008; CDA Collaborative, 2013).

Gender-sensitive conflict analysis identifies the gendered nature of the causes of conflict, the gendered impact of conflict and the gendered dimensions of peacebuilding (Anderlini, 2006). It can identify opportunities to reshape gender relations, particularly in the formative stages of state-building (Strachan & Haider, 2015).

CDA Collaborative (2013: 3), based on analysis of 26 case studies and 1,000+ consultations with practitioners, finds strong evidence that the 'more practitioners know about the conflicts they are trying to address, the more likely they are to identify effective avenues for work, and the less likely they are to make mistakes'. However, it also reports mixed findings about whether and how a programme conducted conflict analysis and its actual effectiveness in achieving the above aims. 'There were effective programs that did very little analysis, and less effective programs that did extensive analysis. Why? The evidence suggested one explanation: that even when practitioners do analysis, they often fail to link their program strategy to it' (ibid.).

State of the evidence

As Box 1 showed, this Topic Guide focuses on systematic approaches and tools developed for policy and practice. A large number of similar toolkits and manuals exist on how to understand conflict and carry out systematic conflict analysis. These are mainly published and written by northern non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donors, multilateral organisations and some by research institutes. Notably, guidance for carrying out gender-sensitive conflict analysis is not well developed (Strachan & Haider, 2015). A range of systemic conflict analyses are published online. However, given concerns about sensitivities and security and political relations, many are not published, and some toolkits do not make their methodologies publicly available. The toolkits often include reflective sections on what works, as well as illustrative case studies. However, there appears to be very little critical examination of the different approaches to, or the impact of, the toolkit conflict analysis approach. Moreover, the reflective or critical perspectives that exist do not tend to separate discussions about conflict analysis from broader discussions about conflict sensitivity.

> For discussions on conflict, see the GSDRC Conflict Topic Guide

1.2 Challenges

Different perspectives of conflict shape conflict analysis
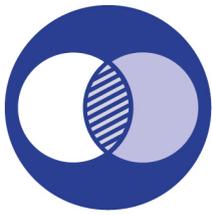
 Differing overlapping worldviews of what constitutes violent conflict and peace, how to identify confict and what causes it can influence the focus and conclusions of conflict analysis and subsequent policy choices (Ballentine & Nitzschke, 2003). For example, some see conflict as an irrational dysfunction of the system, which can be addressed (e.g. Galtung, 1969: 170);[5] others see it as a rational and inherent feature of unequal societies, often based on irreconcilable perceptions of difference (e.g. Berdal & Keen, 1997). The first perspective has led to the 'pathologisation' of post-conflict societies – a framing that contrasts 'failed' states and their 'dysfunctional' populations with 'functional' international 'rescue' interventions and actors (Hughes & Pupavac, 2005).

Some define conflict as a series of discrete, episodic events (e.g. coups, riots, bombings), measured by the number of deaths and conflict events. Others see violent conflict as a social continuity, resulting from longer-term processes that have established war as a form of institution where societal pressures legitimise and normalise conflict (e.g. Jabri, 1996: 22-3). In this view, analysis and knowledge of war is a 'constitutive part of the world of meaning and practice' (ibid.: 23).

> **Box 3: How the concept of state failure undermined conflict analysis and the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands**
>
> Hameiri (2007) argues that the concept of state failure misconstrues conflict as an ahistorical phenomenon, resulting from the absence of a prototypical Weberian state rather than the actual social and political conditions prevailing in particular societies. He finds that its application to the Solomon Islands by the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands has undermined accurate analysis of the root causes of conflict in the Pacific Island state.
>
> By focusing on weak governance, political will and state capacity, it has obscured the structural forces that actually generate the conditions of conflict. 'Without a more comprehensive understanding of the causes and dimensions of conflict in Solomon Islands than that encapsulated in the failed state concept, the long-term viability of the intervention and future political stability…remain uncertain' (p.410).
>
> *Source*: Hameiri (2007)

Analysis can prioritise conflict causes, conflict dynamics or the outcomes of conflict (Woodward, 2007). Bias can also emerge by analysing conflict through a lens of what societies ought to become, rather than analysing the actual situation (Duffield, 1998).

There is a huge literature about what causes conflict, with important debates and theories around: political and institutional factors (including weak state institutions, elite power struggles and political exclusion, breakdown in social contract and corruption, identity politics); socioeconomic factors (including inequality, exclusion and marginalisation, absence or weakening of social cohesion, poverty); and resource and environmental factors (including greed, scarcity of natural resources, unjust resource exploitation) (Haider, 2014a: 6).

Cordell and Wolff (2009: 2, 25) summarise the vast literature on the causes of ethnic conflict. They note that the literature has two broad approaches: one is based on a rational choice approach (explaining ethnic conflict in terms of a security dilemma or economic opportunities); the other is based on psychological theories (explaining ethnic conflict in terms of people's identities and perceptions of their place in society).

Many of the macro-level theories about conflict causes have been subject to substantial criticism and disproof in the academic literature. However, this is not reflected in policy/practitioner thinking, argues Woodward (2007: 52).

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[5] Galtung (1969:170) argues that peace is not just the absence of direct violence ('negative peace') but also the absence of structural violence ('positive peace' – when social and economic inequalities are minimised).

Since the end of the Cold War, analysts have highlighted the rise of new forms of violent conflict. Contemporary conflicts differ in their scope (internal rather than inter-state, subnational rather than national); combatants (more non-state actors – private armies, warlords, criminal gangs, organised communal groups and terrorist or guerrilla organisations – instead of governments, professional soldiers or conscripts); methods (increased use of terror and guerrilla actions and deliberate targeting of civilians instead of combat in conventional battlefields); and models of financing (external rather than internal) (Haider, 2014a: 19). The World Bank's (2011) World Development Report highlights that international actors have not kept up with these changes, for example not taking into adequate consideration the repetitive and interlinked nature of conflict and new challenges such as organised crime, and by focusing programming on post-conflict recovery rather than conflict prevention (pp. 181-4). Mac Ginty (2013) argues that the conflict analysis toolkit approach prioritises certain worldviews, while appearing to be neutral.

Lack of understanding of conflict in peacebuilding and state-building

Reflection among aid actors after the devastating 1994 Rwandan genocide led to realisation that humanitarian and development actors had contributed to increased tensions and the worsening of the conflict. Aid interventions have since been understood to become part of the context – and, in conflict settings, to become part of the conflict. This acknowledgement that aid is not neutral also led to recognition that donors need to consider the inadvertent side-effects of programming on conflict. Conflict sensitivity emerged as a concept and tool to help aid actors understand the unintended consequences of aid and to act to minimise harm and achieve positive outcomes. Although conflict sensitivity originated in the humanitarian field, it has since been applied in a wide range of development, peacebuilding and state-building contexts. Conflict analysis is part of a conflict-sensitive approach. (Haider, 2014b).

For further discussions about peace and state-building and conflict sensitivity, see the GSDRC Topic Guides on: State-building and Peacebuilding and Conflict sensitivity.

The engagement of external actors in peacebuilding and state-building processes has expanded significantly since the end of the Cold War and has become a central focus of peace operations. The literature contains many examples of when peacebuilding and state-building reforms have not achieved their goals, or have led to unintended consequences. There are a number of overlapping explanations for this. Some attribute it to international actors' 'insufficient knowledge and analysis of the intrinsic tensions and contradictions of externally-assisted state-building' (e.g. the promotion of 'universal values' as a remedy for 'local problems'; and outside interventions being used to foster self-government) (Paris & Sisk, 2007: 1, 4). Others highlight the weaknesses of the core assumptions underpinning peacebuilding and state-building approaches (e.g. that economic growth eventually leads to a reduction in violent conflict; that violence is a direct consequence of weak state capacity; and that poverty and underdevelopment are major sources of conflict) (Parks et al., 2013: 11). Others argue that the toolkits produce the 'illusion of a replicable and predictable environment', and a mechanical understanding of the impact of aid (Duffield, 2001: 263), when situations are far more complex (Ramalingam, Jones, Reba & Young, 2009; Herbert, 2014).

