

KoGe Learning Brief No. 2: Conflict-Sensitive Programme Management

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. CSPM as a mindset	2
3. CSPM in the programme cycle management	2
4. CSPM in practice: Case studies.....	4
<i>Case 1: Conflict sensitivity and climate change</i>	5
<i>Case 2: Programming in contexts of migration</i>	6
<i>Case 3: The risk of exacerbating societal divisions</i>	7
<i>Case 4: Implementing projects in situations of economic unrest</i>	8
<i>Case 5: Project implementation in a setting of violent conflict</i>	9
<i>Case 6: Religious divides in a post-conflict setting</i>	10
5. Key Takeaways: Mainstreaming a conflict sensitivity “mindset”	11
6. Further resources	12

1. Introduction

Conflict is a natural part of life in society. If handled well it can lead to positive change and new solutions, or – if it turns violent – it can cause harm and destruction. Conflict sensitivity means recognising the presence of conflict in our work and adjusting our approach to support peaceful ways of resolving our differences while avoiding actions that could worsen tensions or lead to violence.

Conflict-sensitive programme management (CSPM) is not an extra burden on our daily tasks. Instead, it helps us understand situations more deeply and act in ways that are effective and responsible. At the very least, it means avoiding harm. At best, it means ensuring our work has a neutral or even positive impact.

Like the principle of “leaving no one behind (LNOB),” conflict sensitivity starts with us – within our team, with our partners, and with the stakeholders we interact with. We need to be aware of what causes tensions in the communities where we work and agree on how to respond. The way we work together sends an important message to the people we aim to support. It is therefore important that our own project teams are inclusive and diverse, i.e. representative of all relevant societal groups.



Important

- Conflict is a natural part of life. If managed well it can lead to positive change or, if mishandled, can cause harm and violence.
- Conflict-sensitive programme management (CSPM) is not an additional burden but involves including conflict awareness in our work.
- Conflict sensitivity starts within the organisation. The way we work together affects the communities we aim to support.

2. CSPM as a mindset

The distinction between conflict and violence is important because it allows us to understand the wide range of situations that can benefit from conflict sensitivity. CSPM does not begin only in times of crises – even peaceful settings require a conflict-sensitive mindset to notice and address tensions within our teams, amongst our partners, project participants, or the communities where we work. In other words: **we do not need to be in a war zone to address conflict dynamics**.

Perceptions play a key role in understanding conflict dynamics. In situations of violent conflict or communal tensions, how people feel and perceive the situation often matters more than the facts. Always ask: how is our organisation, our programme or activity perceived by different groups in society? Designing and implementing programmes inclusively and fairly helps everyone – even those not directly involved – identify with the effort. This applies to everything from team composition and participant selection to planning public events.

CSPM is only as good as the analysis it is based on. Context analysis enhances our understanding of the environment we operate in. It helps us avoid unintentionally making things worse (“do no harm”) and opens up opportunities to maximise positive outcomes (“do good”). Additionally, it helps us position our work within the broader efforts of other actors in humanitarian, development and peace initiatives. By doing so, we can ensure coordination, avoid duplication, and work towards shared goals.

Conflict analysis tools – such as actor mapping, dividers and connectors, or the conflict tree – can guide our project design, implementation, and follow-up. These tools, many of which are detailed in the resources suggested in Section 6, help embed conflict sensitivity into programme cycle management. This ensures that **conflict sensitivity is not a separate activity** but is integrated alongside other key processes, such as the theory of change, results frameworks, risk assessments, and LNOB measures.

Too often, conflict-sensitive context analysis is seen as tedious or time-consuming. However, it does not need to be overwhelming. Teams often hold valuable knowledge about their operating environment. Tapping into this knowledge through regular meetings or brainstorming sessions – even informal discussions – can yield great insights. Plenty of valuable analysis happens around the coffee machine!



Important:

- Perceptions matter more than facts in many situations. Always ask: how are our actions perceived by different groups?
- Design and implement activities inclusively and fairly. This approach helps ensure everyone – even non-participants – can identify with the project. Send a message of inclusion by forming a team representative of all relevant societal groups.
- Conflict sensitivity relies on strong context analysis and is an integral part of programme cycle management, not a stand-alone task.

3. CSPM in the programme cycle management

The following table shows how to include conflict sensitivity in the different phases of programming. These ideas may not always apply, but even in peaceful settings, programmes may benefit some while excluding others. Keeping this in mind helps us reflect on how the programme interacts with its context and adopt a conflict-sensitive mindset.

