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# **Conflict Sensitivity in Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism:**

## *Good intentions are not enough*

*A reflection paper by Anita Ernstorfer*

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## **I. BACKGROUND**

Over the past several years, the policy focus on ‘preventing’ or ‘countering’ violent extremism and de-radicalization has increased. More and more development and peacebuilding organizations have been implementing projects and programs with PVE<sup>1</sup> (preventing violent extremism) objectives. At the same time, many organizations continue to struggle with this evolving and often controversial agenda, particularly how to align other peacebuilding, conflict prevention or governance work and values with such – explicit or implicit – approaches to address violent extremism.

PVE programming happens at the nexus of development, security and peacebuilding approaches and the boundaries and related terminology between “PVE” on the one hand, versus “CVE” (countering violent extremism), “Counter-terrorism” (CT) or de-radicalization approaches are often unclear. Just like for any other type of international engagement implemented in fragile or transitional contexts, applying a **conflict-sensitive approach** is critical for PVE work. Engaging in PVE is highly political and has faced criticism from civil society and NGOs about ‘securitizing’ development and peacebuilding work. Specific approaches to address ‘extremism’ have often been counter-productive and have the potential to put local communities and partners at risk for reasons that are further explained in Section II (key conflict-sensitivity risks).

Conflict-sensitivity for PVE initiatives is not just a technicality to tinker with the programmatic details of an intervention. It forces policy makers, senior managers, strategic planners and program implementers to ask fundamental questions about how PVE interventions interact with the context and related conflict dynamics, challenges them to reflect on the implications of policy coherence (or lack thereof) on the effectiveness of PVE and other types of development and peacebuilding approaches, and poses significant demands on implementers and donors alike to practice adaptive programming given the many unintended impacts PVE interventions can have.

### **CONFLICT SENSITIVITY AND DO NO HARM**

Conflict sensitivity refers to the practice of understanding how development, humanitarian or peacebuilding interventions interact with conflict dynamics in a particular context, to mitigate unintended negative effects, and to maximize the positive contributions of assistance activities to sustaining peace wherever possible. It is relevant for all types of interventions, important not only in situations of active violent conflict, but also in other contexts of latent violence, protracted conflicts or post-conflict settings. Conflict sensitivity does not require activities to specifically focus on achieving

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will use ‘PVE’ to talk about developmental and peacebuilding approaches that aim to address the structural drivers of violent extremism dynamics - as opposed to security focused counter-terrorism efforts (often aimed at addressing manifestations of extremist violence) or specific ‘de-radicalization’ efforts focused at individual level. For a more detailed discussion of terminology and the history of certain types of framings, please see the UNDP and International Alert toolkit on design, monitoring and evaluation of PVE (p. 15) or Ernstorfer, Anita: Effective Approaches to PVE/Berghof Handbook (section 2).

peacebuilding objectives, but instead seeks to capitalize on the impact all activities may have on peace and conflict.

Mary Anderson developed Do No Harm (DNH) as a principle and an operational framework in the 1990s based on lessons from unintended negative impacts of aid in response to the Rwanda crisis. It developed from a collaborative learning and consultative feed-back process involving hundreds of aid agencies and more than 1,000 aid practitioners globally, resulting in: [Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War](#).

The concept of Do No Harm is often misunderstood as people are sometimes familiar with the DNH principle, but not the practical framework behind it. DNH not only includes the notion of ‘avoiding harm’ but also provides a practical and operational framework<sup>2</sup> for mitigating possible unintended impacts of international assistance on the context. Furthermore, the framework encourages making pro-active contributions to peace where possible – moving further along the spectrum from basic prevention of unintended harm towards peacebuilding (without being a peacebuilding framework!).