The expanding remit of conflict analysis
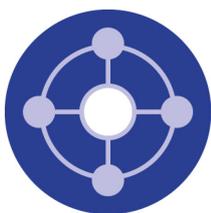
Since the 1990s, the remit of bilateral aid and development work has expanded in line with the expanding international development agenda, moving from a predominant focus on aid and poverty to also include peacebuilding and state-building, fragile states, stabilisation and, more recently, radicalisation and extremism (see Box 5).[6] While many

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[6] As embodied by the newly updated OECD Development Assistance Committee DAC rules, which expand the qualification of official development assistance to include select activities related to security, military and countering violent extremism. See oecd.org/dac/DAC-HLM-Communique-2016.pdf

multilateral organisations have traditionally focused on conflict and state reconstruction (e.g. UN, World Bank), this is a more recent trend in bilateral donors' approaches.

Conflict analysis toolkits have been developed to reflect these integrated approaches. This broader view allows the analysis to cover more aspects of conflict causation and drivers of state fragility, to take better account of potential and actual diplomatic and military interventions on the part of international organisations and to provide a shared understanding across departments (Barakat & Waldman, 2013).

This shift of interests and competencies has altered the fundamental *purpose* of conflict analyses (which has moved from improving the effectiveness of aid and stability in poorer countries to improving the security of the West) **and also the *systems* for conflict analyses.** Increased collaboration and joined-up approaches across government departments (also called a 'whole-of-government' approach) have led to changes in institutions – with, for example, the creation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan and Iraq. There have also been changes to the analytical tools – for example, DFID replaced its 2002 Strategic Conflict Assessment tool with the cross-governmental Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (first developed around 2012).

> **Box 4: Conflict-insensitive aid fuelling conflict in Nepal**
>
> Aid was allocated to more accessible areas in Nepal, which limited benefits for the most conflict-affected regions and for the poorest. In addition, aid programmes that focused on capacity-building and awareness-raising benefited mainly elite groups, with little advantage for the most excluded. Programmes calling for community contributions placed an undue burden on women and the most poor – and were resented. All of this had the effect of exacerbating patterns of exclusion – a key driver of the conflict.
>
> *Source*: Vaux (2002).

Some criticise the merging of agendas as the 'radicalisation of development' with the objective of the 'liberal peace', seeking to 'transform the dysfunctional and war-affected societies' into 'cooperative, representative and, especially, stable entities' (Duffield, 2001: 11). However, others welcome this shift, noting that external actors are not neutral and that the previous tools were out of date with the 'securitisation' of conflict that occurred after 11 September 2001. They argue that conflict analysis tools too 'narrowly geared toward development actors' are out of date with recent scholarly work and lessons from practice emphasising the importance of joint analyses and integrated action across actors in conflict situations (development, foreign policy, military, humanitarian, trade) (Barakat[7] & Waldman, 2013).

> **Box 5: Conflict analysis and analysis of violent extremism**
>
> As an emerging issue on the development agenda, radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) has not been explicitly incorporated into conflict analysis tools or discussions, but, where relevant, it will emerge through analysis of the conflict actors, causes and dynamics. The increased interest in radicalisation and VE by development actors is an extension of the securitisation agenda. The challenge is to get away from a purely security analysis to see how political, economic, social and psychological factors underpin extremism and whether and how aid and development could address these issues.
>
> A **GSDRC Topic Guide on CVE** (Schomerus et al., 2017) explains that 'many research disciplines are seeking to explain terrorist or violent extremist behaviour and to provide the frameworks to analyse what the phenomenon entails and what drives it'. However, the knowledge base is extremely limited by a lack of empirical data, coupled with the complexity, multifaceted and contradictory nature of the issues. Research on countering VE (CVE) programming tends to be driven by intelligence or military interests. CVE is under pressure to be measured and to show success—and many have grappled with how this might be done, with at least one standalone toolkit being developed for the purpose (e.g. the toolkit by van Hemert et al., 2014).

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[7] Barakat is the author of the Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability.

Politics is central, yet toolkits are technocratic

While there is a consensus that more in-depth, context-specific analysis is needed when working in conflict-affected countries, there is also pressure for succinct, easily accessible reports, or else busy policymakers will not read them (Duffield, 2001: 263). This demand has fuelled the growth of conflict analysis toolkits and manuals.

These are designed to be adapted to the context, but do provide a standardised set of analytical terms and questions for analysis – arguably making for an efficient, transparent and replicable process and product. Yet this approach is not without limitation, and the 'ongoing tension' between those arguing for particularity and those arguing for policy-relevant generalisations has divided the policy community (Woodward, 2007: 46).

Ultimately, violent conflict is about **politics, power, contestation between actors and the (re)shaping of institutions for the benefit of some** (at the expense of others). Some argue the toolkits are technocratic and disguise the political nature of conflict and conflict resolution. Mac Ginty (2013) notes that the 'technocratic turn' in peacebuilding has occurred through 1) the standardisation of the analysis of conflict through toolkits; 2) development of the 'bureaucratic infrastructure and material culture' of peacebuilding; and 3) the emergence of select peacebuilding institutions and professionals that dominate thinking and approaches. He argues that the conflict analysis toolkits support technocracy through their specialised and standardised vocabulary (e.g. *structural* and *proximate* causes of conflict); their standardised epistemology (what knowledge is, and how to collect, organise and disseminate it); and their framing of conflicts based on Western assumptions that often exclude local approaches and knowledge.

This can lead to bias or inaccurate analysis, or analysis that does not resonate with local understandings; for example, 'conflict analyses with an in-built focus on technocracy (the breakdown of the state, poor governance, the lack of mechanisms to ensure the fair distribution of resources, etc.) are likely to recommend peace support interventions that focus on technocracy' (Mac Ginty, 2013). The author of the PCIA criticises the growth of conflict analysis tools, arguing they reflect the 'mechanistic Northern-led quest for mainstreamable products' (Bush, 2003: 39) and donor-led conflict analyses often do not adequately identify the role of the development actors themselves and the political context of the development industry.

Local understanding and legitimacy

The drive to measure, monitor and compare peace and conflict across countries and cultures has led to the development of a number of indicators and databases. Some conflict analysis tools focus more at the local level, with space for local staff participation (e.g. the 1999 Do No Harm approach and the 2000 Responding to Conflict tool); others take a broader approach focusing on strategic levels (e.g. 2002 DFID tool (Goodhand, et al., 2002)).

Mac Ginty (2013) argues that many of the approaches to measure peace favoured by international actors are 'deficient', with either too broad or too narrow a level of analysis. And the aggregated statistical format often means their representation of conflicts is 'meaningless' to local communities. Mac Ginty (2013) instead proposes what he calls 'indicators +', which are locally generated indicators, based on the everyday life of the community, and could be generated through participatory conflict transformation exercises. This reflects a wider shift of interest towards 'the local' dimensions of peace and peacebuilding, the increased assertiveness of local actors and loss of confidence in international peace support actors (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013: 763).

2. Analytical elements, methodologies and tools for conflict analysis

2.1 Core analytical elements of conflict analysis

Violent conflict is about politics, power, contestation between actors and the (re)shaping of institutions for the benefit of some (and at the expense of others). People and groups do not randomly fight each other, even if stark inequalities or other grievances prevail in a society, they need to be mobilised. An understanding of these processes of mobilisation is critical to understanding violent conflict.

For further discussions about conflict, see the GSDRC Topic Guide on Conflict

The literature widely uses the same concepts to describe conflicts – actors, causes, dynamics, triggers and scenarios. Within the policy and practitioner literature, there is general consensus on how to use and understand these terms, as explained in the many toolkits and manuals. Some criticise the words used in the toolkits as being technocratic, and thereby disguising the political nature of these problems (e.g. Mac Ginty, 2013) – such as the idea of structural causes (see Box 2). Table 1 below summarises the main guiding questions for conflict analysis and examples of their practical application.

