

## “Do No Harm”

The “Do No Harm” approach had been developed in an effort of close cooperation between a number of humanitarian and development organisations as a result of certain traumatic experiences in the 1990ies. These organisations had seen themselves confronted with the following fundamental question:

*“How may aid be provided in conflict settings in ways that, rather than feeding into and exacerbating the conflict, help local people disengage from the violence that surrounds them and begin to develop alternative systems for addressing the problems that underlie the conflict?”*

All **violent conflicts** have causes. These may be rooted in structural injustices, may be ethnically or religiously motivated, or may be a result of the struggle for limited resources. Causes may be historical or relatively new, may include a broad involvement of people or not, may be completely internal or influenced by external factors, may have resulted already in eruptions of violence or just have the potential to do so. In any case, they have an influence on the relationships between people and on attitudes and behaviours.

The “Do No Harm” framework uses five categories for analysing tensions in a situation of violent conflict, which are called **Dividers** or Capacities for War. They represent some of the characteristic features of the two groups in conflict and are usually easy to identify. These are the issues that people fight about and that are in the focus of the media once violence has erupted.

While Dividers are more or less obvious, they represent only one side of a conflict situation. Even in the most fierce wars, there are many people who continue their normal lives and keep working for the development of their society. In general, there are far more people who are not directly involved in the fighting, but the public attention very often focuses on the “news” of death and destruction.

Even though not strong enough to prevent the escalation of violence, there are always linkages between the two sides in a conflict situation, which could be used to counterweight tensions and to show people perspectives for co-existence. For development actors, it is essential to understand that other dimension, too.

The “Do No Harm” concept uses the same five categories for analysing these linkages, which are called **Connectors** or Local Capacities for Peace.

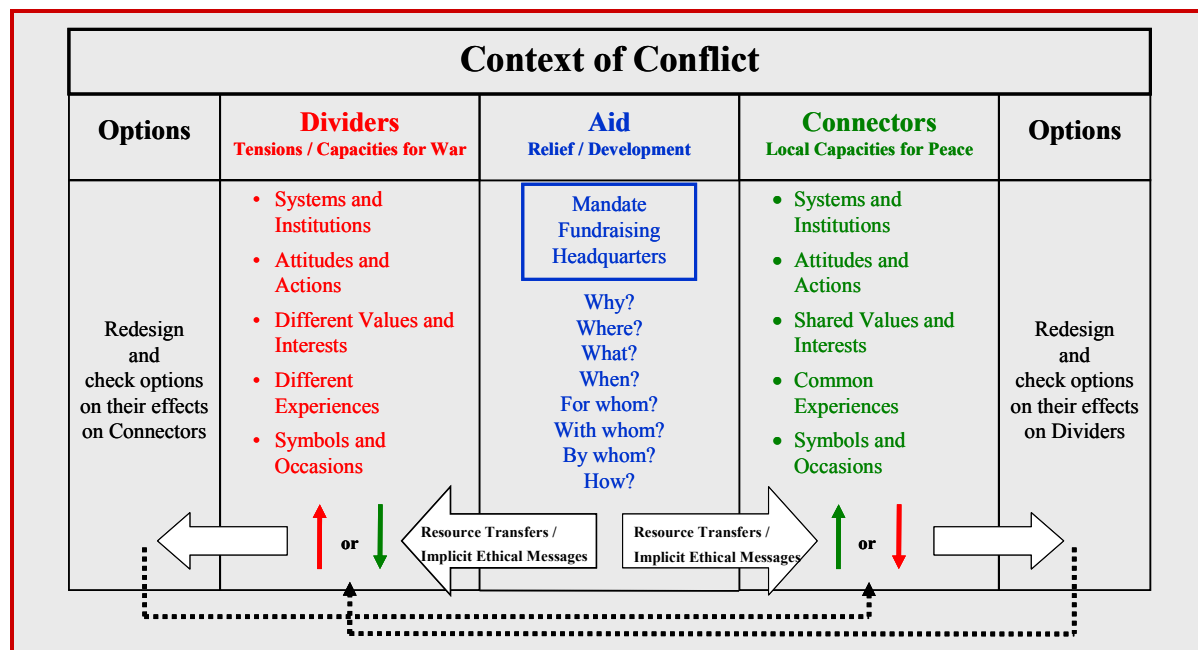


Figure 1 : Framework for Considering the Impact of Aid on Conflict

Before starting to implement a relief operation or a development project in a situation of violent conflict, the information about the context must be gathered and carefully analysed. It is important to know who is involved in the conflict, and it is necessary to see both the Dividers and the Connectors in that particular situation.

When **“Aid”** is provided in such a context, it becomes part and parcel of the situation and thus of the conflict. Additional resources may mean a new incentive for fighting, particularly in situations where the competition over scarce resources is one of the causes of conflict. The distribution of goods, the provision of services, the interaction with the community and the conflict parties, the behaviour of staff, all this can contribute to the reinforcement of existing tensions or to the promotion of harmonious relationships among the target population.

The “Do No Harm” framework helps organisations in understanding the components of their programme and to focus on the details that may have negative side-effects.

All relief or development programmes include the **transfer of resources** (food, health care, capacity-building), and experience shows that these resources may be seen by local people as representing power and wealth. People in conflict attempt to control and use aid resources to support their side of the conflict and weaken the other.

That’s why it is essential to understand what effects resource transfers may have on the local context. Project interventions from outside have an impact on the socio-economic, political and environmental situation in any case – in the context of violent conflict project staff has to be even more careful about who is benefiting and who is losing from the activities. In other words, it has to be considered whether the effects are reinforcing or weakening the Dividers and whether they are strengthening or undermining the Connectors.

Aid carries the explicit message of caring about suffering. By the ways in which it is given and the actions of staff, it also carries several **implicit or tacit messages**. These can affect the context of conflict by reaffirming certain mentalities found as a result of the traumatic experience in situations of on-going violence.

Policies and guidelines of organisations, the interaction of project staff with the local population, the individual behaviour of those who are involved in project implementation, all this has a strong influence on the image that local people develop about a relief operation or a development intervention. Experience has shown that in many cases the reputation of an organisation is much more dependent on such perceptions than on tangible results of project activities.

Development workers need to be aware about these “Implicit Ethical Messages” transferred alongside their practical assistance, try to avoid the confirmation of harmful patterns and show examples of cooperation, respect, accountability and fairness instead.

It is rarely a whole programme that has a negative impact on a context of conflict. In many cases, however, there are some details of programming, some ill-considered decisions, some careless conduct, which have unintended side-effects on the relationship between the various groups in a conflict situation. A well-meant relief or development programme could consequently contribute inadvertently to the reinforcement of tensions or to the weakening of linkages.

This could be avoided through application of the “Do No Harm” framework. Knowing the context, understanding Dividers and Connectors, looking at the components of a programme and at their impact on the context through the mechanisms of Resource Transfers and Implicit Ethical Messages will reveal the shortcomings of an intervention. In case a particular decision reinforces one of the Dividers or undermines one of the Connectors, project implementers need to look for alternative ways of achieving their objective.

There are always **options**!