



Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Food Security Programs

Learning Brief

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IDEAL is an activity funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) that works to support the United States Government's goal of improving food and nutrition security among the world's most vulnerable households and communities. IDEAL addresses knowledge and capacity gaps expressed by the food and nutrition security implementing community to support them in the design and implementation of effective emergency and non-emergency food security activities.

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Food security program in Karnali (Nepal) delivers digital cash vouchers for program participants to purchase food and other essential items. © Mercy Corps 2022

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Preface

The recent conflict in Ukraine is a stark reminder of the links between conflict and food security. Not only has it had a tragic human toll inside the country, but it is also fueling a global food crisis.¹ Indeed, the increasing state of global fragility and conflict is a major contributor to acute food insecurity and a critical underlying concern for achieving the goals of food security programs.

Conflict sensitivity in food security programming is therefore of paramount importance. This is true not only in active conflict zones, but in any fragile environment that may have experienced conflict in the past or shows signs of latent or potential conflict. Ultimately, everywhere they work, it is imperative for food security actors to understand local conflict dynamics and how their programs interact with them. If they do not, implementers risk not only undermining progress toward their objectives, but may also inadvertently cause or exacerbate conflict.

To address this critical matter, this learning brief builds on an existing piece of guidance, *Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming*², from the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) former Office of Food for Peace. This brief assesses prevailing practices, successes, challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations around integrating conflict sensitivity into food security programs. Ultimately, conflict sensitivity is not only about managing and mitigating risk, but also about seeking opportunities to promote peace. In this respect, this learning brief can contribute to USAID's calls for greater coherence in humanitarian, development, and peace programming by supporting aid actors to "champion conflict integration and opportunities for enabling or building peace where possible."³

¹ Reuters (2022), [The war in Ukraine is fuelling a global food crisis.](#)

² Goddard, N., Poyac-Clarkin, A., & Levine, C. (2016), [Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming](#), USAID Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (DCHA/CMM).

³ USAID (2022), [Programming Considerations for Humanitarian-Development-Peace Coherence: A Note for USAID's Implementing Partners.](#)

Executive Summary

Food security programming has been celebrated for its peace dividends, with the World Food Program receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2020.⁴ However, the pathways through which food security programs contribute to peace and social cohesion are still relatively unclear and, under certain circumstances, food security interventions can negatively impact conflict dynamics. This learning brief assesses prevailing practices, successes, challenges, and lessons learned about integrating conflict sensitivity into food security programs. Findings are based on a literature review and key informant interviews with a diverse set of staff members from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) implementing partners.

This brief details how food security programs can be more conflict sensitive by using participatory approaches that emphasize inclusion and empower aid recipients. It further demonstrates that such programs must be transparent to aid recipients and include robust accountability mechanisms that allow communities to make their grievances heard.⁵ This brief holds that conflict sensitivity should be approached in an integrated manner across different programmatic dimensions and operational levels and tailored to the modalities of each program and context.

Recommendations for Practitioners

- Food security programs should seek ways to strengthen social cohesion and gender equality through sustainable practices rooted in the collective management of resources;
- Adhere to minimum standards of conflict sensitivity in circumstances where the speed of delivering assistance does not allow for more in-depth considerations;
- The politics and power dynamics of food security need to be made explicit for conflict sensitivity to be effective; and
- Localization and empowerment of local populations to address conflict sensitivity issues in food security programming on their own terms should be among the primary goals of a conflict sensitive intervention.

Recommendations for Donors

- Require implementing partners to uphold minimum conflict sensitivity standards⁶ and encourage them to seek transformational change by empowering local communities and fostering greater inclusion;
- Explore established and emerging tools for conflict sensitivity and prevention in food security programming and monitor and evaluate their impacts;
- Encourage greater sharing, development, and coordination of conflict sensitive resources and approaches; and
- Invest in and build a research base for climate-informed conflict sensitivity in food security programming.

⁴ United Nations (2020), [Nobel Peace Prize: 2020 - World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#).

⁵ Mercy Corps (2020), [Towards Resilience: Advancing Collective Impact in Protracted Crises](#).

⁶ Humanitarian Practice Network at the Overseas Development Institute's [Applying Conflict Sensitivity in Emergency Response paper](#) suggests minimum conflict sensitivity standards that are listed in detail later in this brief.

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Introduction

Fragility and conflict are detrimental to food security. Conflict-driven crises are the primary driver of both acute and chronic malnutrition, reducing the availability of food products, disrupting agricultural systems, destroying infrastructure, displacing labor, and upsetting formal and informal coping and adaptation mechanisms for food security.⁷ While food security assistance has been celebrated for its potential peace dividends,⁸ there is some evidence that food security programs can have both positive and negative effects on local conflict dynamics.⁹ Despite growing awareness of the need for conflict sensitivity to minimize the risks of escalating conflict and exacerbating systemic marginalization (which can lead to further conflict and food insecurity),¹⁰ food security actors do not consistently integrate conflict sensitivity across all their operations.¹¹

As the frequency, intensity, and duration of conflicts continues to increase, and multiple crises place additional strains on fragility across the globe,¹² there is a growing need to assess and consolidate examples about what implementing partners are learning about the links between food security and conflict, both overt and latent. Building on resources from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—*Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming and Programming Considerations for Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Coherence*¹³—this learning brief explores prevailing practices, successes, challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations for advancing conflict sensitivity in food security assistance from a sample of contexts where USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)-supported programs operate. As the learning brief shows, when food security programs are conflict sensitive, they not only reduce the risk of having a negative impact, but also strengthen social cohesion and lead to better peace and food security outcomes.

WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?

As put forth in the Rome Declaration, food security is a development outcome that is achieved when all people, on a regular basis, consume sufficient, safe, and nutritious food, and practice behaviors that promote both their sustainable economic productivity and well-being. This outcome is achieved through four critical dimensions:

1. The physical availability of food
2. Access to food, including economic access
3. The body's ability to absorb nutrition
4. The stability of these dimensions over time

⁷ FAO (2016), [Peace Conflict and Food Security What do we know about the linkages?](#)

⁸ United Nations (2020), [Nobel Peace Prize: 2020 - World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#).

⁹ For a discussion, see Mary, Sebastien and Mishra, A. (2020), [Humanitarian Food assistance and Civil Conflict](#).

¹⁰ See WFP (2020), [Covid-19 and Conflict Sensitivity](#); Goddard, N., Poyac-Clarkin, A., & Levine, C. (2016), [Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming](#), USAID Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (DCHA/CMM); World Vision (2012), [Conflict Sensitivity and Food Programming: a Do No Harm Pocket Guide](#); and FAO (2020), [The Programme Clinic: Designing Conflict-Sensitive Interventions—Approaches to Working in Fragile and Conflict-affected Contexts](#)

¹¹ Delgado, C. Jang, S. Milante, G. and Smith, D. (2019), [The World Food Programme's Contribution To Improving The Prospects For Peace](#).

¹² OECD (2022), [States of Fragility](#).

¹³ Goddard, N., Poyac-Clarkin, A., & Levine, C. (2016), [Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming](#), USAID Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (DCHA/CMM); USAID (2022), [Programming Considerations for Humanitarian-Development-Peace \(HDP\) Coherence: A Note for USAID's Implementing Partners](#).