The DNH framework walks practitioners through a step-by-step approach to analyzing the context, understanding dividers and connectors in a specific context, and understanding the interactions between dividers and connectors in an international intervention/program. It asks which dividers and connectors can be influenced to be decreased/increased, analyzes patterns of impact of an external engagement on a context (organizational actions and individual behaviors), develops alternative options in case course correction is required, and helps to understand how alternative engagement options would interact with the context.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past two decades, many donors and international and local development, humanitarian and peacebuilding organizations have embraced conflict sensitivity and/or Do No Harm and have collected a significant body of experience with practical application.<sup>4</sup> While practitioners and policy makers understand the general principles in theory, insufficient knowledge of how to implement them in practice in programming and operations is often cited as a limitation or challenge. Often, conflict sensitivity considerations come in as an afterthought when the higher strategic, funding, and programming decisions have already been made. In addition, organizations might invest in initial training and capacity-development of staff, but then do not follow up with a continuing process of accompaniment of teams and partners to integrate conflict sensitivity and DNH systematically into design, monitoring and evaluation approaches on an ongoing basis.<sup>5</sup>

The UN has renewed its commitment to conflict sensitivity and context awareness as part of the Sustaining Peace Agenda. The Secretary-General’s report on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace (A/72/707-S/2018/43, 18 January 2018) in response to the resolutions on Sustaining Peace, underlines the requirement of conflict sensitivity and joint multi-dimensional risk and conflict analysis in order to “ensure positive contributions to peace of all UN actors wherever possible.” This is to be reflected in UN planning processes, strategies and frameworks, including the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. This is in line with the Secretary-General’s efforts to make prevention the number one objective of the UN and the reforms of UN

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Wallace, [From Principle to Practice – a User’s Guide for Do No Harm](#) (CDA, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, [Do No Harm Workshop Participant’s Manual](#) (CDA, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Woodrow and Isabella Jean, [Getting “Do No Harm” to Stick](#) (CDA, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Rachel Goldwyn, [Conflict-Sensitivity Integration Review](#) (USAID, 2016).

Development System and peace and security architecture. The UN system is currently in the process of developing a Guidance Note on Conflict Sensitivity, Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals.

This discussion paper puts forward some of the key ***risks and conflict-sensitivity challenges*** to outline how PVE interventions and research can have negative impacts on the contexts in which they are being implemented. At the same time, it describes practical entry points for conflict sensitivity by applying an approach that recognizes its complexity, and also highlights some key points from the discussions at UNDP's June 2019 Amman Forum on Measuring, Monitoring and Assessing PVE.

***Conflict sensitivity and risk management<sup>6</sup> are two sides of the same coin, but it is important to engage in a conscious process for both – and be clear about the objectives of each.*** The key question from a risk perspective is to explore the implications of the context and the type of programming an organization engages in on the organization – from various angles (e.g. reputational, financial or staff security risks). Conflict sensitivity on the other hand is most concerned about understanding the intended and unintended impacts of international engagement on the (conflict) context as a foundation to mitigate possible negative implications for local partners, beneficiaries and communities.

*“Integrating risk management and conflict sensitivity can undermine conflict sensitivity.”<sup>7</sup>* This is mainly the case when the perspective of risk management is concerned with preventing and mitigating risk for the intervening organization only, rather than considering the risks of programming for communities and local partners. In practice, both conflict sensitivity and risk management are often integrated, and both can provide a first entry point for discussions about the context and related sensitivities with donors and partners.

UNDP's guidance note on risk management in PVE summarizes examples of key 'contextual' risks of how external actors can exacerbate violence and oppression through programming interventions and also describes how UNDP has worked in select contexts to understand and mitigate those risks.

This paper is not an operational guidance note, but a reflection to spark further discussion about the need for a conflict-sensitive approach to PVE as part of a broader approach to development and peacebuilding, as 'PVE' does not happen in isolation. It provides reflections from a macro- and mezzo-level perspective to highlight the critical importance of considering conflict sensitivity not only at the micro-level of programs and projects, but also at policy and strategic decision-making levels.

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<sup>6</sup> See UNDP [Risk Management for PVE Programmes](#) – Guidance Note for Practitioners, 2019

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Goldwyn, *Conflict Sensitivity Integration Review*, ch. 10 (USAID, 2016).