The planning phase	
Needs assessment	Perceptions matter. Think about how the person conducting the assessment is introduced and seen by the community. Are consultations inclusive and representative, or could they be seen as biased?
Context analysis	Learn about the setting. What are the main tensions or possible conflict drivers? Is there a history of violence? Does this situation need to be studied in detail using conflict analysis tools?
LNOB analysis	Conflict often affects vulnerable groups the most. Can we identify who might be at risk of being excluded or harmed?
Project design	
Activity planning	Could planned activities worsen tensions? How can we involve the community to avoid harm and even build peace?
Risks and assumptions	Do the risk matrix, theory of change, and results framework reflect the key findings from our context and LNOB analysis?
Budgeting	If there is conflict, can we include funding for mitigation measures like situational updates or staff training?
Project implementation	
Start-up phase	Focus on team composition, staff training, participant selection, and choosing venues carefully to ensure inclusivity.
Day-to-day activities	Build trust with stakeholders and local authorities. Set up clear communication channels within the team and with external partners.
Complementarity	Are other organisations working on similar issues in your area? How can we ensure coordination and avoid duplication?
Monitoring and adaptation	
Situational updates	Regularly check how the project is affecting the context. Are there any unintended impacts? Is the project reaching the intended groups?
Participant engagement	Collect feedback – including anonymously – and look for opportunities to strengthen social cohesion or reduce tensions.
Activity adaptation	Based on feedback, adjust activities to improve the project's relevance and impact.
Evaluation and post-project follow-up	
Evaluation process	Evaluations can sometimes create tensions. Be aware of this and manage relationships carefully.
Learning	Share evaluation findings meaningfully with participants and use them to design better, conflict sensitive projects in the future.



Important:

- Programming is cyclical, not linear. The phases outlined above overlap and require constant feedback loops, like regularly updating risk assessments.
- The table above provides examples, not an exhaustive list. Its goal is to highlight how a conflict-sensitivity mindset can guide programming.

4. CSPM in practice: Case studies

This section uses fictional scenarios to show how CSPM can be applied in our daily work. Each scenario includes a table with two main parts: **understanding the situation** and **taking action**. The examples provide:

- **General questions** to help you think through the situation.
- **Specific measures** to explore ways to address conflict sensitivity.
- **Tools and tasks** that can help during the process.

The structure follows the definition by the **Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (CSC)**, which describes conflict sensitivity as an organisation's ability to:

1. Understand the context it works in.
2. Understand how its actions interact with the context.
3. Act on this understanding to minimise harm and maximise positive impacts.



Important:

- The six cases below are simplified examples designed to show conflict-sensitive thinking. In reality, programming is much more complex.
- The tools listed in the third column are common in conflict analysis handbooks. You can find more details in Section 6. For an overview of these tools, see Annex 1 (pp. 42-43) of the [How to guide to conflict sensitivity](#) published by the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (CSC).

Case 1: Conflict sensitivity and climate change

An NGO is working in a stable rural area, focusing on skills development and agricultural techniques. Recently, the experienced severe flooding caused by climate change. This resulted in significant damage to crops and very low harvests. Several humanitarian agencies stepped in to provide emergency relief. However, the NGO noticed that women-headed households were not included in the local government's list of participants.

	General questions to ask	Conflict-sensitive measures	Tools to apply
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What are the main societal groups (gender, ethnicity, language, religion, etc.)? Could a history of conflict between these groups be reignited by the disaster?- If some groups are excluded from humanitarian support, is it due to oversight or deeper societal issues?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Use existing context analysis and actor mapping to review the situation.- Identify if other vulnerable groups are also being excluded.- Conduct informal discussions with the community to identify at-risk households.- Engage with local government to keep them involved while understanding why certain groups are left out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Actor mapping/network analysis- Dividers-and-connectors analysis
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Could including women-headed households or other excluded groups create tensions? If yes, how can this be managed?- How can we ensure there is no perception of unfair treatment among the groups receiving aid?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Keep communication open and transparent to ensure the right participants are identified and everyone receives equal support.- Conduct a post-distribution monitoring check to confirm that aid reached all intended households, with a focus on women-headed households.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Post-distribution monitoring check- Feedback mechanisms- Conflict sensitive communication

Case 2: Programming in contexts of migration

An NGO works with youth gangs in neighbourhoods of a rapidly urbanising city. Recently, many young people from indigenous communities have been migrating from rural areas to seek better opportunities. The NGO has included these newcomers in its activities. However, local youths are now complaining that the organisation is favouring indigenous youths over them. This has already led to violence, with new arrivals being targeted in the neighbourhoods.