Conflict profile
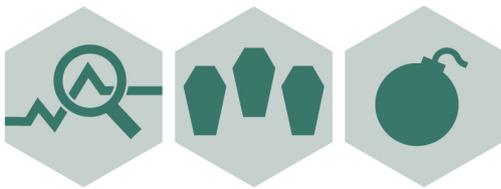
The overarching question for the conflict profile is – what is the context that shapes conflict? (See Table 1 for sub-questions and examples). Table 2 presents practical exercises for analysing the conflict profile and dynamics. For example, Figure 1 presents a timeline of conflict events in Liberia (1977-2011).

Figure 1: Timeline of conflict events in Liberia (1977-2011)
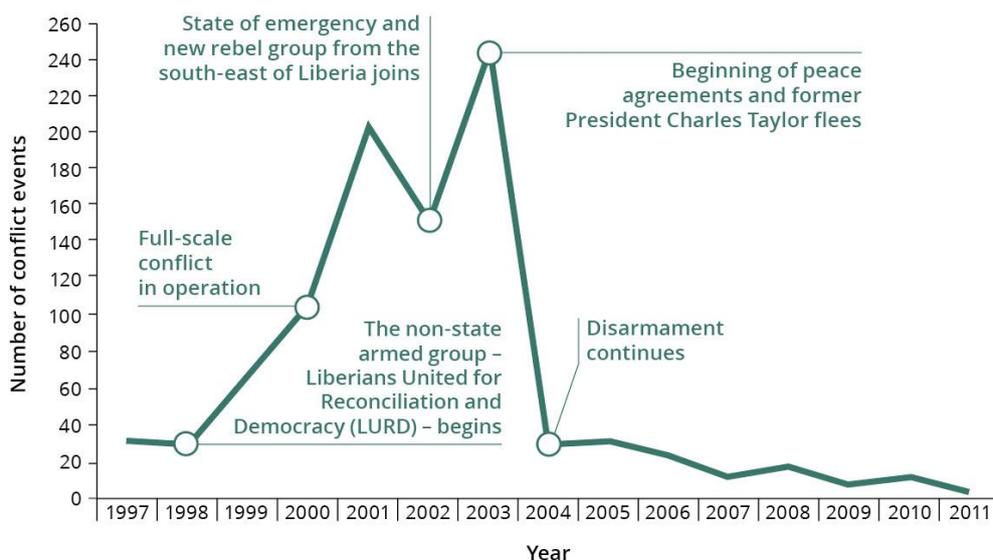
Source: Adapted from Dowd & Raleigh (2012: 14)

Table 1: Guiding questions for conflict analysis	
Profile	**What is the context that shapes conflict?** ■ Is there a *history* of conflict? (e.g. when? How many people killed and displaced? Who is targeted? Methods of violence? Where?) ■ What political, economic, social and environmental *institutions and structures* have shaped conflict? (e.g. elections, reform processes, economic growth, inequality, employment, social groups and composition, demographics and resource exploitation)
Actors	**Who are the actors that influence conflict?** ■ Who are the main actors? (e.g. the military, leaders and commanders of non-state armed groups, criminal groups) ■ What are their *interests*, concerns, goals, hopes, fears, strategies, positions, preferences, worldviews, expectations and motivations? (e.g. autonomy, inequality between groups ('horizontal inequality'), political power, ethno-nationalist, reparations) ■ What *power* do they have, how do they exert power, what resources or support do they have, are they vulnerable? (e.g. local legitimacy through provision of security, power over corrupt justice institutions, weapons and capacity to damage infrastructure) ■ What are their *incentives and disincentives* for conflict and peace? (e.g. benefiting or losing from the war economy, prestige, retribution for historic grievances) ■ What *capacities* do they have to affect the context? ■ Who could be considered *spoilers*? What divides people? Who exercises leadership and how? (e.g. economic beneficiaries of conflict, criminal groups, opposition leader) ■ What could be considered *capacities for peace*? Are there groups calling for non-violence? What connects people across conflict lines? How do people cooperate? Who exercises leadership for peace and how? (e.g. civil society, religious authorities, local justice mechanisms) ■ What are the *relationships* between actors, what are the trends, what is the strategic balance between actors (who is 'winning')? (e.g. conflictual, cooperative or business relationships)
Causes	**What causes conflict?** ■ What are the *structural* causes of conflict? (e.g. unequal land distribution, political exclusion, poor governance, impunity, lack of state authority) ■ What are the *proximate* causes of conflict? (e.g. arms proliferation, illicit criminal networks, emergence of self-defence non-state armed actors, overspill of conflict from a neighbouring country, natural resource discoveries)
Dynamics	**What are the current conflict dynamics/trends?** ■ What are the current conflict *trends*? What are the recent changes in behaviour? (e.g. conflict acts have increased but the number of deaths has decreased; political violence has intensified around local elections; defence spending has increased; paramilitaries have started running in local elections) ■ Which factors of the conflict profile, actors and causes *reinforce or undermine each other*? Which factors balance or mitigate others? (e.g. horizontal economic and political inequalities can increase the risk of conflict; uncertainty about succession of the president strengthens party factionalism; cash for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration fuels small arms proliferation) ■ What *triggers* conflict? (e.g. elections, economic and environmental shocks, economic crash, an assassination, coup, food price increases, a corruption scandal) ■ What *scenarios* can be developed? (e.g. best-case scenario: a peace agreement is signed quickly and the conflict parties implement a ceasefire; worst-case scenario: local politicians mobilise along ethnic lines in the run-up to elections and political violence and riots increase where groups meet)

Sources: Drawn from Fisher et al. (2000); FEWER et al. (2004); Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012); CDA Collaborative (2013); DFID (2015); Mason & Rychard (2005).

Actors

The overarching question here is – who are the actors that influence conflict and peace? (See Table 1 for sub-questions and examples).

Table 2 below presents practical exercises for analysing actors. For example, Figure 2 shows how to draw an actor mapping, and Figure 3 shows the onion tool to explore actors' positions, interests and needs.

There are varying definitions and terms for different actors. Some define actors as those who have a direct or indirect impact on the conflict (e.g. combatants), but not those the conflict has an impact on (e.g. the victims); others define actors as including both groups. Some distinguish 'key people' and 'more people' (CDA Collaborative, 2013). 'Stakeholders' are primary, secondary and external parties to the conflict with a stake in maintaining the conflict and/or building peace (Peacebuilding Center, 2013). 'Conflict parties' are those who are directly involved in carrying out conflict acts, while those engaging in peace activities are 'third parties' (Mason & Rychard, 2005). Actors can be local, national, regional or global. They have competing interests and must make trade-offs. Actors are not homogeneous and internal differences should be considered (e.g. commanders versus rank-and-file; female versus male combatants; political versus military wings of armed groups).

Figure 2: Actor mapping: example of a basic conflict map

Source: Adapted from Fisher, et al. (2000: 23)

'Spoilers' are individuals or groups that actively seek to hinder, delay or undermine conflict settlement (Newman & Richmond, 2006). They often benefit from the war system, and would be negatively affected by an end to conflict. This is similar to the idea of **'dividers'**, which are negative factors that increase tensions between people or groups, reduce their ability to resolve conflicts non-violently and may lead to violent conflict.

'Capacities for peace' refers to actors, institutions or relationships that have the desire and/or capacity to promote peace. This is similar to the idea of **'connectors'**, which are positive factors that reduce tensions between people or groups, improve cohesion and promote constructive collaboration (OECD DAC & CDA, 2007). It can be useful to think about what divides and connects people, and the role spoilers and capacities for peace play in entrenching or bridging these divides.