Methodology

A primarily qualitative study, this learning brief relied on a desk review and key informant interviews (KIIs). The learning brief was guided by an Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from five USAID/BHA implementing partners—Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Mercy Corps, the World Food Programme (WFP), and World Vision International (WVI). The learning process followed a participatory approach in which participants gave feedback on emerging and final findings of the research project.

Through purposive sampling, the project sought input from food security professionals selected primarily from USAID/BHA implementing partners, but also local organizations and relevant intergovernmental agencies. An initial sample was compiled through input from the project's Advisory Committee. Specifically, KIIs were held with representatives from CRS, IRC, Mercy Corps, WFP, and WVI. Network referral (snowball sampling) of other relevant individuals and organizations widened the sample. Based on the sampling strategy, 22 KIIs were conducted remotely, lasting 30-45 minutes each. Key informant identities were kept confidential outside of the research team and have been obscured in the final report.

Semi-structured interview questionnaires were designed based on an extensive literature review on conflict sensitivity and food security programming, and in collaboration with the Advisory Committee. Generalizable themes and categories were iteratively identified according to principles of inductive reasoning, as opposed to working deductively from a hypothesis and/or predicted finding(s).

Background

Understanding Conflict and Fragility

At its most basic, conflict occurs when two or more parties believe that they have incompatible goals. Not all conflict is violent, but it always has the potential to become so. Although no models have been found to accurately predict the likelihood of future conflict, a key feature of conflicts is that they have deep and sometimes unseen root causes that lead to visible consequences. For example, the root causes of a conflict may include discrimination, mistrust, and fear, with the visible effects being incidents of violence, displacement, and poverty.¹⁴ These same root causes of violent conflict may also be present in fragile societies where violence has not erupted, which the U.S. Government has defined as “a country's or region's vulnerability to armed conflict, large-scale violence, or other instability, including an inability to manage transnational threats or other significant shocks.”¹⁵

Similarly, there are different types of violence that can be more or less visible. Physical violence is the most basic form of direct violence. It involves the use of physical force and includes armed attacks, theft, rape, and killing, among others. Two other categories may be less immediately visible. The first is structural violence, which refers to the actions of systems and institutions that harm or disadvantage certain groups and individuals, such as discriminatory policies or exclusionary practices. The second category—cultural violence—refers to the views, values, and behavioral norms to which people adhere to justify violence. These may derive from past traumatic experiences that breed mistrust or from prejudice built on long-standing stereotypes.

¹⁴ This subsection is drawn from Mercy Corps' contribution to the Integrated Seed Sector Development in Africa's [Seed systems in conflict-affected areas: A Context Analysis Tool](#) (2022).

¹⁵ U.S. State Department, Department of Defense, USAID, and Department of the Treasury (2020) [United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability](#).

Related to conflict is the concept of positive and negative peace. Just as some elements of conflict are more visible than others, the same is true of peace. Positive peace refers to contexts where attitudes, institutions, and structures create and sustain peaceful societies. Pillars of positive peace include inclusive governance (including rule of law), equitable distribution of and access to resources, free flow of information, acceptance of the rights of others (including guaranteeing of human rights), and low levels of corruption.¹⁶ Negative peace refers to the absence of direct physical violence, but where one or more of the pillars of positive peace are lacking. Contexts with negative peace may feature authoritarian leadership, weak justice systems, widespread discrimination, and high levels of economic inequality—many of the hallmarks of fragile states. While in some respects these contexts may seem peaceful as there is no open warfare, they still contain serious underlying forms of structural and cultural violence that are fragile and prone to future physical violence and widespread active conflict.

It is therefore essential for food security actors to consider the conflict sensitivity of their interventions not only in situations of overt physical violence, but also in the seemingly more stable contexts of negative peace, or contexts of fragility more generally. If they do not, these interventions may encounter underlying conflict dynamics that can erupt into physical violence at any time. Worse still, aid interventions that do not apply conflict sensitive practices and principles may even contribute to triggering that violence.

Understanding Conflict Sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity describes the ability of an organization to understand the operational context in order to minimize the negative effects and maximize the positive effects interventions have on conflict dynamics.¹⁷ It is important to note that conflict sensitivity places an equal emphasis on avoiding causing unintentional harm and actively capitalizing on opportunities to promote peace. Thereby, conflict sensitivity involves:

- A continued analysis of conflict dynamics in the operational context—especially relationship dynamics between and among groups;
- An understanding of the potential and actual impact of interventions on conflict dynamics, particularly with respect to geographic and participant targeting, direct or indirect assistance to households, government and private sector stakeholders, hiring procedures, partner selection, and staff behavior that may be perceived to benefit one group at the expense of another;
- The adjustment of operational and programming choices in an adaptive manner to, at a minimum, reduce conflict risks, and where possible, promote positive connections both between and among groups.

Context—the geographical, cultural, social, economic, ecological, and historical specificities, as well as local power dynamics in the area of operations—is the essential frame of reference through which conflict is understood, and on the basis of which programs are adapted to make them more sensitive to conflict dynamics. Conflict sensitivity is therefore best achieved through regular analysis of the conflict dynamics to inform program actions and, ideally, by engaging with peacebuilding and other stakeholders in the operational context. While conflict sensitivity should be included in all conflict prone environments, it is particularly important in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS), where interventions are more likely to exacerbate tensions between groups, and where conflict dimensions put food security interventions and program teams at greater risk.¹⁸

¹⁶ The Institute for Economics & Peace (IPE) proposes eight pillars of positive peace as part of its Positive Peace Index. They can be found in the [Positive Peace Implementation Guide](#).

¹⁷ USAID (2020), [Responsible Development: A Note on Conflict Sensitivity from USAID's Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention \(CVP\)](#).

¹⁸ OECD (2012), [Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility: Improving Learning for Results](#), DAC Guidelines and Reference Series.

Understanding exclusion of identity-based groups is an essential component of conflict sensitivity. Unique and universally relevant among various types of exclusion is gender inequality, which is intrinsic to the structure of societal conflict. Conflict sensitivity is therefore incomplete when it fails to take gender into account as it risks perpetuating unequal gendered power relations.¹⁹ Conflict simultaneously shapes and is shaped by gender dynamics affecting the roles of women and men within society and delineating their access to and control of resources. This is particularly true for food security programming, which often includes the transfer of material resources. Overall, women and girls are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity resulting from conflict.²⁰ And as different groups experience conflict differently, they also have varying stakes in and approaches to conflict resolution. Hence, conflict sensitivity must include gender sensitivity.²¹

While specific literature on conflict sensitivity in food security programs is sparse, well established and directly applicable good practices for conflict sensitivity exist.²² Broadly speaking, these include working in a participatory manner, jointly conducting and regularly updating conflict analyses, and assessing how a project affects conflict dynamics positively and negatively throughout the project cycle.

Understanding Food Security Programming and Conflict Sensitivity

The relationship between food insecurity and conflict is complex and compounded by an array of other factors. Food insecurity is affected by natural, economic, and health disasters, forced displacement, and weak governance, contributing to complex emergencies that are analytically extremely challenging to disentangle.²³ Nevertheless, there are examples of food security programming and its potential positive and negative effects on local dynamics, as listed below.

