Conflict, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding: Meeting the Challenges

Maria Lange & Mick Quinn

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International Alert is an independent non-governmental organisation that works to help build just and lasting peace in areas of violent conflict. It seeks to identify and address root causes of conflict and contribute to the creation of sustainable peace through work with partner organisations in the Great Lakes region of Africa, West Africa, Eurasia, South and South East Asia and Latin America. To complement fieldwork, International Alert undertakes research and advocacy to influence policies and practices at the national, regional and international levels that impact on conflict. International Alert seeks to act as a catalyst for change by bringing the voices and perspectives of those affected by conflict to the international arena and creating spaces for dialogue.

The Development and Peacebuilding Programme aims to promote and enable development that contributes to conflict transformation and peacebuilding. We do this through work with a wide variety of institutions, from international and local NGOs to governments, bi- and multilateral agencies and inter-governmental organisations. The programme conducts applied research and analysis of the relationship between conflict and development, formulates policy and practice recommendations and supports the implementation of and capacity-building for 'conflict sensitive' approaches in close partnership with institutions impacting development. For further details, please contact the programme manager, Andrew Sherriff, by e-mail (asherriff@international-alert.org) or by mail to:

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Foreword

This paper forms part of an on-going project on humanitarian assistance in conflict areas led by International Alert's Development and Peacebuilding Programme. The project's aim is to strengthen the capacity of humanitarian agencies working in conflict areas to make a positive contribution to peacebuilding and conflict transformation by raising awareness of conflict and aid issues, and by providing recommendations for enhanced policy and practice. The paper is based on research and consultations with a number of humanitarian policy officers and practitioners.[1] The purpose of these consultations was to discuss how to operationalise the lessons learned by different agencies on conflict sensitive humanitarian aid.

Executive Summary

This paper summarises current debates on conflict, aid and peacebuilding and suggests that humanitarian agencies can go beyond avoiding negative impacts on conflict ('Do No Harm'), to contributing positively to conflict transformation and peacebuilding ('Do Good') in a way that respects their core mandates and key humanitarian principles. The paper argues that this may be achieved by incorporating a 'conflict sensitive' approach in planning and programming. 'Conflict sensitivity' can be defined as the capacity of an organisation to:

- Understand the (conflict) context in which it operates;
- Understand the interaction between its intervention and the (conflict) context; and
- Act upon the understanding of this interaction in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on the (conflict) context and the intervention.[2]

The paper's starting point is a recognition of the very real operational dilemmas faced by humanitarian agencies working in conflict areas, and the realisation of staff on the ground that existing agency approaches do not always adequately address these dilemmas. The paper aims to contribute to the formation of an understanding of practicable policy and operational responses to such dilemmas.

1. Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict

In an environment where conflict in (rather than between) states is the main cause of humanitarian need, agencies cannot ignore the imperative to ensure that their actions do not generate or fuel conflict. Many have taken steps to minimise the potential negative impact of their interventions, but there is considerable ambivalence over whether humanitarian assistance can be purposefully tailored to contribute positively to conflict transformation.

Humanitarian assistance does not in and of itself create either war or peace, and the ultimate responsibility for ensuring peace and stability falls to national governments and the international community. However, poorly planned and/or executed aid programmes in conflict zones may fail to reduce suffering or may at worst inadvertently exacerbate it. Negative consequences include contributing to the economy of war, bestowing unrepresentative legitimacy on warring parties and fuelling tensions between communities by the perceived favouring of one community over another.

Changing realities of humanitarian aid delivery, agencies' experiences of undesired impacts and an increasing politicisation of aid has pushed the issue of the relationship between humanitarian assistance and conflict to the top of the aid agenda. Faced with real operational dilemmas, humanitarians want to understand the potential contribution of humanitarian assistance – in conjunction with longer-term development aid – to conflict transformation and peacebuilding. At the same time, a policy of 'coherence' or 'integration' of humanitarian and political objectives is increasingly pursued on the ground. However, efforts to strengthen the peacebuilding impact of humanitarian assistance are regarded by some as likely to undermine core humanitarian principles and affect humanitarian access negatively.