## II. KEY RISKS AND CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY CONCERNS RELATED TO PVE ENGAGEMENTS

Many lessons and learnings in the peacebuilding field and across different development sectors have been collected over the past two decades. In parallel, standards and principles about what constitutes relevant and effective engagement, such as the OECD/DAC Guidelines on Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility,<sup>8</sup> have been established. Establishing PVE as a separate policy and programming agenda without such standards, while many of the related ‘PVE activities’ fall squarely within established peacebuilding or development approaches, has not helped to ensure that PVE interventions build on the lessons learned from those fields. New organizations have emerged that focus on PVE programming specifically without a solid programming background in other established areas. In many ways, therefore, the international community is trying to apply established approaches on newly packaged and re-packaged issues without always fully understanding their connection to broader areas that have been around for a long time.<sup>9</sup>

There is often a **fuzzy understanding** of what ‘PVE’ means and how it relates and compares to other types of development and peacebuilding work on one hand, and counter-terrorism or anti-radicalization work on the other. Many organizations have re-branded and re-labeled some of their development and peacebuilding work to tap into available PVE funding. Some organizations do not always clearly articulate their PVE objectives in program proposals and funding

*“If the implicit message of a jobs program shifts from ‘we are supporting your livelihood because your well-being matters’ to ‘we are supporting your livelihood to stop you from becoming a terrorist’ this carries risk.”*

*Larry Attree, Shouldn't YOU be Countering Violent Extremism? 2017*

allocations, but ‘de-radicalization’ or ‘preventing extremism’ might be an implicit expectation by the donor. Such ‘hidden agendas’ and lack of transparency are tricky and dangerous for implementers, their partners and the communities in which they operate. Transparency, trusted relationships and open communication with communities,

local partners and beneficiaries are of key concern from a conflict-sensitivity perspective. Within a collaborative and inclusive aid system, transparency and trust are values in and of themselves. They also increase program effectiveness - through better and more locally grounded context analysis, higher legitimacy of programs, better monitoring and evaluation systems if open-ended beneficiary feedback mechanisms are included, and greater sustainability of initiatives given local buy-in and, ideally, ownership, by both local authorities and communities.

<sup>8</sup> [Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility](#) (OECD, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> See Lille Ris and Anita Ernstorfer – [Borrowing a Wheel: Applying Existing Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Strategies to Emerging Programming Approaches to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism](#) (CDA, 2017) – an attempt to apply existing lessons from the field of peacebuilding design, monitoring and evaluation to PVE.

Another important risk from a conflict-sensitivity perspective is the lack of **policy coherence** between foreign policy and security driven counter-terrorism (CT) approaches versus developmental, governance and peacebuilding related 'PVE' work. This poses a risk at various levels: many military and security CT approaches actually feed into support for radical groups and insurgency. Short-term tactical (e.g. security or military) goals might undermine long-term development or peacebuilding goals, and certain foreign governments that provide funding for PVE work might be considered to be conflict actors in the national/local context at a political level. At the same time, too much coherence between CT and PVE approaches is also tricky as more developmental and peacebuilding related goals might be compromised by actual or perceived close alignment with security or intelligence interests.

The main underlying foundation to a conflict-sensitive approach is a sound and holistic **understanding of the context** and the structural drivers of violence or fragility in a given setting. By applying a limited focus on understanding specific drivers of 'extremism' and radicalization without looking at the broader conflict and governance systems, this perspective gets skewed. Labeling and categorizing groups and individuals as 'extremists' or 'radicals' is unhelpful, often unilaterally limiting the attention to specific actors while the main causes of violence are often much broader, more structural and linked to a variety of sociopolitical and economic factors than what might be suggested by a focus on specific groups.

*"Alert's 18 months of research in Mali strongly indicates that the language of 'extremism' does not translate usefully in communities that do not have equivalent terms for 'radicalization' or 'extremism' in their local language. It also reveals that the main cause of violence experienced by civilians is not related to extremism, but to crime or conflict over resources or identity."*

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*International Alert, They Treat us all like Jihadis, 2016*

Furthermore, many analyses underpinning PVE efforts disproportionately focus on the **role of religion and ideology** rather than understanding those in a broader context.<sup>10</sup> From a conflict-sensitivity perspective, this can be dangerous and can further support biases in societies, or fuel hatred and suspicion in mainstream society towards those with different views. Delivering messaging or counter-narratives against specific individuals or groups is very risky and the opposite of a conflict prevention or peacebuilding approach. This is especially tricky in the

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<sup>10</sup> See also Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding* (Berghof Foundation, 2018).

absence of a wider strategy to address underlying grievances in constructive ways for societies at large, and when violent extremism is associated with particular religious, ethnic or tribal minorities (as occurred recently in the government response to the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka).