Examples of Food Security Programming and Potential Positive and Negative Effects on Local Conflict Dynamics		
<i>Type of Programming</i>	<i>Potential Positive Effects</i>	<i>Potential Negative Effects</i>
Cash or food distribution	Innovative models may be used to support communities equitably, for example, by giving households the option to donate part of the food or cash they would receive to those worse off.	Distribution may lead to perceptions of inequality, for example, between Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and host communities or between neighboring communities that qualify and those that do not.
Working with producer groups and production support through markets	Creating agent networks across dividing lines can ease tensions, particularly when shared economic interests are established.	Working with actors who are already economically engaged can be perceived as favoring elites or a particular group and can lead to further tensions.
Rehabilitated boreholes, wells, and other infrastructure for domestic use and livestock	Increased access to water may reduce pressure on existing resources, which are often a source of inter-group tension.	Improvement of water infrastructure may increase tensions across groups if access is not perceived as equitable.
Work with local governments on access to services (such as health, nutrition, and water)	Supporting local government to be more accountable and effective can strengthen positive peace, as described above.	Where local government is perceived as divisive, working alongside them can have a legitimizing effect that increases tensions.

¹⁹ Fröhlich, M. (2016), Taking Gender Seriously in Conflict Sensitivity.

²⁰ FAO (2017), [Food security, sustaining peace and gender equality: conceptual framework and future directions](#).

²¹ Garred, M., Booth, C., Barnard, K., & Saleh, O. (2018), [Do No Harm: Gender Guidance Note](#).

²² UN Sustainable Development Group (2022), [Good Practice Note Conflict Sensitivity, Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace](#).

²³ Brück, T. and d'Errico, M. (2019), Food security and violent conflict: Introduction to the special issue.

General Approaches for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming

Context Monitoring and Analysis

Context and conflict analysis is a crucial starting point for any conflict sensitive intervention, yet is not consistently applied. This analysis should aim to cover key questions around the root causes of conflict, the dividing lines in society, the key actors and groups historically or currently involved in conflict, and existing mechanisms and opportunities for resolving conflict. Multiple tools for conflict analysis exist, including USAID's own *Conflict Assessment Framework Application Guide*.²⁴ In line with the guidance in the following section, employing participatory approaches when using these tools is essential. At its most basic, that means that the analysis process should not be purely extractive, but it should involve respondents after the analysis has concluded in ways that allow them to provide feedback and be allies in addressing the conflict dynamics.

Following the initial analysis, continued monitoring of conflict sensitivity is essential in fragile environments as they are volatile and subject to constant changes in conflict dynamics that may negatively affect operations. Monitoring the evolution of interventions from a conflict sensitivity perspective requires the development and application of conflict sensitivity indicators and lessons learned, which would ideally be integrated within the intervention's broader monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) framework. Such an approach can support context monitoring, as well as the possible effects that environments may have on an intervention or impacts that interventions may have on the context's conflict dynamics, all of which can inform the adaptive management of interventions and activities.

Conflict sensitivity indicators are typically developed through qualitative reporting. To ascertain this information, one might, for example, seek to capture: (a) the proportion of people in community A and B who perceive the project as benefiting both communities equally compared to those who perceived the project as benefiting one community over the other; and (b) the number of staff who believe the project has had no impact on conflict in the target communities / exacerbated underlying tensions in the target communities / enabled greater cohesion in the target communities.

Monitoring the intervention through a conflict sensitivity lens also requires gathering data on the evolution of conflict dynamics and the intervention's impact on these dynamics over time. Finally, adaptive management is essential to respond to outcomes of monitoring exercises in a way that minimizes the negative and maximizes the positive effects of the intervention on conflict.

Food security programs are positioned to use existing data analytics to enhance conflict sensitivity—and even conflict prevention—in unique ways. For example, food security programming has long relied on early warning systems, such as the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET),²⁵ to build response scenarios to impending food security crises. Although not currently a primary focus area, FEWS NET examines the role played by conflict dynamics in precipitating crises. Early warning systems, which can include conflict-related indicators, may be used to build response scenarios and, ideally, avoid crises. Establishing context monitoring and analysis tools, which are built on extremely large data sets (or big data) and predictive analytics, can also provide an opportunity for more regular and consistent macro-level context analysis. WFP, for example, develops Integrated Context Analyses (ICA) that “strengthens the design, planning and implementation of longer-term resilience building programs, developed in

²⁴ USAID (2012), [Conflict Assessment Framework: Application Guide](#).

²⁵ USAID, [Famine Early Warning Systems Network](#).

partnership and aligned to national and local priorities.”²⁶ USAID uses context monitoring indicators to systematically collect information about external factors that might influence strategy, projects, and activities in a given context.²⁷ Implementing partners are similarly using crisis analytics, combining local monitoring information with big data to better understand relationships across communities and context dynamics. Recognizing that climate change can lead to conflict by putting additional pressures on resources, such context monitoring and analysis efforts could be further enhanced by incorporating climate-related data and building a research base for climate-informed conflict sensitivity in food security programming.

REVEALING CONFLICT DYNAMICS THROUGH MONITORING

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mercy Corps used perception and displacement tracking to better understand the relationships between host and displaced communities across high conflict zones. This information helped the aid organization more carefully understand the relationships across communities and tailor their interventions. The monitoring helped Mercy Corps understand that, contrary to common perceptions, displaced populations were settling in areas characterized by ethnic and linguistic similarities, cultural affiliation, shared trade, and often strong social or even familial ties. This required a pivot from shelter and food distribution—which could have fractured these ties and caused tensions in an environment of increasing suspicion and conflict—to providing markets and livelihoods support.

Participation, Empowerment, and Inclusion

Providing an opportunity for affected populations to take part in decision-making at various levels of programming can preempt or address grievances and perceptions of exclusion, which are key drivers of conflict. In fact, one of the lessons that emerged from interviews for this brief was that participatory approaches designed to elevate empowerment and inclusion directly supported conflict sensitivity in food security programming; however, this only happened when they were carefully designed based on the analysis of conflict actors, relationships, and grievances. So not only must programs be participatory, the processes of community mobilization and dialogue should also address issues of marginalization, exclusion, or negative perceptions of others. What is being done under the participatory banner, however, varies widely. It stretches from mere checklist consultations in the planning process of interventions to involving communities actively in every step of a program.

While food security programming is often gender sensitive, it rarely considers the role of gender dynamics in exacerbating conflict, violence, and fragility. As such, programs may not be gender transformative, instead engaging with underlying patriarchal structures, or solving all access and resource control issues. Conducting gender-sensitive conflict analysis and incorporating an intersectional gendered power analysis can make organizations aware of local power dynamics and thereby guarantee inclusion and prevent inadvertent negative effects on conflict.

²⁶ WFP (2014), [A WFP Approach to Operationalise Resilience](#).

²⁷ USAID (2020), [Context Indicator Reference Sheet](#).

