

Chapter 2

Addressing challenges of evaluation in situations of conflict and fragility

This chapter is first of the three that form the main evaluation guidance. Building on the conceptual basis of Chapter 1, it outlines key challenges to evaluation in these settings and then describes core principles for addressing these challenges, including the OECD evaluation principles. The chapter considers the role of conflict analysis and the need to understand the particular context of the intervention. These principles should guide an evaluation in fragile, conflicted settings throughout the process described in Chapters 3 and 4.

This chapter describes some of the key challenges to evaluating in settings of conflict and fragility and then sets out the core principles for meeting these challenges.

Challenges to evaluations in situations of conflict and fragility

This guidance considers that the main challenge specific to evaluations in fragile and conflict-affected settings is understanding and adapting to violent conflict, while mitigating the risk that evaluations themselves become part of the conflict or cause harm to those involved. Other challenges addressed are: complexity, weak theoretical foundations, challenges to data collection, attribution, a highly political environment, multiple actors and multiple agendas.

The high risk of violence

Evaluations of interventions in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding expose – in contrast to almost all forms of evaluation – both evaluators and evaluated to real risk. Potential implications are profound. First, the threat of violence may constrain the evaluators' ability to raise issues, collect material and data, recruit and retain local staff, meet interlocutors, publish findings, and disclose sources. Defending the integrity of evaluation findings in highly politicised and even dangerous settings can pose problems for evaluation teams, particularly where evaluation findings may potentially be misused by different parties to a conflict or harm those involved. Second, the risk of harm may mean that the information obtained is biased, incomplete and/or (voluntarily or involuntarily) censored. Consequently, evaluations must address the operational and methodological consequences of the risk of violence. More specifically, in order to deal with this challenge, it is advisable that the evaluation itself include a conflict analysis in order to assess the intervention and to ensure that the evaluation process and product is conflict sensitive.

Complex and unpredictable contexts and interventions

Few would dispute that settings of conflict and fragility are complex, combining multifaceted, multi-directional change processes with high levels of unpredictability, a general lack of information, and potential strategic misinformation. The way programmes are implemented on the ground may differ widely from original plans, as practitioners change what they are doing to adapt to an evolving conflict. As a result, it may be difficult to identify what exactly should be evaluated. Although unpredictability and complexity may be inevitable, their frequently negative ramifications for evaluations need not be. Evaluators must prepare for risks, develop robust designs, and ensure sufficient flexibility to counter the challenges of unpredictability and complexity. They should select methods that help to capture complex social change processes and illuminate interactions between interventions and the context.

Multiple actors

Many players work in fragile and conflict-affected settings, seeking to effect change and influence the situation, which adds additional dimensions of complexity and uncertainty. Actors may be members of the diplomatic corps or the military; development and humanitarian agencies or government bodies; informal power structures or various local groups. These many actors have different cultures, loyalties, institutional features and interests, and do not always pull in the same direction. There are also differences in terminologies, planning cultures, and approaches between the different agencies on the donor side.

Weak theoretical foundations and evidence base

The theories underpinning international support to peacebuilding, conflict prevention and statebuilding are weak. There is a lack of agreed upon, proven strategies for effectively working towards peace. The logic underpinning donor activities is often unclear. Numerous strategies and programmes are poorly designed with ill-defined objectives and a lack of clearly stated, tested (or testable) theories of change (i.e. the implicit or explicit understandings of how it is hoped that what is being done will contribute to peace). Programme approaches are often contested and evolve rapidly to adapt to the changing context, meaning it may be difficult to establish what activities and strategies are actually being implemented. All of which makes programmes less easily “evaluable”.

Challenges to data collection

Challenges encompass scarcity of data, lack of monitoring, high personnel turnover, and erratic access to field data in certain regions at certain points in time. While the lack of timely, relevant, comparable data of high quality is not unique to situations of conflict and fragility, data problems tend to be compounded in these settings due, for example, to weak state statistical capacities and a multiplicity of international actors with incoherent data systems. However, this guidance suggests that more data collection sources are available than currently used and that resources and institutions with special competence in this area exist and should be taken advantage of.