*“In Afghanistan, an investigative team assembled by General David Petraeus estimated in 2011 that some US\$ 360 million provided by U.S. taxpayers had ended up with the Taliban and criminals, and powerbrokers with ties to both. Thus, aid can serve to increase, rather than diminish, insecurity, and to reinforce violent actors.”*

*Saferworld: Envisaging more constructive alternatives to the counter-terror paradigm, 2015*

In sum, international assistance risks fueling insecurity or strengthening and legitimizing insurgents, especially if it is focused more on strengthening state actors than local communities. This is particularly challenging in situations where governments are part of the problem, an active driver of conflict and/or repression, and if the imperative of an agency’s mandate is to work through national governments, e.g. as

part of National PVE Action Plans.

Many organizations that might have made a general commitment to conflict sensitivity often face critical issues regarding its operationalization and institutionalization. All too often, conflict sensitivity is considered a “ticking the box” exercise, which may lead to some conflict sensitivity or DNH steps being taken, but lacks sustainable integration throughout the programming cycle – or a real intent to look at ‘the bigger picture.’ This might include insufficient context analysis and knowledge of how to translate analysis into solid programming, a lack of understanding of how to monitor and evaluate conflict sensitivity, the absence of beneficiary feedback mechanisms to even find out about possible unintended negative impacts an intervention might have had at community levels, or insufficient organizational support for course correction and program adaptation.

The following section summarizes a few key considerations and principles on how to ensure a conflict-sensitive approach in PVE approaches and programming.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For practical guidance on how to integrate conflict sensitivity into the program cycle and how to build institutional capacities for conflict sensitivity see the [Resource Pack](#) on Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peace building: tools for peace and conflict impact assessment, produced by a consortium of organizations.



### **III. KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE CONFLICT SENSITIVITY IN PVE INTERVENTIONS**

Conflict-sensitive PVE engagements are more sustainable and effective in the long-run. Below are a few key recommendations on how to ensure conflict-sensitivity is happening in PVE work in practice. These are inspired from 20 years of learning and gathering lessons around operationalizing conflict-sensitivity – and are not unique to PVE engagements. They do not represent a full set of organizational considerations on how to ‘mainstream’ conflict-sensitivity in practice across the board, but focus on a few specific points that seem particularly relevant for PVE.<sup>12</sup>

**(i) Define concepts and language in a context-specific way that works for your organization and for partners and communities:** the terms ‘conflict sensitivity’ and ‘PVE’ might both turn staff and partners off for different reasons. Conflict is inherently political and the notion of ‘conflict-sensitivity’ might suggest getting involved with conflict dynamics in a way that does not seem appropriate (a challenge that also occurs with the notion of ‘peacebuilding’ in certain contexts). Embedding conflict sensitivity into a broader approach of an organization to increase ‘program effectiveness’ and design interventions that are ‘sensitive to the context’ might work better in some cases to get buy-in. Likewise, as highlighted above, many partners and communities do not relate to the language and framing around ‘extremism’ and perceive labeling certain people and groups as ‘radical’ as insulting, exclusionary or missing the point of the issues at hand altogether. Sensitivity and participatory approaches are required to develop a joint understanding and language for the key issues embedded in larger contextual understanding – beyond labels and externally-driven language.

**(ii) Embrace complexity and apply a systems thinking approach:** The underlying foundation of any approach to conflict sensitivity needs to be ongoing and sound **analysis** of both context and conflict. Such analysis not only analyzes the specific drivers of violent acts or specific ‘radical’ behavior, but also understands the broader political economies and overall conflict systems in which they occur. Conducting **conflict systems analysis** might be a particularly helpful approach for PVE to analyze the complexity of the issues at hand, the dynamic relationships between structural drivers of conflict and violence and individual motivations for radicalization, and the role of internal and external influences in the overall conflict system. Systems analysis is also useful to understand the long-term implications of security and military-focused counter-terrorism measures that unilaterally support state structures, as they have often pushed people into more radicalization rather than achieving the opposite. A systems approach also helps external assistance agencies to reflect on **their own role within the system** and how best to