ADDRESSING THEFT AND DIVERSION IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan, a country that has witnessed six decades of nearly continuous conflict, has relied heavily on emergency food assistance as well as long-term development food security and livelihood programs. Food assistance in its various forms has, at times, been misappropriated. Due to the security situation in many parts of Afghanistan, conventional measures to counter diversion, such as third-party monitoring, were sometimes difficult to implement consistently. In such circumstances, the national food security officer of an intergovernmental organization who witnessed widespread diversion decided to use local capacities for food monitoring instead. They traveled to the provinces where food assistance was being delivered and built relationships with community representatives. Working closely with the governance unit of their organization, they helped establish public auditing committees for the food security program at the village level, where communities came together twice a month to discuss food distribution with village heads and demand accountability or redress for diversion. Even where mainstream monitoring measures are possible, localized empowerment approaches can enhance existing monitoring and serve as a potent conflict sensitivity measure.

Transparency, Accountability, and Communication

Transparency, accountability and consistent communication between and among diverse communities, are essential to ensuring food security programs do not exacerbate tensions. A lack of transparency about an organization's food security programming decisions—such as who the participants, partners, and implementing staff are, and why they were selected—can exacerbate conflict. Particularly in times of food scarcity, it can turn community members against the implementing agency or against each other, exacerbating grievances, heightening tensions among groups, and making an already difficult operating environment more so. The Food and Agricultural Organization's Guidance Note on Accountability to Affected Populations notes that, "Humanitarian organizations fail to respect the communities they work with when they are not, at a minimum, transparent about their role, their agenda, and what communities can expect from them. Communication that ignores this principle can impact on relations and the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance."²⁸ Such communication needs to be timely, regular, inclusive, and culturally and socially appropriate. Moreover, in addition to standard accountability mechanisms, transparency must be clearly incorporated, planned for, and executed.

Accountability frameworks are widespread in food security programming.²⁹ "Social," "citizen-led," "demand-side" or "downward accountability"³⁰ mechanisms are well integrated into food security programs. In conflict sensitivity terms, robust accountability mechanisms involving feedback loops allow communities to make their grievances heard through established channels of communication, such as suggestion boxes, feedback hotlines, village feedback committees, or social media. The channels also need to be inclusive, giving marginalized groups the ability to deliver feedback, and ensure a timely response to issues raised.

²⁸ FAO (2014), [Guidance Note on Accountability to Affected Populations](#).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Joshi, A. (2011), Review of Impact and Effectiveness of Transparency and Accountability Initiatives: Annex 1 Service Delivery, prepared for the Transparency and Accountability Initiative Workshop October 2010.

TRANSPARENCY OF COMMUNITY-BASED TARGETING IN SYRIA

An INGO delivering food security programming through a mix of modalities in an ethnically diverse part of Syria, with a large internally displaced population amid a civil war, made forays into a more ethnically homogenous area, which up until that time had little contact with international aid. Despite intense humanitarian need, local communities had expelled several international organizations from the area because they were perceived to be too closely linked to “the other side.” When entering the new area of operations, the organization ethnically balanced their implementing staff to reflect the local population. Targeting criteria were developed in a community-based and participatory manner across the area of operations. But more importantly, the criteria were publicly posted in shops across the area of implementation, including in remote villages, as they were developed and revised. In addition, targeting criteria and other programming decisions were not only passively communicated, rather, staff members were actively encouraged to reach out and communicate and discuss programming decisions and elicit feedback.

Strengthening Social Capital and Social Cohesion³¹

Natural disasters, the outbreak of conflict, or economic crises are only some examples of shocks that can undermine food production, access, and consumption. The capacity of people to prevent, cope, and adapt to such shocks is particularly important for achieving food security goals in fragile contexts. In conflict environments, social cohesion and the ability to build and maintain social capital are critical to people’s capacities to build resilience and strengthen the ability to cope and mitigate risks associated with conflict and climate change.³² Where social cohesion and social capital are weak, individuals, households, and communities do worse, and have lower food security outcomes in crisis settings. Aid programs that incorporate a conflict sensitive lens and focus on strengthening social cohesion and social capital across diverse groups increase peace dividends that support the objectives of the program while also strengthening the foundations for long-term peace and resilience.

A recently published case study on social cohesion by USAID found that higher levels of collaboration across groups did not necessarily increase intergroup trust on their own.³³ Rather, dedicated efforts needed to be made to ensure that the interactions between these groups were positive. These findings reinforce the message that to successfully contribute to social cohesion, conflict-sensitive food security programming must do so intentionally. Only then, will it be able to contribute to social cohesion within society and strengthen the prospects for present and lasting peace.

³¹ Kim, J., Sheely, R. & Schmidt, C. (2020), [Social Capital and Social Cohesion Measurement Toolkit for Community-driven Development Operations](#).

³² Mercy Corps (2012), [From Conflict to Coping: Evidence from Southern Ethiopia on the contributions of peacebuilding to drought resilience among pastoralist groups](#).

³³ Mercy Corps (2021), [Resilience Rapid Learning Brief: Harnessing Local Sources of Social Cohesion in Niger](#).

TRADE FOR PEACE IN ETHIOPIA

In the Gambella region of Ethiopia, international agencies have supported South Sudanese refugees through food assistance programming for decades. Conflict between host communities and refugees erupted sporadically, especially over land and water disputes, as arable land in the lowlands was scarce. Food assistance was integrated in local nutrition programming; initially, refugees would work on the farms of host communities, improving food security for both groups. However, a conflict sensitivity analysis demonstrated the centrality of land as a driver in the conflict, allowing the organization to rethink both social cohesion and food security in Gambella. Through a careful deliberative process, a new initiative brought solar powered irrigation to arid regions to increase arable land. As a result, refugees planted their own crops on new land, increasing their food security. Host communities also benefited in terms of food security through trade in food products with the refugees. Today, most of the food produced on refugee-run farms is now consumed by host communities, making the whole region more food secure as well as more resilient in social cohesion terms through increased economic linkages.

Integrating Conflict Sensitivity in Different Pillars and Operational Levels

Food security is intrinsically linked to other kinds of security, including water, energy, environmental, health, climate, and national security.³⁴ Applying a conflict sensitivity lens in food security programming therefore requires a systemic, multi-sectoral analysis, which can have the added benefit of advancing linkages in planning and implementation across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding assistance to enhance coherence and maximize impact and sustainability.³⁵ In multi-mandate agencies, conflict sensitivity should be treated as a crosscutting issue that mutually interacts with and reinforces coherence across the humanitarian, development, and peace pillars. More specifically, analyzing the underlying relationships and group dynamics—including motivations, perceptions, and aspirations—and what this means across the different pillars, can be used as a foundation for informing humanitarian-development and peace strategies and interventions.

Conflict sensitivity can also be enhanced by ensuring that staff members, partners, and other individuals involved in carrying out interventions are themselves more aware of do-no-harm and other conflict sensitivity considerations. In fact, the role of more subtle forms of communication is often overlooked. However, skills like emotional intelligence and negotiation can enhance conflict sensitivity in practice. How an individual staff member assesses a situation, deals with conflict as it occurs, or addresses aggrieved aid recipients can have as much of a bearing on the conflict sensitivity of operations as an understanding of conflict dynamics. Providing individuals involved in program implementation with basic skills, such as a foundational understanding of do-no-harm frameworks of analysis, can therefore enhance conflict sensitivity at the most direct level of engagement with aid recipients.