Attribution

Attribution is the ascribing of a causal link from a specific intervention to observed (or expected) changes. While attribution poses a problem in all areas of development work, attributing results to any particular policy or single intervention in conflict contexts is even more difficult. The difficulty arises principally from the fluidity and complexity of conflicts settings themselves and from frequently non-linear nature of change processes. For example, other activities (beyond the scope of the evaluation), such as military interventions, may actually be responsible for changes that are attributed to conflict prevention or peacebuilding activities. It can be very difficult for evaluators to control for these outside variables. Related challenges include the difficulty of creating a counterfactual or control group, especially when looking at country or regional conflicts, which is necessary to describe with reasonable certainty what would have happened had the activity in question not taken place

Politicisation

Fragile and conflict-affected settings are highly political environments. Due to the politicisation of international involvement and political sensitivities in national contexts, evaluators may find it difficult to maintain a safe, credible “evaluation space”.

Box 2.1. Political constraints in conflict settings: lessons from Sri Lanka

The evaluation took place in 2008-2009 in the complex political context of strained relations between the government and donors and significant security restrictions on travel outside Colombo. This limited the range of parties that could be interviewed and made donors hesitant to release sensitive strategy and programming material to the evaluation team. In response to the worsening security situation, the evaluation team decided to exclude from the sample the activities associated with the peace negotiations, as well as other aspects of diplomatic engagement, the security sector, and some donors’ internal analyses. This was a significant decision that led to agreement by most donors to support the evaluation, even though it meant important areas of donor engagement and the history of conflict prevention and peacebuilding work were not assessed.

Source: Chapman et al. (2009).

Overcoming challenges to evaluation

This section outlines core principles for evaluation in settings of violent conflict and fragility. These principles should be carried throughout the evaluation process, informing each of the steps outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. The specific issues outlined here complement the general evaluation principles and standards which the OECD has set out. The application phase of this guidance showed that these general evaluation principles, as outlined below are also relevant and valid in conflict settings. There is no excuse not to apply them. When applied carefully, they enhance the credibility, use, and rigour of the evaluation process and its end results.

The OECD DAC’s *Quality Standards for Development Evaluation* (2006a) provides a guide to good practice. This short document, built through international consensus, is a staple reference for all evaluations, including those in settings of conflict and fragility. The standards draw on the core principles that evaluation processes should be impartial, credible, transparent, and independent. They should also be useful and relevant, informing decision makers and contributing to learning. An evaluation report should describe transparently the data sources, data collection instruments and analytical methods used and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Evaluation teams should deal with attribution and causality in a credible way. Commissioning agencies should make the results of evaluation widely available and ensure that they are used systematically by decision makers and others to support learning and accountability. The standards also state that the collaboration of development partners is essential. This and other key references for evaluation are presented in OECD (2011d), *Evaluating Development Co-operation: Summary of Key Norms and Standards*.

Context as the starting point: conflict analysis

What is known about a situation of conflict and fragility, its causes, components, and dynamics? Conflict analysis – which includes analysis of the political economy, stakeholders,

and conflict drivers and causes – is central to any evaluation of donor engagement in situations of conflict and fragility. Conflict analysis provides an analytical framework for assessing the relevance, effectiveness, and impact of peacebuilding activities, as explored in Chapter 4.

Conflict analysis may be used as the basis for assessing whether activities have been sufficiently sensitive to the conflict setting, determining the scope of the evaluation (what will be evaluated), and identifying pertinent evaluation questions. Another of its functions is to ensure that the evaluation itself is conducted in a conflict-sensitive way. Conflict analysis, as the basis for evaluative analysis, is a key aspect of conflict prevention and peacebuilding evaluations, regardless of the design and methods used. It is as important for evaluations using randomised control groups, regression analyses, surveys, and large sample sizes, as it is for qualitative evaluations with in-depth case studies and focus groups. (The use of conflict analysis is covered in more detail in Chapter 3 and Annex A).