That humanitarian assistance operates within a highly political context is not a recent phenomenon. Traditionally, agencies have adopted a series of strategies to resist the undermining of the effectiveness of their actions by competing political agendas of both warring parties and international donor governments. These strategies have included the development of codes of conduct, minimum standards and codes of best practice. Humanitarian principles, however, cannot always adequately inform the practical choices by staff on the ground in conflict areas, where the provision of resources inevitably has an impact beyond improving the situation of the targeted populations, because it affects the local social, economic and political dynamics. As

violent conflict is more often than not the primary cause of human need, any effort to respond successfully to this need depends on addressing conflict and supporting opportunities for sustainable peace.

While politicisation of aid by donor governments may challenge humanitarian principles, an emphasis on 'human security' may benefit humanitarian agencies, as it widens the concept of security to involve addressing all threats to the survival, daily life and human dignity of human beings. This approach should, if implemented, imply sufficient long-term external support for overcoming the effects on communities of poor governance, poverty and economic vulnerability – all factors that otherwise increase the likelihood of conflict. Human security, however, is itself increasingly under threat, as certain powerful donor governments pursue 'hard security' issues directly and through their influence on other actors.

2.　Conflict Sensitivity – Constraints and Ways Forward

Humanitarian agencies trying to be conflict sensitive face a number of challenges that, generally, fall into three broad categories: policy, operations, and internal management and capacity. Policy challenges range from competing and conflicting government agendas, which fail to provide a framework of support for humanitarian action, to restrictive funding parameters, which limit agencies' ability to invest in systematic conflict sensitivity. Operational challenges include diversion of aid to belligerents and threats to staff security. Both can potentially be alleviated by greater understanding of conflict dynamics, which can provide agencies with a basis for making more informed decisions about aid provision and security arrangements. Challenges of internal management and capacity include insufficient resources and high staff turnover, which lead to a loss of institutional memory and undermine agencies' analytical capacity.

In response to these challenges, participants in International Alert's (Alert) consultations identified a number of recommendations to donor agencies, international NGOs and local partners. These range from undertaking training in (and use of) appropriate analytical tools to conducting advocacy with relevant parties in order to create opportunities for humanitarian access. As international NGOs are highly dependent on the policy and resource decisions that shape the overall parameters of their work, meeting these challenges demands increased donor-agency consultation prior to the launching of aid efforts and support for conflict sensitive approaches and critical reflection throughout the intervention.

3.　Conclusion

The reactive nature and short time frames of emergency aid tend to exclude possibilities for planning to make a **long-term** impact on the underlying causes of conflict. Complex emergencies in conflict zones, however, do not develop overnight, but are normally preceded by widespread human rights abuses, a breakdown of state structures etc. Needs indicators in complex and evolving conflict environments rarely conform to a tidy relief-rehabilitation-development continuum, and emergency services do not become unnecessary overnight. The implication of this for aid agencies is that they have an opportunity to seek to influence the planning of aid at a much earlier stage by advocating for a higher profile for humanitarian issues in the overarching policy frameworks that define the parameters of their interventions.

The challenge of linking humanitarian assistance to peacebuilding objectives tends to be obscured by the conflicting political agendas that accompany the allocation and monitoring of aid resources. Seeking to rebuild local capacity to withstand and transform violent conflict is entirely consistent with traditional humanitarian principles. But it does require analysing the root causes and dynamics of conflict and the political context of each crisis, which implies more systematic information gathering and organisational learning from past experience. Based on this, agencies must complement operational activity with targeted advocacy to keep donors and international governments aware of how and why conflict impacts on human suffering.

Humanitarian agencies can contribute to an environment conducive to sustainable peace in three ways. Firstly, they can strengthen the affected population's capacity to resist the **effects** of violent attacks by providing food,

shelter etc. Secondly, they can act as witnesses to remind warring parties of their responsibilities, thereby protecting the population. Thirdly, they can adopt a human security approach that contributes to creating an environment where people can meet their own basic needs. In many cases, and in particular in high-intensity conflict, local communities rank security issues alongside (and as a prerequisite for satisfying) humanitarian need. Conversely, experience shows that inter-community dialogue and community-level peacebuilding may be fragile without humanitarian assistance to meet material needs, like food, shelter and health.