³⁴ Naylor, R. (Ed.) (2022), *The Evolving Sphere of Food Security*.

³⁵ USAID (2022), [Programming Considerations for Humanitarian-Development-Peace Coherence: A Note for USAID's Implementing Partners](#).

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN CASH, VOUCHER, AND MOBILE MONEY TRANSFERS

The integration of conflict sensitivity frameworks across different aspects of operations becomes particularly clear as modality shifts in food security programming bring new actors and procedures to programs that previously had little bearing on conflict dynamics. The trend towards cash transfers, vouchers, and increasingly mobile money, for example, bears new risks in terms of conflict sensitivity that are often difficult to manage. Specifically, remote cash-based assistance, which has become increasingly the norm in the context of COVID-19, comes with greater dangers of tensions and even diversion of funds at the distributor level. In response to the challenges imposed by COVID-19, IDEAL facilitated a learning stream focused on Cash, Voucher, & Food Distribution as a part of its Food Security COVID-19 Learning Series.³⁶ Including both humanitarian and development actors, it reflected on the challenges raised by the pandemic in terms of cash, voucher, and food distributions, and solutions that participants were exploring to address them. Monitoring of distribution at the village level, across vast areas, and the restriction of movement imposed on monitors during the pandemic, meant that implementing organizations were far removed from aid-recipients. A staff member from an international organization that has long been at the forefront of integrating conflict sensitivity into food security operations across the globe described the difficulties of integrating conflict sensitivity procedures into cash transfers. While community-based targeting, the development of vulnerability criteria, and verification is still done by the INGO, the cash transfers themselves are handled by third party service providers that include mobile network providers and their networks of cash-out agents. Unlike in a food distribution scenario, the interaction between agent and community members is no longer visible to the INGO, which might not be present in each locality. Here tension might occur due to community, ethnic, religious affiliation, or other reasons. For instance, there have even been reports of cash-out agents charging “fees” to deliver money to aid recipients. To try to better monitor and understand these dynamics despite the physical obstacles, some implementers began conducting post distribution monitoring (PDM) and verification of beneficiaries by phone, and then ensuring data quality control for data collected in PDMs and finding appropriate ways to collect data through mobile phones.

³⁶ Food Security and Nutrition Network (2021), [Cash, Voucher, and Food Distribution Learning Stream](#).

Lessons Learned and Recommendations in Applying Conflict Sensitivity to Specific Elements of Food Security Programming

Targeting and Distribution

The interviews conducted for this learning brief found that how targeting and distribution of goods and services is designed and communicated has essential implications for conflict sensitivity. Targeting decisions can be perceived as forms of exclusion by the communities that live in proximity to targeted populations but are left out of an intervention. Resentment can quickly turn to violence against both aid recipients and aid workers if targeting is not transparent and clearly communicated. By contrast, carefully crafted, more inclusive or more flexible targeting criteria can go a long way in avoiding tensions.

CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN CASH, VOUCHER, AND MOBILE MONEY TRANSFERS

An INGO working on food security programs with IDPs in South Sudan found that no matter what the targeting criteria for food and cash assistance were, food assistance was shared by IDPs with host communities. IDPs sought to build trust as well as social and economic connections with host communities. In part, this was utilitarian, but it was also a deliberate act of building relationships that made both sides feel more safe and secure in both food security and social cohesion terms. These connections were sustained over time and could potentially be accessed in times of future need.³⁷

Community-based targeting³⁸ is extremely widespread in food security programming and can ensure that there is buy-in on who receives aid and thereby prevent conflict. However, how community-based targeting is done is essential to conflict sensitivity. Using community-based targeting without understanding local power dynamics is likely to not only skew targeting efficacy, but also reinforce unequal power dynamics and lead to conflict. This highlights the importance of incorporating elements of conflict analysis in humanitarian assessments.

Enlisting community members into targeting committees—often composed of men and women, elected, religious, and traditional leaders, local officials, civil society representatives, or farmers unions—can also put them into difficult and sometimes precarious positions vis-à-vis local expectations and power dynamics. In general, aid organizations do not provide support to enable committee members (who may represent identities with traditionally less power in their communities) to overcome the existing power dynamics in these committees and make food or (cash-based) assistance fairer and more transparent.

Furthermore, in community-based targeting, existing formal and informal livelihood groupings are often overlooked. Livelihood associations, such as cattle herding groups, often function within established social norms about resource sharing and have inbuilt communal decision-making processes. They could be potential conflict sensitive vehicles for targeting decisions because of the practices of resource sharing associated with them and the level of social acceptance these practices enjoy. For example, the USAID/BHA-supported Currency of Connections research initiative “offers aid actors insights into localized social protection and support systems in South Sudan and the ways in which humanitarian aid can both

³⁷ Mercy Corps, [The Currency of Connections](#).

³⁸ Community-based targeting is a participatory form of social protection policy that engages community representatives to identify recipients for program benefits.

complement and disrupt these systems.”³⁹ Leveraging resource sharing networks and practices should be central to conflict sensitive targeting. However, it is also important to recognize that existing practices might be exclusionary at the community and system level.

Supporting local systems and networks presents challenges in other ways. For example, in Market Systems Development programming, the intention is to support market actors and businesses to ensure locally owned and sustainable food security. This inevitably requires working with relatively “better off” populations that often represent economically dominant ethnic groups.

BUSINESS SUPPORT FOSTERING RESENTMENT

In Ethiopia, an NGO supported a milk processor to expand into a more remote area. The milk processor was from a dominant ethnic group and considered a “highlander.” Even though the new business was intended to collect milk from pastoral areas, this was not clearly communicated and explained to communities. There was no initial dialogue facilitated between the business and communities. As a result, pastoral communities and the government initially perceived the NGOs and businesses actions as not transparent and badly intentioned, exacerbating tensions.

This highlights the added utility of conducting gender sensitive power analysis alongside conflict analyses, to understand unequal power imbalances inherent in these systems and networks. Based on that understanding, programs can engage with communities, open dialogue, and adjust their programming to avoid causing harm. For example, to try to break down power imbalances, it may be necessary to facilitate conversations around power and equity, particularly with the traditional power holders in the area of intervention.⁴⁰

Recommendations for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Targeting Practices

- Leverage community-based targeting mechanisms to deepen participatory targeting processes, integrating social network and gender & social inclusion analyses;
- Draw from conflict sensitivity analysis to ensure targeting across groups and lines of division, including, for example, both host and displaced populations;
- Communicate rationale of targeting decisions clearly and systematically through locally appropriate communication channels;
- Where community committees are formed, facilitate conversations on power and equity with committee members with particular attention to the traditional power holders.

Procurement of Goods and Services

Procurement encompasses the efforts to obtain and maintain the goods and services required for food security programming. This might include food or livelihood inputs, storage facilities, transport, cash-transfer service providers, or technical support such as vendor networks. While in some humanitarian contexts food or livelihood inputs might be flown in, most programs source goods and services locally.⁴¹ How and from whom these goods and services are procured might have major conflict sensitivity implications. Corruption and diversion are also major conflict sensitivity risks in procurement. Staff involved might become subject to bribery and market effects might lead to localized monopolies.

³⁹ Mercy Corps, [The Currency of Connections](#).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ WFP, for example, sources more than 60% of its 3.5 billion annual supply locally. See WFP (2020), [Procurement](#).