To understand the distribution and control of power *vis-à-vis* conflict, some donors focus on what actors are included/excluded from the **'political settlement'**. While definitions vary, and it is a contested concept, this

Topic Guide understands the political settlement as 'the informal and formal processes, agreements, and practices that help consolidate politics, rather than violence, as a means for dealing with disagreements about interests, ideas and the distribution and use of power' (Laws & Leftwich, 2014: 1). The idea is that, for a political settlement to be stable and non-violent, it needs to be inclusive of 1) the elites that have the power to disrupt peace and, some argue, also 2) wider societal groups that are currently marginalised from power (e.g. indigenous people, women) (e.g. DFID, 2015). The question of who to include and how depends on how the actors interact (e.g. do the elites excluded from the political settlement mobilise support from marginalised groups?)

Figure 3: Onion actor analysis – actors' positions, interests and needs in Chiapas, Mexico

INDIGENOUS PEASANT ORGANISATIONS

BOSSES AND LANDOWNERS

Against militarisation: demand for a free press, equal opportunities and the investigation of assassinations and human rights violations

Against subversion: protection by the security forces and a denial of the rights of indigenous people

POSITIONS
What we *say* we want

INTERESTS
What we *really* want

NEEDS
What we *must* have

Land redistribution, respect for human rights, alliances with other social forces and democracy

Political and economic control, access to cheap manual labour, building alliances with municipal and state government

Land, well-being and justice

Land and money

Source: Adapted from Fisher, et al. (2000: 27)

Causes

The overarching question here is – what causes conflict? (See Table 1 for sub-questions and examples.) Table 2 presents practical exercises for analysing conflict causes. For example, Figure 4 presents a 'conflict tree' exercise looking at conflict causes in Kenya in 2000.

Actors fight over 'issues', and conflicts are complex and multi-causal, therefore it is useful to distinguish between different types of causes, influencing factors, and outcomes, and to differentiate the sources of tensions or divisions that affect large or small numbers of people at the local, subnational, national, regional and international levels (DFID, 2015).

Structural **causes** of conflict (also called *root* causes or *underlying* causes) are long-term or systemic causes of violent conflict that have become built into the norms, structures and policies of a society. ***Proximate*** **causes**

of conflict (also called *immediate* causes) are more recent causes that change more quickly, that can accentuate structural causes and that lead to an escalation of violent conflict.

Ultimately, these are political issues, involving power, contestation between actors and the shaping of institutions for the benefit of some (and at the expense of others). The original causes of conflict may not be the same factors that sustain war – for example, conflict may have political and social motivations but be prolonged by economic motivations, creating disincentives for peace (Berdal & Keen, 1997). It is thus important to adopt a chronological, contextual and dynamic approach when engaging in analysis to be able to understand how the conflict has developed over time. This means looking at the outcomes as well as the causes (Woodward, 2007).

Figure 4: Conflict tree to visualise conflict causes in Kenya
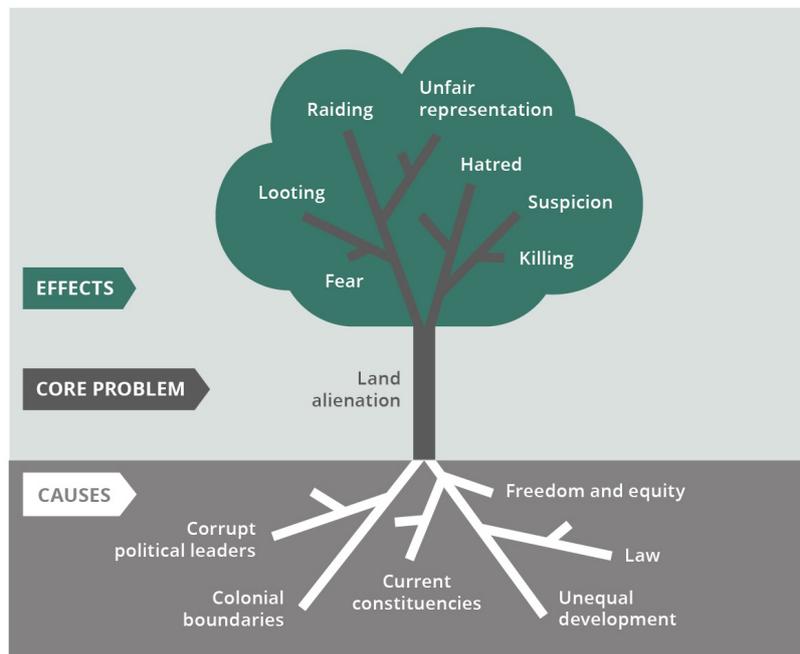
Source: Fisher, et al. (2000: 29)

Box 6: Analysis of violent extremism: part of conflict analysis?

Conflict analysis toolkits do not include explicit categories to analyse violent extremism, but where relevant it will emerge through analysis of the conflict actors, causes and dynamics. As the development agenda broadens to include radicalisation, policymakers are increasingly linking the latter with the drivers of conflict in specific contexts.

A GSDRC Topic Guide on Countering Violent Extremism (Schomerus et al., 2017) highlights that, while research is extremely limited, recent debates on VE focus on 'push and pull factors' (e.g. the role of personal relationships; beliefs, values and convictions; narratives of history; rejection of a system; etc.). The Guide finds weak evidence for some commonly stated influencing factors (e.g. poverty, religious faith, lack of education).

Dynamics

The overarching question here is – what are the current conflict dynamics/trends? (See Table 1 for sub-questions and examples.) Dynamics result from the interaction of the conflict profile, actors and causes, and they can be triggered by events (FEWER et al, 2004: 5) (see Figure 5 below).

Focusing on dynamics helps understand whether, why and how the conflict is escalating, intensifying, decreasing, spreading, contracting, or in stalemate, etc. (DFID, 2015). Table 2 presents practical exercises for analysing conflict dynamics.

Analysis should focus on latent as well as manifest violence to be able to identify potential outbreaks of violence.[8] The idea of the 'temperament' of a conflict relates to how people are transformed by a conflict or the energy of a conflict (Mason & Rychard, 2005). The literature has increasingly focused on understanding the processes through which conflict issues become so salient that leaders mobilise around them, and on identifying transition opportunities that may help break cycles of violence and state fragility – rather than on, as before, developing typologies of issues that cause conflict (World Bank, 2011; Jabri, 1996). Analysis of dynamics ensures conflict analysis does not just produce detailed lists, but rather an understanding of the dynamics and the interaction of the different elements.

**Figure 5: Visualising the dynamics of conflict–
how the conflict actors, causes and profile interact**
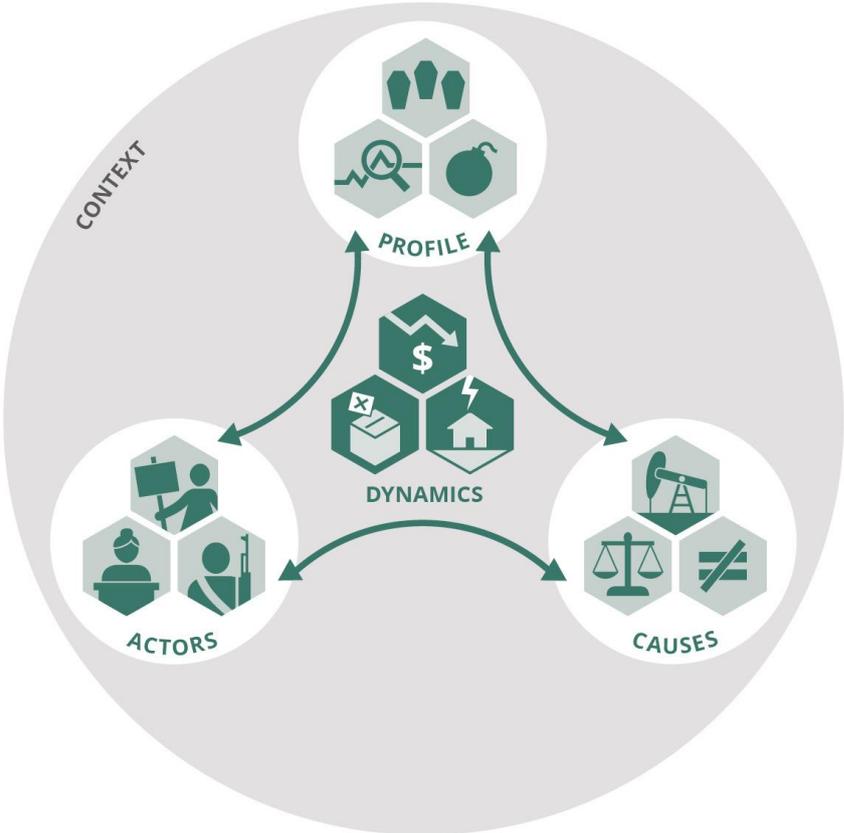
Source: Adapted from FEWER, et al (2004: 2)