	General questions to ask	Conflict sensitive measures	Tools to apply
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the main groups in the community? Is there a history of tension or conflict between those groups? - Are there deeper issues, beyond competition for services, that divide these groups? - Do the groups understand each other's needs and the services your organisation provides? Are there gaps that other NGOs might address? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Include conflict analysis and actor mapping in the initial context assessment. - Understand the reasons behind the recent increase in migration. - Consult local youths to understand why they are mobilising against the newcomers. Use focus groups or individual discussions to explore their concerns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Positions, interests, needs" analysis - Do-no-harm (seven-step) analysis
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can you build connections between the two groups? - Does your project team include both indigenous youths and urban youths? - How will you respond to potential violence? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identify participants who can connect both groups, e.g., someone respected in the neighbourhood but with indigenous roots. - Organise group discussions to help sides see that their needs complement each other. - Where safe, plan activities like inter-group sports events, joint campaigns, or shared projects. - Ensure your project team includes members from both groups to set an example of collaboration. - Communicate clearly about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Participant selection criteria. o Zero tolerance for violence, while promoting dialogue. - Develop and plan responses to possible violence scenarios. - Involve state actors (e.g., police) if needed to prevent violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus group discussions - Inclusive hiring practices - Scenario planning

Case 3: The risk of exacerbating societal divisions

An NGO working in a country featuring both Anglophone and Francophone communities has designed a new programming cycle. The plan includes creating two new staff positions. The operational team has shared CVs of potential candidates with the NGO director, who notices that only Anglophone candidates are being considered. When she asked her team about this, the response is that Francophone candidates do not have the required skill set and cannot be shortlisted.

	General questions to ask	Conflict sensitive measures	Tools to apply
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the main societal groups in the country? Is there a history of tension or conflict between these groups? - Is the NGO team representative of all societal groups? If not, why? - Could the current team composition (or future hires) be seen as biased or partial? - How might people perceive the exclusion of certain groups? Could this harm the partner's reputation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The NGO director and her staff should discuss the risks of team composition in a self-critical way. This includes understanding how different groups in society might perceive the teams' makeup. - Consult the population to understand potential sensitivities. While the NGO team knows the context well, it may still have internal biases. - Identify if this situation reflects deeper, unspoken societal tensions or if language (Anglophone vs Francophone) is genuinely not seen as a conflict issue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actor mapping using the ABC (attitude, behaviour, context) triangle - Consultations and focus groups
Taking action	<p>Do all team members understand why balanced team composition is important? If tensions between societal groups exist (visible or hidden), how does the team address them? Are these issues discussed openly or ignored?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure that all team members understand the importance of representing different societal groups fairly. - Recruitment: a representative team can help maintain impartiality, especially if tensions escalate. - Hold a team session before starting project work to discuss team dynamics and potential sensitivities. This session is not about "resolving" deeper societal issues but about team awareness. The team's ability to work together will set an example for the community and project participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Representative recruitment processes - Team sessions on conflict sensitivity and conflict management - Bilateral consultations with team members (if needed)

Case 4: Implementing projects in situations of economic unrest

In a country with rising inflation, a Swiss NGO is struggling to implement projects through its network of partners. All budgets for the current programming phase were prepared in the local currency. However, local operators are unable to stay within budget due to rising fuel and food prices. Political demonstrations against the government are increasing, along with incidents of looting. Partners have written to the NGO's head office in Basel, requesting that new contracts be issued in Swiss francs.

	General questions to ask	Conflict sensitive measures in this situation	Tools
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are there dormant societal tensions that could resurface due to economic hardship? Can these be identified? - Are new groups emerging in this situation, especially among communities falling into poverty? - How is the security situation evolving? Could conflict flare up between groups or between the population and government? - How could looting or violence impact staff safety and project activities? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Update the conflict and context analysis to include new emerging groups. - Monitor tensions and security issues through regular situational updates. - Pay attention to potential conflict between groups or between the population and the government, especially during demonstrations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Situational updates - "Multi-level triangle" analysis - Security monitoring - Scenario development
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can the programme and its results be secured? - How can activities be adapted to ensure benefits remain equitable, especially if new at-risk groups emerge (link to LNOB)? - What scenarios could emerge in the future, and how would they affect the programme? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain strong relationships between the Swiss NGO, partners, and donor. Discuss proactively if contracts need to be changed to Swiss francs. - Adapt programming to respond to growing needs, even as resources shrink due to inflation. - Communicate clearly and openly with all stakeholders, especially if new groups are identified. Explain how participants are selected and why. - Depending on the situation, consider collaborating with the government to calm tensions and show that actions are being taken to support the population. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contract negotiation and dialogue - Adaptation of programming - Conflict-sensitive communication

Case 5: Project implementation in a setting of violent conflict

Rebel insurgents have taken control of an area where an NGO is running its programmes. In a recent security briefing, the police and armed forces informed civil society that they can no longer guarantee safe road access to the communities where the organisation operates. The NGO is now considering evacuating staff from the area and pausing programme activities temporarily.