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of lessons from conflict sensitivity ‘mainstreaming’ within and across organizations broadly speaking, see *Conflict Sensitivity Mainstreaming Efforts* by Nicole Goddard (2014) or *Getting “Do No Harm” to stick*, by Peter Woodrow and Isabella Jean (2019).

support positive change that might already be happening within the conflict and governance system – without any type of external engagement.<sup>13</sup>

**(iii) Consider conflict-sensitivity from the start:** Often, the integration of a conflict-sensitive approach is considered a technical programming detail, begun once higher level policy and strategy decisions have been made. This is frequently the reason why conflict sensitivity falls short in practice. It is critical to consider conflict sensitivity at all levels - strategy, policy, programming, operations, human resources, procurement etc. to ensure overall institutionalization. This helps organizations with decision making on whether or not to engage on PVE in the first place, how to approach it, and how to engage with funders constructively to make PVE engagements aligned with conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm principles and values from the start. Some organizations have developed **Go / No Go criteria** to help their country teams make decisions on when and how to engage on PVE, what type of funding might be acceptable and/or possibly put the organization and their partners at risk, as well as to help to decide when to step away from PVE if it brings reputational risk and threatens the legitimacy of other peacebuilding and development work. For organizations like UNDP and others, it is critical to take principled decisions about how to engage governmental and non-governmental counterparts in steering a PVE agenda of support with long-term, conflict-sensitive impacts. It requires political savvy and leveraging of local and national relationships to generate a common agenda that is purposeful – and makes a positive difference in a given context.

**(iv) Set up organizational systems that enable adaptive programming and management and are supportive of a learning culture in the organization:** Following through systematically on the integration of conflict sensitivity into design, monitoring and evaluation requires clear senior management and donor commitment to **adaptive programming** and **flexibility** in implementation. Context analysis and understanding unintended impacts makes sense only if there is space for course correction and changes in, for example, theories of change, beneficiaries, target groups, areas of intervention, etcetera. A culture of transparency, trust and learning is key all the way from funders to front line implementing staff. Enabling a culture in which colleagues are encouraged to share **failures** and challenges and how to learn from them for future work is critical in this sense. This also requires a proactive approach to how internationals **listen** to local staff, local partners and communities, and work with them to sustainably strengthen local capacities in order to allow for an honest and forthright exchange about the impacts of interventions – whether they are positive or negative, as well as for a closed **feedback loop**<sup>14</sup> to act accountably and transparently upon recommendations. Engaging funders, donors and other partners on this learning journey in an open and transparent manner is critical.

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<sup>13</sup> See Ernstorfer 2018, Berghof Dialogue Handbook – A peacebuilding systems perspective to PVE

<sup>14</sup> Francesca Bonino, Isabella Jean and Paul Knox Clarke, Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts, Practitioner Guidance (CDA, 2014).

**(v) Strive for policy and programming coherence and collective action where possible:** Some donors have joined forces to take a coordinated approach to conflict sensitivity, do analysis together, and share resources to increase accountability and program effectiveness in highly complex contexts. Given the importance of policy and programming coherence in PVE work to avoid negative impacts, it seems worthwhile to look at and learn from those experiences. Examples include the [conflict sensitivity resource facility](#) in South Sudan and the [conflict-sensitive assistance to Libya Forum](#). These could be interesting models to consider for PVE engagement, to ensure the establishment of joint principles and approaches for PVE engagement in specific contexts. This could be especially powerful in cases where certain PVE approaches are not aligned with peacebuilding and conflict prevention principles, where programming could be more aligned and integrated, and/or where simultaneous counter-terrorism strategies (driven by other parts of the same donor governments funding development-oriented PVE interventions) represent concrete conflict-sensitivity risks. From a UN perspective, collective action could also include a more deliberate focus on internal program coherence within and across specific funds and programs, increased UN policy coherence, and collective and cumulative approaches funded through multi-agency and multi-donor approaches, based on joint analysis and strategy development.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a collection and analysis of experience with collective and cumulative impacts in peacebuilding and further references, see Sweta Velpillay and Peter Woodrow, *Collective Impact in Peacebuilding: Lessons from Networking Efforts in Multiple Locations* (CDA, 2019).

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