Triggers are single events, or the anticipation of an event, that can change the intensity or direction of violent conflict (e.g. elections, economic crisis, a natural disaster, etc.). **Scenarios** describe possible imagined futures and/or tell the story of how such futures might come about (Bishop et al., 2007). Through analysis of the potential future interactions of the conflict profile, actors, causes and dynamics, a number of different and competing scenarios can be developed. These can be framed as best-case, middle-case, worst-case, most-likely-case or status-quo scenarios – the normative framing of what is 'best' will depend on the object of study and the perspective of the researcher (e.g. whether the objective is stability or sustainable peace). Or they can be framed around story narratives – for example in an analysis about prospective elections in Sierra Leone, three scenarios were presented: Scenario 1: election violence; Scenario 2: regional stalemate; Scenario 3: youth, drugs and violence (Adolfo, 2010: 49).

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[8]For example ACLED (2015) also records in its dataset of political violence some non-violent events (e.g. protests), to capture the potential antecedents to violence or critical junctures of a conflict.

Table 2: Practical exercises for conflict analysis		
Profile and dynamics	▪	Plotting a graph of events gives a sense of time, frequency, trends and stages of the conflict (see Figure 1). Conflict events can be disaggregated, e.g. by type of conflict act, perpetrator/conflict actor, conflict cause, etc.
	▪	Drawing a map or maps across time periods to visualise trends, e.g. with conflict events or territorial control of different actors.
	▪	Drawing a timeline of historic conflict events, phases and triggers to help identify trends, temporal patterns and potential triggers. This can then be analysed against future events coming up (e.g. elections, reform processes, youth bulges).
	▪	The Glasl model conceptualises escalation 'as a downward movement, where conflict parties get sucked into the conflict dynamics' (Mason & Rychard, 2005: 6). The nine levels of escalation are (ibid.):
		1) Hardening of positions but still belief in discussion to resolve conflict;
		2) Debate, polemics and polarisation;
		3) Actions not words, danger of false interpretation;
		4) Images and coalitions as the parties see the other in negative roles and fight these roles;
		5) Loss of face, a major escalation step;
		6) Strategies of threats and counter threats;
		7) Limited destructive blows, dehumanisation, shifting values;
		8) Fragmentation and destruction of the opponents' system is the aim;
		9) Together into the abyss, total confrontation without any possibility of stepping back. Self-destruction is the price of destruction of the opponent.
	▪	'Multi-Causal Role Model: This model focuses on causation, on the different quality of reasons, triggers, channels, catalysts, and targets. Content and actors, dynamics and structures are also considered' (Mason & Rychard, 2005: 2).
Actors	▪	Actor or stakeholder mapping can be a useful tool to get a graphic snapshot of actors' relative power in the conflict, their relationships and the conflict issues between them. Different mappings representing different perspectives can be useful to understand different perspectives (Fisher et al., 2000) (see Figure 2).
	▪	The ABC triangle graphic tool is used to examine actors' attitudes, behaviours and context (depicted graphically in a triangle) and compare the different perspectives (Mitchell, in Fisher et al., 2000: 25-7).
	▪	The onion graphic tool is used to examine actors' public positions (the outer layer), interests (the middle layer) and needs (inner layer) (Fisher et al., 2000: 27) (see Figure 3). It can be used to examine actors' competing interests and to identify possible trade-offs.
	▪	The pyramid graphic tool is used to examine the different levels of stakeholders in a conflict – starting with key conflict actors at the top level (adapted from Lederach, in Fisher et al., 2000: 33-4).
Causes	▪	The conflict tree graphic tool is used to examine core problem(s) (the tree trunk), causes (the roots) and effects (the branches and leaves). It visualises how structural and dynamic factors interact to lead to conflict (see Figure 4) (Fisher et al., 2000: 29; Mason & Rychard, 2005).
	▪	The forcefield analysis graphic tool is used to examine the different forces influencing a conflict (Fisher et al., 2000: 30–1).
	▪	The pillars graphic tool is used to examine the factors or forces that contribute to create conflict (based on Goss-Mayr, in Fisher et al., 2000: 31).
	▪	The greed and grievance model makes lists of the conflict causes according to whether they relate to greed or grievance (Vaux, 2015: 4).

2.2 Conflict analysis tools

Numerous toolkits and manuals provide models of how to conduct conflict analysis. There is no one best practice or one methodology for conflict analysis to lead to better programming, finds CDA Collaborative (2013), based on analysis of 26 case studies and 1,000+ consultations with practitioners. Choosing the most appropriate tool depends on the context; the commissioning actor; the purpose of the conflict analysis; the focus of analysis; and what resources are available (staff, funding and capacity) (see Section 3).

Most of the tools were published in the 2000s, and only a few have been updated. There is no way to assess from the literature which tools are more or less popular, or more or less used, in an objective or comprehensive way. Many have been adapted from earlier approaches[9] to the specific needs of the donor or international NGO (INGO), and there has been a tendency towards toolkits. There are also a huge number of courses on conflict analysis.[10]

A key source by FEWER et al. (2004) summarises 15 conflict analysis tools, finding that most are designed for the development field (10 of the 15), with some for humanitarian assistance (4), peacebuilding (3) and foreign policy (2). Donors tend to use country-level strategic approaches and international and local implementing agencies use more detailed, context-specific analysis (Leonhardt, 2003).

Some approaches are designed to be participatory at the local level (e.g. the 1999 Do No Harm approach), whereas others have more formal methods to examine the wider conflict (e.g. 2012 USAID tool; 2002 DFID tool). Some are more relevant for INGOs (e.g. the 2015 World Vision approach) and others for bilateral donors (e.g. USAID 2012 tool).

The tools have largely converged on a set of common concepts, a menu of questions to guide research and easy-to-use methodologies (see Section 2.1). These are designed to be illustrative and adapted according to the context of the country, the commissioning agent and the purpose of the study.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) compares six of the conflict analysis tools to give a sense of the variety available, summarising their purpose, potential users, assumptions, methodology and effort and evaluation application. See Table 3 below.

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[9] For example, UNDP's 2003 tool is a derivative of DFID's 2002 Strategic Conflict Assessment tool. And many tools are adapted from the 1999 Do No Harm tool.
[10] An example is this UN System Staff College course: 'Conflict Analysis for Prevention and Peacebuilding'
http://www.unssc.org/courses/conflict-analysis-prevention-and-peacebuilding-online-april/