Conflict sensitivity

Conflict sensitivity refers to the ability of an organisation to a) understand the context in which it is operating, b) understand the interaction between the intervention and that context, and c) act upon that understanding in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on the conflict (CDA, 2009). All activities in a fragile and conflict-affected setting must be conflict sensitive. The principles of conflict sensitivity, adopted by the OECD in 2001, assert that international assistance must, at a minimum, avoid negative effects on conflict – “do no harm” – and, where possible, make a positive contribution to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Fragile States Principle 2 (OECD, 2007) reiterates the commitment to conflict sensitivity, emphasising the importance of basing interventions on strong conflict and governance analysis in order to avoid inadvertently aggravating social tensions or exacerbating conflict.

Conflict prevention and peacebuilding policies, projects and programmes, and development or humanitarian activities in conflict settings sometimes do cause harm, often unwittingly as in the example given Chapter 1 (Box 1.3). When assistance does cause harm in a situation of conflict and fragility, it produces direct or indirect effects that aggravate grievances, increase tension and vulnerabilities, and/or perpetuate conflict and fragility in some way. Such effects may be the result of a project or programme engagement – i.e. how its humanitarian or development outcomes contribute to peace or affect conflict. However, they may also spring from the operational aspects of an engagement (Uvin, 1999ab) – i.e. how, where, and when donors and agencies operate and how they implement and distribute aid.

As a policy or programme should be conflict sensitive, so should the evaluation process itself. Evaluations carried out before, during, or after a violent conflict must be conflict sensitive because they are themselves interventions that may impact on the conflict. In this respect, it is important to understand that questions asked as part of an evaluation may shape people’s perception of a conflict. Evaluators should be aware that questions can be posed in ways that reinforce distrust and hostility towards the “other side”. Evaluators should keep in mind that the way they act, including both the explicit and implicit messages they transmit, may affect the degree of risk.

Moreover, the evaluation process itself may actually put people in danger. A number of the evaluators who contributed to this guidance spoke of incidents where someone they

had questioned in the course of their evaluation work had been arrested or otherwise threatened. Measures should be taken to avoid this. For example, in one evaluation the evaluation team leader decided that the names of its local members should not be published in the report, because of possible repercussions they could face as a result. Their identities were protected and the local experts operated instead as external resource staff and key informants. In some cases, such as the real-time evaluation of Denmark's humanitarian aid in south-eastern Somalia (Polastro *et al.*, 2011), it may be considered more prudent and effective to rely on local staff or national teams that can more easily travel in dangerous zones – though their safety must also be protected.

It is especially important to consider the safety of interpreters and other local staff, partners and beneficiaries, whom evaluators may inadvertently expose to greater risks than they themselves face. International evaluators leave after a short while, which may influence the risks they are prepared to take. Local people stay, however, and face possible reprisals. Such risks should be identified and addressed at the outset of the process and included in the planning and implementation of the evaluation. Doing so is the responsibility of evaluation commissioners and team leaders and a requirement of conflict-sensitive, ethical evaluation. Evaluators and commissioners should discuss and take appropriate measures to ensure conflict sensitivity, the ethical conduct of the evaluation and the protection of those involved. A thorough, up-to-date understanding of the conflict is the first step in a conflict-sensitive evaluation process. The evaluation report must explain what measures were or were not taken to ensure the conflict sensitivity of the evaluation itself and any impact that taking or not taking them may have had on the results of the evaluation.