	General questions to ask	Conflict sensitive measures	Tools
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who are the main groups in society? Who is in conflict? Are there groups not involved in the conflict? - Do we have communication or access to these groups (armed and unarmed)? - What is the project's focus? Is it working "on" the conflict (addressing the root causes), or is it being implemented "in" the conflict (caught up in the dynamics)? - How is the project perceived? If it started before the violence, is it still relevant? What are the risks and benefits of continuing versus pausing the project? - Does the project create uneven benefits that could worsen conflict or violence? If so, what adjustments are needed? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deepen understanding of the situation, including societal divisions and perceptions of different groups. - Stay impartial: perceptions of neutrality are crucial, especially if the organisation plans to continue its work in the post-conflict phase. - Carefully assess whether working "in" the conflict is possible or if pausing activities is necessary. (Working "on" conflict becomes very challenging in a violent setting.) - Consult project participants and the population to understand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perceptions of the project (e.g., fairness or uneven benefits). - How the project can stay relevant. - Whether suspending activities is the best option. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stages of conflict and timeline analysis - Conflict actor mapping (e.g. Venn diagram) - Monitoring and risk analysis (in communication with armed actors, if possible). - Community consultations with the population and project participants.
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can the safety of team members be ensured? Are some more at risk in specific areas than others? - What is the impact of violence on team members? How can internal dynamics (e.g. positions in the conflict) be managed? - Are programme adaptations needed to avoid fuelling conflict and ensure the project is fair and equitable to all groups? Could activities shift from development to humanitarian aid or temporarily pause (triple nexus approach)? - How can internal conflicts within the team be managed while remaining neutral in the larger conflict? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct a cost-benefit analysis to decide on continuing, adapting, or pausing the project. - Adjust programming to align with the conflict context: consider participants, activity locations, or types of activities. - Reorganise staff movements based on the security situation - Hold team discussions or exercises to address staff concerns and ensure they feel supported in dealing with the conflict. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cost-benefit analysis of project continuation - Programmatic adaptation (e.g., shift activities or participants) - Team exercises and consultations for internal conflict management - Staff security assessments

Case 6: Religious divides in a post-conflict setting

After a decade of armed conflict, ended by a hastily formulated peace agreement, a Swiss NGO is trying to resume its work in a predominantly Christian country marked by deep religious divides. The NGO's three partner organisations operate through the churches and have strong ties to the current government. However, the government has been criticised for exploiting religious identities to suppress the Muslim minority. On social media, the Swiss NGO and its partners are increasingly targeted by hate speech.

	General questions to ask	Conflict sensitive measures	Tools
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How is your organisation perceived after the conflict? Is it seen as impartial or aligned with one side? - Are there specific events (e.g., human rights violations, trauma) that occurred in the project areas that need consideration? - How did the conflict end? Have the root causes of the violence been addressed, or do they remain unresolved? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognise that a Christian organisation close to the new government may be seen as biased. Address this perception carefully to reach all parts of the population. - Be mindful of symbols: places, words, and individuals carry meaning in a post-conflict setting and must be chosen strategically. - Understand that a "majority winning" narrative may lead to self-victimisation among the minority, which can complicate reconciliation efforts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conflict timeline - "Positions, interests, needs" analysis - Monitoring of the security situation (including online spaces)
Taking action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can the NGO and its partners work towards being seen as more impartial? - Assess whether Muslim communities are willing and ready to participate in planned activities. Is this the right time? - Examine team dynamics: has the conflict created internal divisions or trauma among team members? Internal work may be needed before supporting external communities. - If armed civilian groups emerged during the conflict, what risks to they pose to the programme? Anticipate potential security issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partner with a respected Muslim organisation to demonstrate impartiality. - Form a team with both Christian and Muslim members to send a message of inclusion. - Hold team sessions to address internal concerns and support staff affected by the conflict (trauma, group allegiances, etc.). - Monitor security risks in areas with armed civilian groups and explore collaboration with disarmament programmes. - Communicate transparently with all stakeholders to manage perceptions and demonstrate neutrality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Representative recruiting - Team exercises and consultations - Monitoring security risks - Collaboration with disarmament programmes

5. Key Takeaways: Mainstreaming a conflict sensitivity “mindset”

As the previous examples have shown, CSPM is not about following strict tools or methods. Nor should it be seen as a complex, time-consuming, or data-heavy task. Instead, conflict sensitivity is a way of thinking – an ongoing habit of assessing the challenges we face when designing, implementing, monitoring, and reporting on our activities.