As humanitarian, development and peacebuilding responses to crises are inter-linked, so are the different levels of conflict at which these responses take place. At a local level, humanitarian assistance can complement and reinforce peacebuilding efforts of civil society organisations that are representative and legitimate within their own communities. However, higher-level complementarity between foreign diplomatic efforts and the humanitarian response may compromise humanitarian neutrality and access. For this reason, and because humanitarian assistance has limited effectiveness as a foreign policy tool, donor agencies should not attempt to persuade humanitarian organisations to undertake 'Track 1' conflict resolution.

More importantly, developing the conflict sensitivity of agencies' core programmes is likely to have more positive impacts on peace than stand-alone peacebuilding programming. However, mainstreaming conflict sensitivity across programmes may be more demanding and many agencies choose to undertake various forms of often separate peacebuilding programmes. Alert's experience and emerging practice of some humanitarian agencies themselves indicates that peacebuilding programmes that are linked to concrete socio-economic opportunities are often the most effective. Learning from peacebuilding programmes should therefore inform the mainstreaming of conflict sensitivity across all programmes through existing agency frameworks, e.g. a sustainable-livelihoods or rights-based approach.

Listening more to local perspectives and helping the 'owners' of the conflict develop capacity to transform and prevent crisis is key to both humanitarian effectiveness and conflict sensitivity. Accountability and transparency of decision-making both down- and upstream are prerequisites if humanitarian interventions are to contribute to community peacebuilding. This requires greater consultation with local civil society actors and a better understanding of the power dynamics of the given situation, including analysis of conflict dynamics.

To maximise the positive impact of humanitarian assistance on conflict, agencies must undertake continuing analysis of underlying conflict trends, be willing to adapt in the light of changing evidence, and strengthen their ability to learn and apply lessons from partners and wider civil society constituencies. Perhaps the greatest challenge for agencies is to commit to providing structural change, if this means collaborating with political actors to promote objectives that go beyond the immediate relief of suffering, such as peacebuilding. This challenge illustrates a traditionally weak capacity to analyse, and low-key involvement in, the political context of aid. Given the constant pressure on agencies to act rather than analyse and strategise, this problem is difficult to address, although part of the solution may be to develop partnerships with independent organisations that analyse the political context. However, the question remains whether humanitarian agencies are willing to make the changes to their organisational cultures that will be necessary to make conflict sensitivity a reality.

Recommendations for humanitarian agencies include the following:

- Identify, partner with and build the capacity of local civil society organisations that are viewed by their communities as legitimate and representative and that can play a positive role in more long-term local peacebuilding efforts.
- Integrate conflict sensitive principles and methods into core programming areas (rather than establishing separate peacebuilding programmes), so as to minimise unintended negative consequences, increase accountability and strengthen positive spill-offs on peace.
- Where appropriate, seek to develop new partnerships with other international and local agencies who can assist in meeting the diverse needs created by violent conflict.

- Think through the potential impact of the humanitarian activity on the conflict dynamics and vice versa in the planning stage and incorporate women's and men's perspectives into the design. This includes appreciating the gendered impact of violence and the particular roles of women and men in post-conflict peacebuilding.
- Advocate for a higher profile for humanitarian issues and human security realities in overarching (donor) policy frameworks, based on in-depth understanding of realities on the ground.
- Develop and strengthen capacity to understand and analyse the operational context, including the profile, actors and causes of conflict. Comprehensive and on-going conflict analysis that extends beyond the immediate locale of operations to the national and regional levels should be considered an important element of adequate risk assessment, needs assessment and targeting.
- Invest in evaluations and lessons learned that are based on the perspectives of legitimate and representative local partners, who are committed to peaceful change, and their constituencies, and ensure that these lessons are applied in on-going and future programmes.

Conflict sensitivity requires both developing sufficient capacity within agencies and advocating for change in the external environment, in particular the political and funding climate within which agencies operate. Beyond the actions of agencies, however, the willingness and capacity of donor agencies and governments to take appropriate steps is crucial.

Recommendations for donor agencies include the following:

- Promote a co-ordinated approach to conflict analysis with other donors. A co-ordinated policy framework is a key prerequisite for subsequent conflict sensitive humanitarian operations.
- Commit staff and resources to conflict analysis and to implementing and evaluating the approach suggested by this analysis.
- Invest in developing humanitarian agencies' analytical ability and conflict sensitive capacity generally.
- Develop stronger downward accountability and listen more willingly to advocacy messages from NGOs and, in particular, legitimate and representative local civil society organisations that are committed to peaceful change.
- Mainstream conflict transformation objectives in intervention strategies and, where this is not feasible in the short term, insist on a principled humanitarian approach.