Purpose	Potential users	Assumptions	Methodology and effort	Evaluation application
Table 3: Summary of six conflict analysis tools				
Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts: Analysis Tools for Humanitarian Actors (MSTC) **– World Vision, 2015**				
Aims to improve ability to analyse dynamics of conflicts to impact programme and project planning and advocacy in emergency situations.	NGO emergency response, development and advocacy staff.	Focus on chronic political instability, not just violent conflict. Sees conflict as cyclical with periods of peace followed by conflict.	Collection of tools to analyse actors, symptoms and political economy of conflict, generate future scenarios and assess strategic and operational implications. Effort depends on scope of data collection and workshop.	Focuses on macro level; how conflict will affect programme in future. Flexible and adaptable to specific contexts. Can be used to analyse clusters of countries.
Conflict Assessment Framework – USAID, 2012 (version 2.0)				
Country and programme strategic planning to identify and prioritise causes of conflict based on understanding of impact.	Donor desk officers, implementing partners, mission staff, embassy staff, other government officials.	Pulls together best research on causes, level and nature of conflict to identify windows of opportunity.	Combination of desk study, in-country visits, workshops and interviews. Includes significant staff time: about 2 months.	Relevant to conflict sensitivity, prevention and peacebuilding. Quality may vary depending on robustness of methodology used to gather data.
Aid for Peace – Paffenholz and Reychler, 2007				
Assesses peace and conflict relevance, risks and effects of development and humanitarian projects or programmes.	Development and foreign ministry officials.	Examines both conflict and peace factors. Framework for analysis of peacebuilding deficiencies and needs, conflict risks and effects of intervention on conflict.	Desk study/survey of other interventions; field mission with 3–5 days training and workshop. Potentially time-consuming and costly, depending on time for baseline study and mapping and number of field visits and workshops.	Addresses both conflict sensitivity and peace and conflict programming. Provides specific guidance on integrating peace and conflict lens into evaluation.
Manual for Conflict Analysis– Sida, 2006				
Country/programme /project planning to improve effectiveness of development cooperation and humanitarian assistance in areas affected by violent conflict.	Development agency staff, implementing partners.	Conflicts driven by structural instability, struggle for power and influence, and mutual fear and insecurity.	Desk study, consultations and workshop to consider programme implications. Local ownership of analysis important. 6-12 weeks, depending on scope of desk study.	Focus on different levels of programming. Relevant both for conflict sensitivity and planning at country and sector levels.

Conflict-related Development Analysis – UNDP, 2003				
Conflict, related programme planning and review aimed at understanding linkages between development and conflict, increasing positive impact of development efforts.	Development agency staff and donors working in situations prone to and affected by conflict.	Conflict caused by combination of security, political, economic and social causes and actor interests. Development can cause violence.	Data collection and analysis followed by workshop or expert study to analyse current responses and suggest ways forward. Effort depends on method for data collection. Methodology derives from the 2002 DFID tool.	Development-focused and linked to programming. Useful at country or sector level, less at micro level. Quality of analysis depends on rigour of data collection.

Conflict and Policy Assessment Framework– Goor and Verstegen, 2000 (Clingendael Institute)				
Aims to link early warning to policy planning and implementation.	Donor and embassy staff involved with foreign policy and development issues.	Focus on indicators of internal conflict and state failure. Uses Fund for Peace's measures for sustainable security as goal.	External research and analysis to track indicators and identify problem areas and responses for workshop discussion. Effort depends on size of workshops, and consultant involvement.	Not programme-specific, but focuses on broad policy or programme development. Facilitates clarity on developments and trends, not causes.

Source: Adapted from OECD (2012: 79).

3. Principles and lessons for conflict analysis

This section collates the most commonly identified principles and lessons related to the conflict analysis toolkits. It is illustrative and uses examples of widely mentioned issues, but it is not comprehensive of all principles or all lessons. It draws on reflective sections in the toolkits themselves, and where available on policy, practitioner and academic texts that specifically critique the conflict analysis toolkits.

3.1 Choosing the method

Commissioning

Conflict analyses are typically funded, published and/or written by policymakers, practitioners (especially INGOs), think tanks, policy-oriented research centres, human rights organisations and private sector actors/consultancies. The conflict sensitivity literature and aid effectiveness principles highlight the benefits of joint analyses (within governments, between donors, between INGOs, etc.) to generate shared understandings and joined-up working and to improve the coherence of different actors' programming (e.g. Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012) (see Box 7). This also helps overcome the constraints of limited funding and staff (Shahab Ahmed, 2011). The New Deal fragility assessments propose a model of joint conflict analysis that is chaired by the host government and that includes not only the typical development actors but also the private sector and academia (Scott & Midgley, n.d.).

OECD (2012: 78) suggests the following **questions to help choose a conflict analysis tool:**

- Does the tool's proposed methodology match the purpose of the analysis?
- Does the tool's proposed methodology agree with the ways of working of the evaluation team?
- Does the evaluation team have the capacity (skills, expertise, access, etc.) to use the tool well?
- How long does it take to produce a reliable conflict analysis?
- What are the resource implications of the selected tool (staff time, travel, seminar costs, facilities, data management)?
- Is the evaluation team able to allocate or secure the required resources?

The purpose of the conflict analysis defines the method. A conflict analysis delinked from strategy/policy/programming processes can be used to build a holistic understanding of the conflict not framed by policy/political priorities. A conflict analysis embedded in a strategy design process ('strategic conflict analysis') directly shapes decision-making on what to work on in a conflict-affected country. It helps test and clarify the theory of change and integrate conflict sensitivity into overall strategies (Vaux, 2015).

Analysis embedded in project design processes will illustrate if and how a project might engage with conflict dynamics and how to manage that. Conflict analyses can be used to develop principles and limits for activities, to design benchmarks for monitoring and evaluation and to define what conflict sensitivity means in the context, and be developed into an analysis of conflict risk and a conflict prevention strategy (ibid.). Participatory conflict analysis can be used to build a common understanding of the conflict between participants (Fisher et al., 2000). Table 4 presents levels of analysis needed according to the purpose.

Focusing the analysis according to the purpose can ensure the analysis is not too broad. Conflict analyses can focus on different levels –geographically (national, regional, local); sectorally, at the programme/project level; and at the problem level. A local conflict analysis should be informed by a wider analysis but will go down to the level of people and their roles (e.g. as dividers or connectors). A

> **Box 7: Cross-agency macro conflict analysis**
>
> Cross-agency conflict analyses were commissioned in Kenya, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka by their respective national members of the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium. By pooling intellectual and information resources, it was possible to generate shared understandings. Each consortium member considered the analysis 'much stronger' than what they could have developed individually.
>
> *Source*: Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012: 5-6).

national/international conflict analysis should have a local dimension but will not go into such detail. This leads to two basic types –project-focused and programme-/strategy-focused. The concepts may be the same but the conflict analysis system will be different (e.g. comparing Do No Harm with the 2002 DFID tool).

Level	Conflict analysis
Table 4: Conflict analysis at the levels of country operational plan, sector and project/programme	
Level	**Conflict analysis**
Country operational plan	'A broad understanding of conflict dynamics and the key drivers of conflict is needed. Conflict sensitivity then involves an assessment of how strategic decisions interact with the conflict factors identified.'
Sector	'An understanding of how the key issues/driving factors of conflict play out in that sector is needed. For example, in the education sector it may emerge that all teachers are drawn from one ethnic group as they are better educated, that history teaches a very one-sided view of the past, or that antagonism to another group permeates language and literacy teaching. These are issues that relate to individual projects, but can be identified at a sector level, and need to be recognized within individual projects or programmes within that sector.'
Project / programme	'A more nuanced understanding of the conflict at a micro level is needed. The Do No Harm framework, identifying what divides and what connects people in a context, is one valuable tool for such an endeavour. The analysis at a sector level and at a macro level is pertinent to assessing how an intervention can interact with conflict but not adequate to assess a project's conflict sensitivity. Conflict analysis at the sector level can also be helpful to inform design choices and indicators at the project/programme level, by identifying issues that affect a range of projects in the sector.'

Source: Goldwyn & Chigas (2013: 17).

Ongoing conflict analysis: updating and timing the analysis

The literature widely identifies that conflict analysis should be dynamic and ongoing to refine the analysis, to update it to changing situations, and to support consistent monitoring (e.g. GPPAC, 2015). The major distinguishing features of ongoing conflict analysis are that it: focuses on the most critical/relevant issues or questions; tends to start with strong foundational knowledge of the conflict, either from seasoned local staff or from international staff who are deeply engaged on the conflict issues; and tends to generate short, regular, often informal outputs/updates, rather than stand-alone reports.