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROCUREMENT

A large intergovernmental organization uses primarily “internationally recognized partners” on the ground to buy, store, and deliver food products. These partners are sourced from official lists that often involve government actors or actors close to local governments who, at the large-scale the organization operates on, are often the only actors with sufficient capacity. In such cases, elite capture of contracts is a danger. The financial due diligence in partner and contractor selection of the organization is rigorous and includes supply chain analysis. However, rarely asked questions are: What are the political implications of choosing this contractor? What is their social, ethnic, or political make-up? Who are they most closely affiliated or associated with? In other words, how are structural power dynamics affected and potentially reinforced by procurement decisions?

Recommendations for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Procurement

- Develop conflict sensitivity skills of staff involved in procurement and ensure organizational procurement principles and practices are communicated to vendors;
- Develop or revise procurement and finance policies, including anti-fraud and anti-corruption procedures, from a conflict sensitivity perspective;⁴²
- Include conflict sensitivity considerations in the vetting, assessment, and selection of vendors;
- Communicate procurement processes and policies transparently with local communities;
- To counter market capture or monopolization by a particular group, assess and adapt bidding policies for exclusion of certain groups based on language or technical criteria;
- Consider prioritizing vendors with diverse makeups and hiring policies that encourage diversity or even those that hire staff deliberately across conflict lines.

Working through Local Aid Actors and Localization

Local aid workers are on the front lines of navigating conflict dynamics, and hence play a central role in conflict sensitivity. On the one hand, localization—whereby funding and decision-making power is shifted towards local actors—holds great potential in increasing conflict sensitivity. Notably, local organizations and local staff of international organizations speak the languages and have an implicit understanding of conflict dynamics, as demonstrated by the “Addressing Theft and Diversion in Afghanistan” example above. They might understand food production and consumption patterns better and are aware of the cultural and social particularities that guide food (and cash) assistance activities. In addition, localization can prevent substitution effects and the replacement of local structures by working with and strengthening local capacities.

On the other hand, local actors may also face their own unique challenges. Who is considered a local in a given locality is not always well defined. Local staff or partner organizations might be perceived to be party to the conflict based on their group membership and actions they take. Local staff and organizations are also often subject to local power dynamics and cultural expectations of reciprocity within groups. Giving to outgroups equally can come with social sanctions or worse for local staff. Local staff and partners can also be exposed to extortion, as they might have families in place and are thereby more vulnerable.

Conflict sensitivity and the application of its principles requires a mix of approaches. For instance, local aid actors, alongside international staff, can be trained on principles of conflict sensitivity and supported to apply them throughout their work. Beyond just training, establishing a safe environment where local

⁴² See for example UNDP (2020), [Guidance Note #3: Conflict-Sensitive Procurement Recruitment and Accountability in Lebanon](#).

partners can be candid about the challenges they face plays a crucial role in the implementation of implementing conflict sensitivity practices. For instance, local partners may often see problems or detect tensions between groups or frustration with aid programs well before international actors do, but they may hesitate in sharing these observations with their international counterparts due to concerns of sounding incapable of overcoming contextual challenges and implementing successful interventions. A strong effort is needed to ensure local partners do not believe raising problems will be interpreted negatively, or brand them as being difficult to work with. Various resources on conflict sensitivity are geared toward ensuring that local partners, as well as local leaders, their conflict sensitivity.⁴³

WHO IS A LOCAL IN KENYA?

Working with staff that are perceived to be foreign, or more dangerously, perceived to be from an opposing group, is one of the surest ways to make an organization and program seem to be taking a side in conflict dynamics on the ground. Staff can be attacked, and food assistance may be blocked. On one occasion, while delivering emergency food aid, one organization in Kenya deliberately chose food transport drivers from the “local” population. However, who was considered a local by the INGO was not considered local by the local population. The preference of drivers was interpreted by aid recipients as a deliberate bias and resulted in protests in front of the INGO offices. To locals, all transport contracts had been given to “foreigners” despite their strong cultural links and linguistic similarities with aid recipients. After hearing their grievances, INGO representatives noted that there was reduced transport delivery capacity amongst the group the aid recipients considered as “local.” Yet, rather than ignoring grievances, the INGO decided to work with local businessmen to create the necessary capacities. They helped form a transport organization in the community and awarded 50% of the transport contracts to that association.

Recommendations for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Working with Local Aid Actors and through Localization

- Form long-term partnerships with local organizations and engage in mutual capacity sharing on conflict sensitive approaches;
- Set expectations on conflict sensitivity for all staff during their hiring and onboarding process;
- Conduct joint conflict sensitivity analysis with local organizations to understand local power and conflict dynamics and how they may affect local staff and partners;
- Provide capacity sharing and accountability mechanisms to local partners on applying conflict sensitivity, and preventing bias and discrimination;
- Promote a learning culture, whilst establishing various formal and informal opportunities for receiving feedback, even anonymously;
- Protect local staff and partners from the risk of sanctions when they act according to humanitarian principles and do not showing preference to their own group.

Investing in Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion

Food security programs, both emergency and development, are centrally focused on strengthening local livelihoods as a pathway to food security. While livelihood interventions often aim to improve the prospects of people who are structurally, economically, or socially marginalized, they automatically interact with existing power dynamics within and between groups. For instance, providing support in ways that create an economic advantage for one group over another may foment tensions.

⁴³ Specific guidance is available in resources such as [this one](#).

A livelihood is not only how an individual earns money to meet their family's needs, but it is also a powerful source of identity. Livelihood activities can align with different religious or ethnic factions, different socio-economic groups (such as castes), or different geographies. Food security programs that invest in specific livelihoods can drive economic prosperity towards distinct groups of people, either intentionally or inadvertently, propping up certain identity groups and neglecting others. Care should also be taken because certain livelihood pathways, especially those that are high value (e.g., livestock), may attract or fall victims to criminal activities (e.g. livestock raiding or rustling), and investment in those pathways may have a longer-term and broader destabilizing effect. Moreover, when livelihood interventions seek to support markets, including traders, processors, and suppliers, they may automatically work with relatively privileged segments of society that belong to particular identity groups, stoking perceptions of favoritism and elitism.

Alternatively, it is possible for livelihoods investments to support peace. For example, supporting assets or services that encourage collaboration across livelihood groups for shared economic gains can be an incentive for peace.

Recommendations for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity When Investing in Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion

- Undertake conflict and political economy analysis to better understand power dynamics across and within livelihood groups;
- Use participatory processes (such as dividers-connectors analysis) that draw from multiple livelihood groups to identify potential areas for investment that link livelihood groups;
- Use a market systems development approach to invest in services or assets that support multiple livelihood pathways (e.g., financial services, telecommunications, transportation infrastructure, etc.) across multiple identity groups, particularly where certain groups and certain livelihoods tend to overlap significantly;
- Based on the conflict and context analysis, consider the inclusion of specific livelihood interventions, rooted in sound market systems analysis, which will provide alternatives to violence for groups and individuals at risk.

Public Services and Infrastructure

Improving access to health, water, education, and other public services and infrastructure is a common component of food security programs. Similarly, community infrastructure—such as the building of water pumps, irrigation systems, and grain silos—can form an essential part of sustainable food security programming.