Recommendations for Western governments' policies and practices in conflict-affected countries include the following:

- Ensure that all policies and actions (diplomatic, military, trade) are clearly strategised, planned, implemented and evaluated with their impact upon conflict and peace dynamics in mind (rather than just assessing aid and/or humanitarian assistance in this way).
- The long-term peacebuilding impact of a 'coherent' approach depends on the quality of the underlying policy guiding governments and other actors. A policy or framework that is based on limited analysis and that lacks a sufficient international and local constituency should be avoided, as it is unlikely to promote sustainable peace and may damage humanitarian access.
- Avoid using humanitarian action as the sole response to complex political problems in countries and regions that are perceived to be of less strategic interest and/or consistently 'poor performers'.
- Pursue conflict prevention and transformation objectives with respect for humanitarian values and space.
- Invest in long-term, sustainable and locally owned solutions to conflict that address accompanying humanitarian crises.

Introduction

A large body of research on conflict and aid, including Alert case studies of Sri Lanka, Liberia and Afghanistan,[3] indicates that humanitarian assistance may have either a negative or positive influence on the dynamics of conflict. This paper builds on this research, consultations with humanitarian agencies and Alert's experience of working in conflict areas. Its starting point is a recognition of the operational dilemmas faced by humanitarian agencies in conflict areas, and the realisation of staff on the ground that existing approaches often do not adequately address such dilemmas. Dilemmas include how to reconcile short- and longer-term objectives and how to develop a thorough understanding of the context when faced with extreme time pressures. These dilemmas are recurrent in most humanitarian operations, particularly in conflict areas, and are also playing themselves out in the current context of Iraq. Here, agencies face hard choices about the legitimacy of and framework for aid operations in the absence of a clear UN mandate, as well as concerns about the implications of aid provision by military forces.

This paper does not pretend to provide clear and uniform answers to these dilemmas, but it is hoped that it will contribute to the formation of a policy and operational understanding of how agencies and their staff may begin to confront them. It seeks to do so by first summarising current debates on humanitarian assistance and conflict. Secondly, it provides recommendations for how humanitarian agencies can go beyond avoiding a negative impact on conflict ('Doing No Harm') to contributing to real conflict transformation and peacebuilding ('Doing Good': see Box 2, below) through increased sensitivity to conflict. This sensitivity is in full accordance with humanitarian mandates and principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. The paper is based on background research and a series of formal and informal consultations with humanitarian organisations, policy advisors, donor representatives and academics. The purpose of these consultations was:

1. To explore how working in conflict influences the ability of humanitarian agencies to strengthen the quality of assistance; and
2. To suggest practicable responses to the challenges.

Chapter 1 outlines the context of and some lessons learned about humanitarian assistance and conflict, including the current debate on peacebuilding, and agencies' attempts to find ways forward in dealing better with conflict. Chapter 2 identifies challenges faced by practitioners on the ground trying to 'Do Good' and ways to address these. On the basis of this discussion, chapter 3 suggests how humanitarian assistance – in support of its core humanitarian mandate – can 'Do Good' by contributing to an environment conducive to sustainable peace.

CHAPTER **1**: Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict

1.1 The Operational Environment

The US National Intelligence Council identified 42 million people in need of urgent assistance in twenty countries in 2001–02.[4] In eleven of these, on-going intra-state conflict was the primary cause of humanitarian need[5] while six were emerging from, but still plagued by, internal conflict.[6] A further seven countries were at risk of humanitarian emergency – a risk heightened in each case by intra-state conflict.[7] These figures illustrate that the need for humanitarian assistance is today occasioned overwhelmingly by intra-state conflict – sometimes in conjunction with environmental factors. The deliberate targeting of civilians by warring factions is a key feature of these post-Cold War conflicts. In addition, humanitarian emergencies in a number of countries are on-going, with conflicts proving intractable and international humanitarian assistance becoming more than just a short-term measure.[8] In these situations, the risk of aid dependency is ever present and the impact of assistance on conflict dynamics needs to be continuously monitored.[9]