Below are key takeaways to help integrate conflict sensitivity into our daily work at all levels, while keeping situational realities and localisation in mind:

- **Conflict sensitivity starts with understanding the context** in which we work. Keeping this understanding up to date as situations change allows us to **act effectively**, minimising harm and maximising the positive impact of our activities.
- **Conflict is not just armed violence.** The “C” in “CSPM” refers to a broad definition of conflict: competing interests exist in all societies, but the aim is to address them peacefully and without violence.
- **Conflict involves perceptions and “conflicting analyses.”** People will have different views on who is right or wrong, who has legitimate grievances, and how those grievances are expressed. There is no single “true” conflict analysis – multiple perspectives often exist, and they may conflict with each other.
- **Tools for conflict analysis** can help us better understand situations, identify societal divides, and spot conflict drivers. These tools (some mentioned in the previous section, with more details to be found in the resources listed below) can be used individually or with teams, depending on time, data, and needs. The key is to make conflict sensitivity a regular habit, not a one-off process.
- **Conflict sensitivity is about inclusion.** The more analysis is “co-created” – involving team members, communities, and key stakeholders – the more valuable it becomes. Inclusive approaches help avoid bias and reduce the risk of excluding certain groups or individuals.
- **Mainstreaming CSPM does not mean everyone to be a conflict analyst.** Instead, it is about building awareness within teams: being attentive to changing dynamics, learning from programming, and adapting as we go.



Important

- Conflict sensitivity must become a **habit** integrated into daily work, not a long, difficult task done once a year.
- CSPM should be **inclusive**: it can be a team-building exercise that involves colleagues or project participants.
- Not everyone needs to be a conflict analyst, but everyone should understand that a conflict-sensitive mindset is essential for the work our organisations do.

6. Further resources

There are many guidance notes, handbooks, and toolkits on conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity – though most of this documentation is unfortunately available only in English. Below is a selection of publicly available resources that provide an accessible introduction to the themes addressed in this KoGe Learning Brief.

Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (CSC), *How to guide to conflict sensitivity* (2012), available at:

<https://www.saferworld-global.org/resources/publications/646-how-to-guide-to-conflict-sensitivity>

This rich and detailed document, referenced in Section 4, explains how conflict sensitivity can be applied throughout the programming cycle. An annex provides concise overviews of key conflict analysis tools.

Oliva, Fabio and Lorraine Charbonnier, *Conflict Analysis Handbook: A Field and Headquarters Guide to Conflict Assessments* (2016), United Nations Systems Staff College, available at:

<https://www.unssc.org/news-and-insights/resources/conflict-analysis-handbook>

This comprehensive handbook, authored by experienced UN trainers, covers numerous conflict analysis tools in detail and includes an extensive bibliography. It is both accessible and easy to navigate.

Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (2021), International Cooperation webpage on Conflict-Sensitive Programme Management (CSPM), available at:

<https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/themes-sdc/fragile-contexts-and-prevention/preventing-recurrent-cycles-violent-conflicts/conflict-sensitive-programme-management.html>

The Swiss FDFA, a long-time champion of CSPM, provides access to a handbook and various “tip sheets” on related topics, all downloadable from the site.

United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG), *Conducting a Conflict and Development Analysis Tool* (2016), available at: <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/conducting-conflict-and-development-analysis-tool>

This extensive guide offers an “agency-neutral” approach to conflict analysis. It includes real-world examples and detailed commentary on the stages of conflict analysis, as well as guidance on when and why to undertake such efforts.

Van Brabant, Koenraad, “Peacebuilding How? Good Practices on Conflict Analysis,”

Interpeace, 2010, available at: [https://cnxus.org/wp-](https://cnxus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2010_IP_Peacebuilding_How_Good_Practices_In_Conflict_Analysis.pdf)

[content/uploads/2022/04/2010_IP_Peacebuilding_How_Good_Practices_In_Conflict_Analysis.pdf](https://cnxus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2010_IP_Peacebuilding_How_Good_Practices_In_Conflict_Analysis.pdf)

This concise text offers practical insights into the methods and politics of conflict analysis. It also explores how different perspectives can lead to “conflicting analyses”, as highlighted in Section 5.