The World Vision (2015: 62, 113) MSTC tool (see Table 3), which focuses on bringing local actors and participatory methodology (workshops) into country-level conflict analysis, is designed to be cyclical, repeated and ongoing. MSTC workshops, which result in a final conflict analysis report, are planned for every three to ten years, depending on contextual changes and organisational needs. In very changeable settings, or following extreme events, this period can be shortened. The guidance note plans that, in between the workshops, the MSTC report will be updated through context monitoring, focusing particularly on the elements that are most likely to change – such as trigger events and scenarios. It recommends setting up a context monitoring team with 'MSTC-trained people' to collect and analyse data (ibid.).

Although not focused on conflict analysis *per se*, two recent initiatives in the development community – Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)[11] and Doing Development Differently (DDD)[12] – highlight the

[11] https://twpcommunity.org/
[12] http://doingdevelopmentdifferently.com/

importance of ongoing political analysis. Hudson, Marquette & Waldock (2016:1) outline two 'steps' and leading question for everyday political analysis:

1. Understanding interests: What makes people tick?
   - Is what they want clear?
   - Are they acting in line with their core beliefs?
   - Do you understand the constraints they face?
   - Is it clear who and what the key influences on them are?
   - Is their behaviour being shaped by social norms about what is appropriate?

2. Understanding change: What space and capacity do people have to effect change?'
   - Are they the key decision-maker?
   - Do they have potential coalition partners?
   - Are their key decision points clear?
   - Is their framing of the issue likely to be successful?
   - Are they trying to achieve multiple things at once?

However, there are many practical challenges to carrying out ongoing analysis. For example, significant time and resources are required. Goldwyn and Chigas (2013: 17) propose a 'good enough conflict analysis' can be based on quicker methods – such as workshops including multiple stakeholders, rapid interview processes or a desk study drawing on analyses by other agencies. Another common challenge is that there may not be capacity/knowledge to update the paper in-house, especially if external consultants carried out the report, there was not a transfer of knowledge during that process and if the consultant is not available to update the analysis (Shahab Ahmed, 2011).

Timing the analysis. When conflict breaks out or escalates suddenly, a rapid conflict analysis may help in getting a sense of what is happening. In other cases, an analysis might be commissioned a year or more before an election that could become a conflict trigger. While the literature highlights that strategic and project analyses should be planned according to the policy timeline, Shahab Ahmed (2011) found PCIAs in Pakistan were often commissioned outside of the project cycle and that it was hard to integrate them. Evaluations of DFID's Strategic Conflict Analysis tool found that 'poorly timed analyses have failed to be integrated into country planning processes, thus limiting their influence' and that incentives within DFID 'militated against initiation' (Barakat & Waldman, 2013).

Methods and data

Conflict analyses **typically combine different methods**, including literature reviews and secondary data analysis; participatory methods –community consultations, workshops with project staff and experts; data collection – surveys, media monitoring; and key informant interviews. **Primary research**, particularly participatory approaches at local level, should be budgeted and planned in advance to ensure there is time and funding. Primary research in conflict-affected countries can be extremely costly, be dangerous to carry out and take a long time to produce results, owing to access and safety challenges, the dynamic changing environment, lack of personnel with language skills and local knowledge, etc. Again, potential biases should be identified. A key challenge lies in examining and representing the views of the 'opposition', which may in some cases be underground. This can be done to an extent by involving or interviewing proxies.

Desk-based research can provide a broad understanding of the issues, how they interrelate, a historical framing and linkages with academic and policy debates. A range of sources can be found in published literature and grey literature; media reports can be used to track recent events. Two important limitations are that the majority of literature on conflict and developing countries tends to be published by external actors – often donors, think tanks and NGOs (e.g. human rights organisations). This potential for bias should be highlighted in the review. Also, desk-based research lacks an up-to-date perspective and typically has a weak understanding of the local realities of the conflict.

Concerns over sensitivity, security and political implications mean many conflict analyses are not published, particularly those based on primary research. This greatly limits the development of shared understandings and the ability to evaluate the impact of the analyses.

There are a number of useful secondary **data sources** online (see examples in Box 8). Data from conflict-affected contexts are typically limited and illustrative rather than comprehensive. Triangulation across different sources can improve reliability. Data should be disaggregated to reveal more nuanced information about specific groups – for example sex, ethnicity, age. Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg & Strand (2002) explain that the problem with relying on events and statistics to define conflict is that conflicts are experienced in different ways by different people, and conflict events – large or small – can have variable local and international implications. For example, a key global dataset on armed conflict – the Correlates of War project – did not include the Northern Ireland conflict in its dataset as the number of battle deaths per year did not reach the 1,000 deaths threshold set up the project, despite the situation being experienced both at home and abroad as a conflict (ibid.: 17).

Box 8: Illustrative examples of data sources on conflict

Example of a global monitoring system: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)
ACLED tracks political violence and protest data for developing states. Including: dates and locations of political violence and protest, types of event, groups involved, fatalities and changes in territorial control. Also data related to: battles, killings, riots and recruitment activities of rebels, governments, militias, armed groups, protesters and civilians.

Example of a subnational monitoring system: Bangsamoro Conflict Monitoring System (BCMS)
The BCMS is a subnational conflict monitoring system that tracks the incidence, causes and human costs of violent conflict and violent crime in the proposed areas of the Bangsamoro (currently part of the Philippines). It sources data from government and civil society to improve credibility and robustness, principally Philippine National Police reports, supplemented by media reports. Multi-Stakeholder Validation Groups also generate and validate data. The BCMS is a partnership between International Alert, the World Bank and three local academic institutions. It has been combined with the Southern and Eastern Mindanao Conflict Database to form Conflict Alert.

Triangulation and the nuancing and balancing of findings are crucial. Actors have different experiences, perspectives and histories of the conflict and will remember events with different meanings and emotions (Fisher et al., 2000). 'Facts' and perspectives are highly politicised. To mitigate this, the conflict analysis process should engage a range of different stakeholders with different perspectives (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012). External actors should be cautious of what information they select and how they use/reproduce it, as it can have legitimising (and de-legitimising) impacts on certain actors or issues.

Inclusion of gender perspectives in conflict analysis enables a more nuanced and effective understanding of conflict factors, actors and dynamics. It can highlight the gendered nature of the causes and impact of conflict, providing a deeper understanding of the structural issues that need to be addressed through peacebuilding (Anderlini, 2006). Gender variables are, however, often missing from conflict analysis and conflict assessment frameworks. Many conflict analysis frameworks mention gender issues – for example the need for women's participation in consultative processes or for understanding of the role of gender in social exclusion – in only a cursory sense (ibid.).

For further discussions, see the GSDRC Topic Guide on Gender and Conflict

Resistance to undertaking gender-sensitive conflict analyses is partly fuelled by the lack of rigorous evidence that gendered approaches make a significant difference to the quality of interventions in conflict-affected countries (ibid.). Guidance on carrying out gender-sensitive conflict analysis is not well developed. The term 'gender' is still often used synonymously for 'women', resulting in the failure of gender analysis to acknowledge that gender is relational and that men also possess gender identities (Sudhakar & Kuehnast, 2011). Acknowledging men as gendered subjects makes it possible to ask men and women similar questions in gender analysis, and to understand what conflict and peace mean to different women and men (Myrttinen et al., 2014). A gender-relational approach to gender and conflict analysis should include how gender difference

intersects with other identities in shaping and being shaped by violent conflict – and in providing opportunities for transformative change (Myrttinen et al., 2014; El Bushra & Sahl, 2005).

Evaluation

'Evaluation teams are primarily concerned with conflict analysis from two perspectives. First, in assessing "relevance" it will be important to understand whether and how a programme implementation or policy development group developed their understanding of the conflict and context. In other words, what was the basis for their determination of priorities at the policy level or programme directions. Second, in order to assess the "impacts" of policies or programmes, the evaluation team needs to understand the conflict that programmes and policies are attempting to influence or change. An evaluation team thus needs to understand the different approaches to, and tools for, conflict analysis to be able to review the adequacy of the analysis performed or conduct its own analysis if one does not exist' (OECD, 2008: 68).