In this context, aid organisations from the Red Cross Movement and UN agencies to international NGOs and their local partners have to reappraise their intervention approach with each new crisis. For many, addressing need while carefully avoiding conflict areas (working 'around' conflict) is neither a practicable nor a morally defensible option. The responsibility to face up to the challenges of working 'in' conflict is now widely recognised. This involves addressing need in a way that minimises any potential negative impact on the conflict dynamics.[10]

BOX 1. HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND CONFLICT

Potential negative effects of humanitarian assistance on conflict quoted by participants in Alert consultations and elaborated elsewhere include the following:

- By setting up parallel non-governmental services, aid can hasten the collapse of already weakened state structures[11] and may, by providing essential services that the state no longer delivers, allow governments to shift resources to military budgets, thus aggravating or prolonging the conflict.
- Aid can enable belligerents to avoid realising the true costs of the conflict, further undermining their will to return to peaceful coexistence.
- Aid can become a means for warring parties to sustain themselves, thus prolonging suffering, and may escalate violence by attracting raiding.
- Striking agreements with warlords to permit aid to be delivered may bestow unrepresentative legitimacy on them.[12]
- Aid can undermine local productive capacities, thereby delaying the return to economic self-sufficiency and undermining local initiatives.
- If the distribution of supplies is perceived to favour one community over another, tension between neighbouring peoples and increased inter-factional fighting may result, thus aggravating the conflict situation.
- Paying economic inducements to protect aid workers may legitimise militias providing such protection.
- By providing humanitarian aid in crisis zones, there is a risk that parties to conflict may be deflected from assuming responsibility for the welfare of their own citizens.

The issues raised by the findings in Box 1 are neither new, nor the only concerns related to the negative impact of humanitarian assistance. They mirror practitioners' own reflections on the efficacy of their work in 'complex emergencies', and evaluations that ask serious questions about the long-term benefits of humanitarian aid to beneficiary communities.[13] There is notable consistency in the outcomes of many of these evaluations, and the following conclusions are typical:

Programme design: Engagements should be longer-term, less resource-intensive at the beginning to avoid overwhelming fragile economies, and more inclusive in their target groups. Groups perceived as linked to the 'aggressors' often have no less acute needs than victimised communities.

Regional approach: International responses should recognise the regional character of complex emergencies, especially where there are large numbers of displaced persons. Interventions across national boundaries should complement each other.[14] The African Great Lakes Region, West Africa, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, South Eastern Europe and the Horn of Africa offer salient examples of places where a regional approach is imperative.

Local capacities: Local institutional capacity can be under-appreciated and under-utilised in relief efforts.[15] Individuals and organisations are recruited as implementers, but their analytical understanding and ability to address their communities' needs in a sustainable way is often only fully appreciated when the internationals prepare their exit strategies.[16]

Co-ordination: Agreed structures and procedures for inter-agency co-ordination of relief efforts are necessary to avoid duplication and/or gaps in provision, as well as 'shopping' among NGOs by beneficiaries. Within the UN agency system, these co-ordination mechanisms are now well defined (if unevenly applied), but donors rarely make co-ordination a condition of funding for NGOs. Confusion and (at worst) heightened conflict over resources can follow.[17] Co-ordination is both beneficial to the quality and impact of aid delivery and has potential positive impacts on peacebuilding dynamics, as it provides a model for 'good peace behaviour' for local populations.

Information management: Agencies' information management systems, geared to donor reporting requirements, can place excessive demands on staff time. At the same time, they do not necessarily deliver the basic 'who is doing what, where' data that allows humanitarians to monitor overall levels of need, and the effectiveness of inter-agency responses.