The delivery of services can cause tensions to arise in several ways: when access to these services favors certain groups over others (such as displaced versus host communities); when interventions to improve service delivery legitimizes a divisive government; when services are of inferior quality despite additional investment (e.g., poorly constructed buildings); when access to services favors elites, etc. Likewise, community infrastructure projects can be subject to corruption and service delivery can be structured by patron-client relations or other local power dynamics. All infrastructural development should therefore begin with interrogating project phases through a lens of conflict analysis to assess how local conflict drivers might interact with the project. Again, projects should follow participatory approaches that include a wide range of actors. Where several competing actors operate in a project area, it is important to involve all groups from the beginning to achieve (as far as possible) equal access for all, as well as to target particularly vulnerable populations.

At the same time, interventions that support improved access to public services can build social cohesion across groups. For example, where development and oversight of public services instigate dialogue and is shared across groups. When approached through a conflict sensitivity lens, developing community

infrastructure can also advance social cohesion in food security programs by addressing and overcoming resource shortages and serving as a confidence building measure between conflict parties. Where possible, community infrastructure should be inclusively planned, collectively maintained, and ideally operated and managed across conflict lines. Infrastructure and services should also be integrated vertically with regional and national networks, and the state or equivalent governance structures can play a key role in maintaining peace and social cohesion through infrastructure management.

Recommendations for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Public Services and Infrastructure

- Use service delivery and infrastructure development as an opportunity to facilitate dialogue across communities regarding equitable and improved access to those services;
- Undertake conflict sensitivity analysis specific to public services and infrastructure projects to determine potential risks and opportunities related to peace and conflict;
- Planning processes should be participatory, community-driven, and inclusive of all parties to a conflict, especially potential spoilers;
- Infrastructure and services should be leveraged to facilitate dialogue and foster collaboration across dividing lines for shared food security benefits;
- Technical training for aid recipients around infrastructure development should include training related to conflict management.

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE WATER INFRASTRUCTURE IN NIGERIA

In Northern Nigeria, an INGO brought a conflict lens to food security programming in an area where farmers and pastoralists had been feuding. A conflict analysis demonstrated that access to water, on which farmers and pastoralists crucially depend for their food security, was a key driver in the conflict. The parties were brought together in food security capacity building workshops so that the original source of conflict—access to water—became the basis for interaction and relationship-building. Trainings in mediation, negotiation, and leadership were added to the curriculum, resulting in various dialogue sessions driven by participants. Eventually the construction of water pumps was seen by both groups as a solution to water shortages and the associated conflicts. The INGO made funds available and tendered contractors, but the project was managed and overseen by farmer and pastoralist representative groups, who had to continue their collaboration to initiate and implement the project. Eventually, maintenance of the infrastructure was handed to farmer-pastoralist committees, who subsequently functioned as conflict management mechanisms as well.

Land, Water, and Resource Sharing

Land and water conflicts are some of the primary drivers of conflict encountered in food security programming. Programs may be inserted in struggles over arable land between refugee and host communities, or water disputes between farmers and pastoralists. However, resource-sharing agreements and community-based frameworks of cooperation for access to land and water, in many food security interventions, already form an important conflict sensitivity tool. In addition to that, water dispute management systems can create avenues for cooperation by considering pre-existing customary practices and norms, and when appropriate, build off institutions already in place. However, these mechanisms may also be highly patriarchal and exclusionary. To mitigate the risk of potentially supporting such inequitable structures, it is important to base program intervention on inclusive consultative processes that ensure the meaningful inclusion of women and marginalized groups. This includes taking into consideration, for example, any methods of land management used by women or other sub-groups and finding ways to integrate them into the program.

RESOURCE-SHARING AGREEMENTS IN UGANDA

In Northern Uganda, an INGO brought together pastoralists that had been fighting along migrating routes for their cattle. Fights would typically occur during the watering of livestock, often turn violent, and thereby make the maintenance of food security for communities precarious. Cattle thieving would also ensue during watering and grazing, further heightening tensions. By engaging with village elders and drawing on customary knowledge, plans were put in place for time-sharing agreements over pastures and the development of additional watering holes along the migration pathways. As security increased following peace agreements made between tribes, occasional veterinarian services were also established, further incentivizing all sides to keep the peace. Finally, peace committees were set up amongst elders to address the issue of cattle thieving and to negotiate appropriate compensation for offenses.

Recommendations for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Land, Water, and Resource Sharing

- Ensure all resource management initiatives begin with a conflict sensitivity analysis and internal and cross-community dialogues to understand community norms, perceptions, and past grievances;
- Develop resource sharing agreements, such as community-based frameworks of cooperation around access to land and water;
- Connect land, water, and resource sharing mechanisms to existing conflict management and inter-community dialogue mechanisms;
- Support implementation of existing legal frameworks around land and water management;
- Conduct a gendered and social inclusion analysis of land and water governance to ensure that women, girls, and other marginalized groups are meaningfully included in land and water tenure.

Humanitarian Principles and Conflict Sensitivity

Although conflict sensitivity has always held a specific focus on making humanitarian interventions more conflict sensitive, the humanitarian sector presents unique challenges in applying conflict sensitivity. One of the primary obstacles is the urgency and short timeframes in humanitarian response. Particularly in relief interventions that address rapid-onset disasters, community engagement and analysis can slow the response down, and divert vital time and resources from saving lives. Nevertheless, interventions can incorporate quick exercises that, at least, fulfill the minimum standards of conflict sensitivity, including those outlined by the Overseas Development Institute.⁴⁴ These practical suggestions for a minimum standard on conflict sensitivity practices include, among others, a “good enough” conflict analysis as part of initial emergency assessment—including rapid community-based assessments—to identify key drivers of conflict.

For the humanitarian sector, conflict sensitivity frameworks may feel incompatible, as humanitarian actors rely on humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence to gain and maintain access; whereas conflict sensitivity asserts that aid is never neutral, as all interventions become part of the

⁴⁴ The Humanitarian Practice Network at Overseas Development Institute’s [Applying Conflict Sensitivity in Emergency Response paper](#) suggests the following for minimum conflict sensitivity standards in emergency response: 1) Emergency preparedness plans should include a regularly reviewed and updated conflict analysis; 2) Initial emergency assessment should include a ‘good enough’ conflict analysis identifying key drivers of conflict; 3) Partnership strategies and partner selection should be analyzed in relation to conflict dynamics; 4) Management and operational staff should receive training on conflict sensitivity; 5) All new staff should have orientation on the conflict context; and 6) Conflict-related questions and indicators should be included in monitoring and evaluation tools.

context.⁴⁵ Therefore, by holding that all interventions insert themselves into local power dynamics, conflict sensitivity uncomfortably politicizes a sector that seeks to remain apolitical. The humanitarian motivation to save lives rapidly through food assistance can therefore lead to trade-offs with conflict sensitive programming. Accepting these trade-offs without carefully analyzing their potential long-term harm could compromise the very humanitarian principles that humanitarian food assistance tries to uphold.