Evaluating conflict sensitivity (and effectiveness)

It is important to understand that conflict sensitivity does not automatically deliver an effective peace programme or policy. A conflict-sensitive intervention is not necessarily effective in addressing drivers of conflict and fragility. Nor are explicit peacebuilding interventions necessarily conflict sensitive. For example, a reconstruction programme that rebuilds destroyed homes and provides small income-generation grants to returning refugees and internally displaced persons may avoid “doing harm” and try to rebuild relationships across conflict lines. It sponsors inter-ethnic dialogue between returnees and host community members, provides “balancing grants” to the host communities for priority community infrastructure or income-generation projects, and sponsors sports and cultural events for youth. It succeeds in ensuring that aid does not disproportionately benefit one group, and supports rebuilding of relationships among some community members. However, while it may be conflict sensitive, the reconstruction programme may not be effective peacebuilding as such, insofar as its activities do not address the drivers of the conflict, which could be, for example, impunity and injustice or conflicting visions of the future.

In assessing conflict sensitivity, it is important to look at the extent to which the intervention aggravates or mitigates grievances, vulnerabilities or tensions. For interventions that do not have explicit peacebuilding goals, evaluators would assess the effects of the development or humanitarian outputs and outcomes (e.g. infrastructure development, a more operational police or judicial system, etc.) on the drivers of conflict or fragility. For example, a poverty reduction programme may have positive development results, but a thorough conflict analysis might reveal that, while the programme reduced levels of poverty overall, one group gained more than another, causing deeper resentment

among excluded groups. If poverty reduction strategies helped achieve greater equity, they might contribute to peace.

In addition, all activities, whether explicitly aimed at peacebuilding or not, should be examined to assess their conflict sensitivity. One of the more widely used conflict sensitivity tools, the *Do No Harm Framework* (Anderson, 1999), draws attention to the unintended consequences of aid planning and practice. Although it was originally developed for humanitarian aid it is also regularly applied to development and peacebuilding interventions. It identifies five ways in which operational components of an intervention may affect a conflict:

- theft/diversion: fuelling the conflict with stolen or diverted goods/funds;
- market effects: changing local markets with an influx of outside goods;
- distribution: distributing goods along the lines of the conflict;
- substitution effects: replacing existing functioning systems or structures;
- legitimisation: giving legitimacy to a group or leader by working with them.

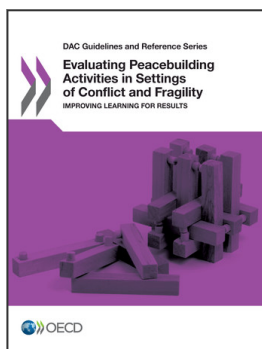
It also identifies four ways in which the behaviour of agencies, especially those implementing programmes, sends messages that reinforce the modes of warfare or, alternatively, non-conflictual relations. These include behaviour that:

- conveys respect or disrespect to people and communities,
- communicates an agency's willingness or unwillingness to be held accountable,
- treats people in ways that are perceived as fair or unfair,
- demonstrates transparency or lack of transparency.

Negative patterns can undermine an organisation's efforts and put its staff in danger, lead to relationships that are antagonistic and untrusting, and make partners and communities feel humiliated. In extreme cases, violating the principles of respect, accountability, fairness and transparency can lead to violence against an organisation or within the community.

Evaluators may need to examine the target agency's own ways of working to determine whether the intervention is conflict sensitive. This would include examining inadvertent impacts of decisions about staffing, criteria for selection of beneficiaries, selection of local partners, relations with local authorities (including military actors and government), and processes and procedures for distributing aid (*ibid.*). Often, simple decisions about hiring – such as requirements regarding language – can result in staff that is disproportionately drawn from one conflict group. Similarly, seemingly objective criteria for the selection of beneficiaries (e.g. needs) can result in one group obtaining much more assistance than another and, consequently, contribute to escalating tensions. While the implication is not that donors or implementing staff abandon their criteria or redistribute aid, they must be aware of unintended conflict effects and develop options within the programme to mitigate them (*ibid.*).

Being conflict sensitive and evaluating conflict sensitivity are two imperative dimensions of evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding work. A clear, critical assessment of an activity or a policy's impacts will cover both intended and unintended consequences and thus offer insights into the sensitivity of the activity under evaluation. Evaluators can help assess whether or not the standard of conflict sensitivity has been achieved – as well as provide insights on how to improve sensitivity.



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