Flexibility: Political pressure to disburse funds rapidly works against an informed analysis of need, and project outputs/targets are often not sufficiently flexible to allow mid-stream modification if the situation on the ground changes.[18]

Lessons learned: Time-limited funding and high staff turnover can mean that NGOs do not retain staff with institutional knowledge.[19] Often, too much time is spent reinventing the wheel to the detriment of effective aid delivery, and lessons-learned papers are produced but implementation remains challenging.[20]

Many of the above conclusions are reflected in Alert's case studies of Sri Lanka, Liberia and Afghanistan.[21] The studies found that, in each country, humanitarian assistance had failed to fully achieve its intended results. In some cases, it had unintentionally aggravated the impact of conflict on the lives of ordinary people, because it had been planned, and sometimes delivered, with inadequate attention to conflict.[22] A study of Sri Lanka, for example, found that NGO-supported government resettlement programmes in East Sri Lanka and in border areas had reportedly exacerbated inter-group tensions.[23]

The case studies highlight the need to match humanitarian aid to contexts and the frequent lack of investment in co-ordinated and comprehensive contextual analysis. In many cases, the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies were found to be exacerbated by poor initial analysis of the conflict dynamics, leading to unrealistic programming expectations on the part of donor agencies. At the operational level, there was evidence of unco-ordinated responses amongst external policymakers and their programme implementers. The likely effectiveness of international NGOs and their local implementing partners was thereby reduced. In addition, the case studies found a lack of coherence between government policies on aid and other forms of international engagement, notably trade and foreign policy. Similar findings have emerged from other studies of humanitarian assistance, notably on the unintended consequences of relief programmes in Sudan[24] and on missed opportunities for supporting peace in Kosovo.[25]

Fuelled in part by agencies' own experiences of these potential negative effects of their actions, an intense on-going debate on the relationship between humanitarian assistance and conflict – and the possible role of humanitarian actors in peacebuilding – has emerged. The main points of this debate, and the roles and responses of policymakers and humanitarians, is discussed below.

1.2 The Policy Debate

The end of the Cold War has seen the emergence of a well-documented[26] politicisation of humanitarian aid, which is reflected in a marked shift toward earmarked bilateral funding,[27] allowing donors to specify their desired long-term political (as well as relief) outcomes in crisis countries. As a result, the difference between political and humanitarian interventions has become less clearly demarcated, as illustrated in Kosovo, where war was justified on 'humanitarian' grounds. This trend, fuelled by the changing nature of conflicts[28] and the lessons outlined above, has put the question of the relationship between humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding high on the aid agenda. Further changes to the overall international political context, in which all NGOs are working, have occurred following the September 11 attacks and the ensuing 'Global War on Terror'. In the context of an increasingly militarised global environment, there is a fear that the space for NGOs to operate and work on peaceful conflict resolution and prevention will be lost, and that a 'seismic' change is occurring in the models of intervention, which may threaten the relevance of NGOs.[29]

There has been a lively debate and a large body of literature about the recurrent dilemmas of undertaking humanitarian assistance in conflict areas.[30] While the debate tackles issues keenly felt by humanitarian staff, an emerging awareness among agencies of 'conflict sensitivity' has yet to be fully reflected in policies and practices. Increasingly politicised aid agendas have also fuelled some agencies' and individuals' suspicion of, and resistance to, efforts to enhance the peacebuilding potential of humanitarian assistance. These efforts are seen by some as likely to undermine humanitarian principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality. Another concern is that such efforts may reinforce a trend of abandonment of separate diplomatic and political action by political actors, leaving humanitarian aid as the primary form of political engagement in conflict-affected and strategically less important countries.[31] At worst, some would see it as leading to the co-option of humanitarian assistance to a highly militarised hard security agenda.

In the aid and conflict debate, so-called 'minimalists' argue for a return to 'basics', reaffirming the core principles of humanitarianism and rejecting the 'corrupting' principle of peacebuilding as political involvement. 'Maximalists' argue that humanitarian assistance should be used as a tool to promote conflict resolution. This paper places itself between these positions by arguing pragmatically that given the changing context of humanitarian operations, which now more than ever take place predominantly in conflict zones,[32] conflict sensitivity contributes to the **effectiveness** of humanitarian assistance. Because violent conflict is often the primary cause of human need, efforts to respond successfully depend on addressing the dynamic of conflict and maximising opportunities for sustainable peace. In the longer term, a secure living situation is the prerequisite and basis for addressing poverty and enabling sustainable development.[33]

BOX 2. DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

Humanitarian assistance is here defined as emergency assistance provided in extreme cases, including distribution of food and water and the provision of temporary shelter and other non-food items that will temporarily save lives.[34]

While competing definitions of *peacebuilding* abound, for the purpose of this paper, we use the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) definition of peacebuilding as:

'Activities that are focused on long-term support to, and establishment of, viable political, socio-economic and cultural institutions capable of addressing the root causes of conflicts and mediating social conflict, as well as other initiatives aimed at creating the necessary conditions for sustained peace and stability. These activities also seek to promote the integration of competing or marginalized groups within mainstream society, through providing equitable access to political decision-making, social networks, economic resources and information and can be implemented in all phases of conflict.'[35]

Alert sees peacebuilding as a locally defined process driven by the needs of the local population and not determined by external governments' agendas. Much – though not all – of the concern voiced by humanitarian agencies regarding involvement in 'peacebuilding' stems from appropriation of the term by foreign policy agendas.[36] In the above understanding, the people affected by conflict are seen as the primary driving force for its resolution. This form of peacebuilding involves developing and supporting local capacities, providing opportunities for dialogue, and building and strengthening strategic coalitions for peace across traditional barriers and conflict divides.

We use the term '*Doing Good*' to focus attention on how humanitarian assistance can make a **positive** contribution to peace as part of the fulfilment of its core mandate.[37] Consequently, 'Doing Good' refers to humanitarian actions that are planned in accordance with local conflict dynamics (with recognition of the national and regional conflict dimensions). These actions seek to meet human needs equitably through a process that contributes to the transformation of conflict and the building of peaceful relations between communities.[38] This is a very process-oriented approach and the way humanitarian assistance is provided is indeed often as important as what is provided. The building of sustainable peace requires action on many levels (local, national and regional) that are not all directly influenced by humanitarian assistance. However, the contribution of humanitarian action rests primarily at the level where it takes place, i.e. the community level. It is the people most directly affected by conflict that are best placed to transform it.[39] Where conflict undermines and weakens actors striving for peace, humanitarian assistance can provide support for and reinforce peacebuilding efforts carried out on other levels by other actors. Recognising the importance of this contribution does not, however, exonerate national states from their primary responsibility for ensuring peace and stability.

Conflict sensitivity can be defined as the capacity of an organisation to:

- Understand the (conflict) context in which it operates;
- Understand the interaction between its intervention and the (conflict) context; and
- Act upon the understanding of this interaction in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impact on the (conflict) context and the intervention.[40]

1.3   The Role of Policymakers

Recognising that intra-state and/or regional conflict aggravates already acute levels of humanitarian need, many donor governments now subscribe to the notion of 'coherent' policy instruments or 'integrated responses'. This entails mobilising international trade, diplomacy, development initiatives and even military intervention alongside humanitarian assistance to relieve the causes as well as the symptoms of suffering.[41] The policy objective of 'coherence' offers international and inter-governmental policymakers the prospect that funds spent on humanitarian aid may achieve more tangible, robust results if allied to actions taken by other actors working towards a common goal.

This trend toward 'integrating' humanitarian and political objectives is apparent at a policy level. For UN agencies, integration is embedded in the recommendations of the *Brahimi Report* (2000) on UN Peace Operations.[42] For the European Union, the *Solana Report* (2000)[43] argues for greater 'convergence' between conflict prevention and response activities. The 'Communication from the Commission on Conflict Prevention' (2001) and 'Implementation of the EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts' (2002) also stress the need for greater coherence and co-operation across EU 'instruments' (including aid) when undertaking preventive actions.[44] Whether termed 'coherence', 'integration' or 'convergence',[45] the concept is now more than a policy objective, and is increasingly pursued on the ground. When agreeing to work within the framework of multilateral peace accords, like Rambouillet (which preceded the Kosovo conflict) and the Bonn Agreement (pertaining to Afghanistan), or the emerging, but still nebulous, set-up in Iraq, humanitarian aid agencies know that they will be accompanied by other actors whose primary purpose is not avowedly humanitarian. The presence of multilateral peacekeeping forces,[46] transitional government advisors, international finance institutions and the media in the intervention mosaic is a contemporary reality in many humanitarian situations. In such situations, the need to co-ordinate humanitarian activities with those of other actors becomes even more pressing. Donors as well as agencies need to consider how co-ordination can be achieved to the benefit of longer-term peacebuilding and with respect for humanitarian independence.