Recommendations for Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Humanitarian Food Assistance Interventions

- Follow conflict sensitivity minimum standards in humanitarian food assistance interventions to balance response time with appropriate conflict sensitivity mechanisms;
- Integrate conflict sensitivity considerations into humanitarian needs assessments to mitigate the impact of trade-offs that may be required to uphold humanitarian principles;
- Use the above analysis to inform discussions over the kind of moral and operational boundaries an organization sets to maintain humanitarian operations.

THE HUMANITARIAN CONUNDRUM IN SYRIA

The conundrum between the delivery of humanitarian food assistance and the potential of working with illegitimate actors is particularly acute in the case of Syria. The vast majority of food assistance flows through the Syrian Red Crescent, which is perceived to be close to the Syrian government and even the security services. The Syrian government itself stands accused of war crimes and has been described by Human Rights Watch as “weaponizing the delivery of aid.” A representative of a large intergovernmental organization that delivers food assistance also described that, throughout the war, there is evidence that armed groups in besieged areas diverted at least some food assistance. While the organization is very diligent in applying humanitarian principles to active operations, the long-term or indirect effects to conflict sensitivity are often not considered because the need to deliver humanitarian food assistance is so great.

⁴⁵ USAID (2020), [Responsible Development: A Note on Conflict Sensitivity from USAID’s Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention \(CVP\)](#); Goddard, N., Poyac-Clarkin, A., & Levine, C. (2016), [Conflict Sensitivity in Food Security Programming](#), USAID Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (DCHA/CMM).

Overall Recommendations

Recommendations for Practitioners

Food security programs should seek ways to strengthen social cohesion and gender equality through sustainable practices rooted in the collective management of resources. Efforts to strengthen and measure resilience can reveal the mutual and reinforcing benefits of food security programming, peacebuilding, and sustainable development through the strengthening of social and environmental systems. As an essential need, collaboration around food security can, for example, be an important confidence-building measure between conflicting parties, which can be brought together through the collaborative and sustainable management of resources. Such approaches need to be gender transformative, addressing underlying patriarchal structures and unequal access and control over resources.

Adhere to minimum standards of conflict sensitivity in circumstances where the speed of delivering assistance does not allow for more in-depth considerations. Speed should not be an excuse to forgo conflict sensitivity. Basic minimum standards, such as including a “good enough” conflict analysis in an initial emergency assessment, should be common practice, albeit with an eye on seeking opportunities for a more in-depth consideration of conflict sensitivity during the intervention whenever possible.

The politics and power dynamics of food security need to be made explicit for conflict sensitivity to be effective. Engaging organizational leadership, staff, and partners in discussions about how programmatic choices affect conflict and power dynamics on the ground is an essential building block of conflict sensitive practices. Ethical conundrums and programmatic trade-offs—speed versus social and political analysis, for example—need to be openly discussed and assessed for their potential risks, just as other programmatic choices. This can generate essential discussions over redlines in the trade-offs being made in the name of humanitarian principles, as well as support critical efforts to problem-solve.

Localization and empowering local populations to address conflict sensitivity issues in food security programming on their own terms should be among the primary goals of a conflict sensitive intervention. A systems-wide empowerment approach, focusing on the empowerment of individuals, groups, and institutions should be integrated across all operations. This includes engaging people within and across communities in participatory processes in program design and implementation decisions. Recognizing and acknowledging that people within a context often have the knowledge and tools to analyze, plan, and address their own problems is key to conflict sensitivity in food security programming. Social accountability mechanisms, for example, can help address protracted conflict sensitivity issues, such as theft and corruption around food security programs. Contributions of food security programming to empowerment for conflict sensitivity, however, must be based on realistic theories of change.

Recommendations for Donors

Require implementing partners to uphold minimum conflict sensitivity standards and encourage them to seek transformational change by empowering local communities and fostering greater inclusion. Minimum standards of conflict sensitivity, which are quicker and less comprehensive, should be upheld in all cases, but especially in certain emergency contexts where the speed and nature of the program does not allow for going further. By definition, minimum standards do not cover all aspects of conflict sensitivity. Therefore, whenever possible, implementing actors should be encouraged and supported to contribute to transformational change in conflict dynamics through empowering local communities to strengthen social cohesion and gender equality.

Explore established and emerging tools in for conflict sensitivity and prevention in food security programming, and monitor and evaluate their impacts. Food security programming has long relied on

early warning systems, such as USAID-supported FEWS NET, to mitigate harm associated with food insecurity. Early warning systems are used to build response scenarios and prevent crises where possible. They could be equally useful for the development of conflict prevention and conflict sensitivity strategies in food security programming. Similar systems are also increasingly being used by peacebuilding and conflict analysts to monitor and potentially prevent conflicts.

Encourage greater sharing, development, and coordination of conflict sensitive resources and approaches. There is a great deal of information available on the wider topic of conflict sensitivity; however, it is dispersed between different donors and their implementing partners, covering a range of sectors across the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus. Greater efforts can be made to share, develop, and coordinate resources and approaches to ensure that they are available to all who need them. This may include basic training materials on conflict sensitivity⁴⁶, lessons learned, toolkits to help apply the approach,⁴⁷ and tailored products to inform specific food security interventions.

Invest in and build a research base for climate-informed conflict sensitivity in food security programming. Linking conflict sensitivity and especially conflict preventive measures to changing weather patterns in food security programs will be crucial in the future. Livelihood pathways are some of the best-established ways in which climate change can lead to conflict by putting additional pressures on resources. However, as discussed above, food security programming is also uniquely positioned to mitigate research competition and transform it into collaboration. Building a knowledge base and revisiting past interventions should be key for learning about conflict sensitive programming in the context of climate change.

⁴⁶ For example, on Disaster Ready, Mercy Corps' [Building Conflict Sensitive Interventions](#) training course.

⁴⁷ For example, Mercy Corps' [Conflict Sensitive Interventions Toolkit](#).

Conclusion

To ensure food security programming upholds the Do No Harm principle, conflict sensitivity should not be seen as a supplement to programs, but as an integrative approach through which programs can be designed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. Rather than a single technical exercise, conflict sensitivity should be mainstreamed into all food security operations, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states. This includes emergency response, where at least minimum standards of conflict sensitivity should be observed. Each stage of the planning and implementation process for food security programs should be assessed against conflict dynamics as each choice of partner or use of different food assistance modalities presents both risks of conflict and opportunities for peace.

Fortunately, several approaches to conflict sensitive program management in food security already exist. Perhaps most important is the need for regular context monitoring and analysis, and for programming to be participatory, inclusive, and transparent to local populations. This allows food security actors to listen, learn, and adapt their interventions to respond to conflict dynamics. Therefore, while aid workers should receive guidance on the specific technical elements of conflict sensitivity; emotional intelligence, negotiation skills, and cultural competencies are equally important. Mainstreaming conflict sensitivity across aid programs, could also promote greater coherence between humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programming.

Ultimately, empowering local populations to address conflict sensitivity issues in food security programming on their own terms should be the primary goal of interventions. Communities that can collectively monitor the benefits of programs and hold aid actors, local leaders, and national authorities to account, will be able to address conflict sensitivity issues more effectively. In addition to being locally owned, when conflict sensitivity is delivered in respect of the principles of gender equality and social inclusion—as it must always be—food systems can be made more secure through a fairer distribution of resources and strengthened social cohesion.