Box 9: Examples of published conflict analyses

- Country conflict analysis of Nepal (using DFID's Strategic Conflict Assessment tool) (Vaux, 2002)
- Country conflict analysis of Liberia, 2012 (using the US government's Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework)
- Country conflict analysis of Cambodia, 2002 (using the USAID Conflict Vulnerability Analysis)
- Programme conflict analysis of the Swiss Angola Programme, 2002 (using the PCIA tool)
- Regional conflict analysis of Northern Uganda, 2013
- A systems conflict analysis of Syria (using the Berghof Foundation's systems conflict analysis model) (ARK Group DMCC, 2016)
- Country conflict analysis of Afghanistan (using Sida's Strategic Conflict Analysis) (Holmberg et al., 2012)
- Regional conflict analysis of Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines, 2001 (appears to be adapted from the FEWER methodology)

3.2 Choosing the team

Team composition

Conflict analysis can be led by an internal team, or by external consultants. The conflict sensitivity literature recommends that conflict analysis be carried out by the commissioning actor's in-house staff, to improve the impact of the analysis, to ensure the findings and recommendations are relevant to the commissioner, to challenge internal staff assumptions and develop capacity and to ensure ownership and that the paper is read, understood and internalised (e.g. Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012: 5–6). However, there are many trade-offs and challenges to consider. For example, when time is limited, it can be more efficient to use specialised consultants with experience using the analytical tools and methodologies or with greater knowledge of the context. Different commissioners/publishers will have different capacities and strengths: INGOs may be better equipped to use participatory approaches; donors may have greater access to key informants and intelligence reports; donor involvement in interviews may raise sensitivities.

Incorporating and understanding the breadth of national and local perspectives are crucial to understand local realities and the latest conflict dynamics. Many of the tools are designed to be participatory, to include views from, for example, elites, communities, organisations and locally based staff. Careful actor analysis should select participants from across all groups, paying attention not to reinforce exclusive conflict dynamics and to ensure the inclusion of minorities, women and groups that might oppose peace (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012). Discussing conflict can be very sensitive and topics should be carefully chosen. Finding neutral places for dialogue, protected from external agendas, can move discussions forward (Peacebuilding Centre, 2013). Local staff and communities are embedded in the context and may have less objectivity, making triangulation of findings important. Challenges include who to include, whose voices and interests to prioritise, the level and quality of participation and ownership of the processes (Schmelzle, 2005; Donais, 2009). Shahab Ahmed (2011) examines the use of PCIAs in Pakistan (2006–8) and finds a disjuncture between the use and importance given to PCIA and the realities of the staff in country. The

paper found a lack of understanding among people working at the project and implementation levels of what the PCIA was, why it was needed and the theory behind it, and that PCIA and 'conflict sensitivity' were 'alien concepts' for the majority of staff (ibid.).

Perceptions and bias

Perceptions are central to understanding conflict, and conflict analysis should examine and understand the experience of conflict from a variety of perspectives (Fisher et al., 2000). Conflicts are born of disagreements, and there are often few truths. While the news media tends to provide information on 'conflict behaviour, actors, events and issues', it does not tend to cover 'perceptions, reasoning, motivations and assessments of the parties to a conflict' (Höglund & Öberg, 2011: 7-8).

Sources of information and data may be biased – explicitly or implicitly – and it is important to examine their rigour, accuracy and potential biases (e.g. see Box 11). In its evaluation, CDA Collaborative (2013: 4) found conflict analyses could be biased and narrow because people either work with implicit assumptions based on personal experiences or explicitly use conflict analyses to make a case for their desired action.

The conflict analysis process is useful in prompting staff to question their own

> **Box 10: Understanding implicit bias in the data**
>
> Most violence monitoring systems use media reports to track conflict events, therefore the data are dependent on the integrity, quality, capacity and reliability of the media reporting. Potential biases should be examined. Parks, Colletta & Oppenheim (2013) highlight that spatial bias can occur, as there are fewer media sources in rural areas and a predominance of urban reporters who might not know the rural areas. This problem is exacerbated when conflict occurs in rural areas – such as in Thailand's Deep South and in Mindanao. Another potential bias lies in reporters' interpretation of what happened, who was involved and what the motivations were (e.g. criminal violence or insurgency-related violence). 'In areas such as Mindanao, where multiple forms of contestation overlap, this may lead to misdiagnosis of fundamental conflict dynamics and trends' (pp. 93–4). The paper suggests helping to prevent these forms of bias through the triangulation of multiple data sources and by combining data analysis with more detailed qualitative analysis.
>
> *Source*: Parks et al. (2013).

assumptions and to consider gaps and differing interpretations of issues. The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012: 6) highlights that 'part of conflict sensitivity is recognising that project staff form part of their contexts and may interpret situations based on their own histories'. Training may be required for staff – both those carrying out the analysis and those using it. For example, conflict analyses are often gender blind. Anderlini (2006) suggests holding short-term training or workshop sessions on the significance of gender issues to conflict.

Another challenge is that, when **policy/political priorities frame the focus of analysis**, there is a risk of the analysis overemphasising donor priorities, which might not be the most important issues for local communities, for the country as a whole, or for securing peace. Yet integrating conflict analysis into strategic and policy processes makes it more likely to affect policy and practice. To address these challenges, conflict analyses typically draw on and commission a range of information sources – both independent from and embedded in policy processes.

The OECD (2012: 78) suggests the following questions to help manage implicit assumptions when choosing a conflict analysis tool:

- Do the evaluators share the underlying assumptions about the conflict that form the basis for analysis?

- Is the tool's understanding/assumptions about the nature of conflict appropriate to the specific context in which the programme or policy is being implemented?

- Does this perspective correspond to the mandate and values of the organisation being evaluated?

3.3 Linking conflict analysis with practice

The literature widely identifies the challenges of linking analysis and practice – this applies to conflict analyses and also other forms of analysis (e.g. PEA, early warning indicators) (OECD, 2002). CDA Collaborative (2013: 4) notes that, as conflict analyses are often disconnected from programme strategies, they do not help with the 'so what?' question. This reduces their effectiveness in informing policy and practice. Another weakness is that conflict analyses can identify a long list of important factors, without prioritisation or analysis of the dynamics among the factors (ibid.).

Vaux (2015: 7) finds that conflict analyses may produce 'impractical recommendations', especially if they are not precise enough or do not adequately identity the obstacles. Vaux suggests a follow-up feasibility assessment of the recommendations may be necessary, involving wider stakeholders in the country of analysis.

CDA Collaborative (2013: 4,1) finds 'no clear link between whether and how a program did conflict analysis and its effectiveness', and 'the question of how to do conflict analysis in a way that facilitates effective choices in programming remains'. OECD (2002: 11) finds conflict analyses are 'underused' and have 'yet to exert a major influence on planning and design'. Duffield (2001: 262) notes that 'most governments and aid agencies lack the organisational structures to allow them to use such information effectively'. While external actors may aspire to work better, there are many political and institutional factors that limit them from achieving this (e.g. funding, pressures to spend budgets, political imperatives, etc.).

The evaluations of DFID's 2002 Strategic Conflict Assessment have not been published, but they are reviewed in Barakat and Waldman (2013), who note that the analyses were generally commissioned on an *ad hoc* basis and relied on the country head or conflict adviser's personal priorities. There was a lack of understanding of when to carry out the analysis and there had been 'serious underutilisation' in situations of latent conflict.

> **Box 11: Integrating analysis, evaluation and redesign**
>
> DFID used a strategic conflict analysis as the basis for a conflict prevention and peacebuilding evaluation of its programme in Nepal. This 'Conflict-sensitive Programme Review' then fed into a revised country strategy. One of the changes that came about was a greater emphasis on transparency, because it had been shown that this could reduce tensions locally and prevent Maoist interference. The review also highlighted the need for an active 'equal opportunities' policy to ensure all social groups were represented among DFID staff. Conflict analysis, strategy and evaluation were integrated.
>
> *Source*: Vaux for OECD and CDA, 2007, in OECD (2008: 25).

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Click on linked titles in purple to visit publication web pages.

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