However, the integration/coherence trend is not just a recent phenomenon. International aid has never been entirely apolitical. Firstly, government contributions to aid budgets always reflect the differing priorities of domestic policymakers. This is also reflected in UN Consolidated Appeals, where there is often a close connection between which crises get the highest percentage of funding and geopolitical realities.[47] Secondly, by providing resources where significant sections of the population cannot fend for themselves, as discussed above, humanitarian agencies become an important part of local socio-economic realities. In this sense, aid is never apolitical. The question, therefore, is not whether or not humanitarians wish to engage in politics, but rather what kind of politics they wish to engage in.[48]

1.4   The Response of Humanitarians

Agencies acknowledge the implications of working in a politicised environment and have adopted a series of strategies to ensure that the effectiveness of their actions is not diluted by the competing political agendas of other actors.[49] To resist co-option by political forces (by donor governments at home or by warring parties where they operate), agencies providing humanitarian assistance have developed and maintained a core ethos of impartiality, independence and neutrality.[50] According to these principles, humanitarian aid is **neutral**,[51] **impartial** (i.e. provided proportionate to human need alone)[52] and **independent** of the interests of groups or individuals with a stake in the outcome of the crisis in question. Adherence to these principles is seen as expedient as well as ethical, because perceived impartiality, when respected by other actors on the ground, ensures access to the populations in need and enhances the safety of humanitarian field workers.

The development of codes of best practice[53], minimum standards[54] and codes of conduct[55] etc. are attempts to address the dilemmas faced by humanitarian agencies increasingly working in a politicised conflict environment. Humanitarian principles, however, cannot always adequately inform the practical choices that confront programme managers on a daily basis in conflict zones. Furthermore, in conflicts where civilians are

deliberately targeted, the provision of aid on the basis of need may well be perceived as a partial act by warring parties.[56] The logistics of delivering humanitarian assistance in a way that avoids the threat from belligerents is an ever-present challenge, and the impact of operational decisions on actual conflict dynamics cannot always be estimated in advance. The practical reality of 'impartial' and 'neutral' intervention is therefore put to the test with each new situation.

In addition, the humanitarian sector is far from homogenous when it comes to prioritising the demands of multiple stakeholders. Aid agencies in the UN system operate under an international mandate and bureaucratic structures that can make accountability to affected populations difficult to maintain. Large donors like the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) increasingly demand technical competence, rather than political sensitivity, from their implementing NGOs.[57] Charitably funded international NGOs, on the other hand, can be driven more by the need to 'market' their work to their constituency of supporters than to engage with the complex political reality of the populations on the ground.

While politicisation may challenge humanitarian principles, aid agencies can gain practical benefit from a renewed emphasis on reinforcing **human security** in conflict and immediate post-conflict zones. The term 'human security' remains contested and generally vague, but its theoretical basis is Amartya Sen's work on 'Freedom from Fear' and 'Freedom from Want'.[58] In its broadest sense, 'human security' reinterprets and widens the concept of security to mean: 'Comprehensively seizing all of the menaces that threaten the survival, daily life and human dignity of human beings and strengthening the efforts to confront these threats'.[59] This implies providing actors with a mandate to create safer conditions on the ground whilst wider reforms are put in place. The approach should therefore contribute to creating an enabling environment for the relief and development efforts of NGOs and UN agencies.[60] In practice, the enforcement of human security may disproportionately benefit one party to the conflict and alter the environment for the provision of humanitarian aid. But a commitment to human security in terms of creating the conditions for long-term peace should also imply sufficient external support for overcoming the debilitating effects on communities of poverty, economic vulnerability and poor governance.[61] However, the pursuit by certain powerful donor governments of 'hard security' issues directly and through their influence on other actors increasingly poses a threat to human security.

So, in view of the above, why are humanitarians sceptical of allying themselves with peacebuilding activities? Given the short time frames of humanitarian assistance programmes, can – or indeed should – aid agencies consciously seek to influence the dynamics of conflict in the implementation of relief programmes? Would this imply buying into an externally defined peacebuilding agenda, and compromising humanitarian principles? Or does the humanitarian ethos rather imply that agencies have a unique contribution of their own to make to sustainable peace? In order to seek an answer to these questions, the following chapter looks at the constraints and opportunities for adopting a 'conflict sensitive' approach to humanitarian assistance.

Chapter **2**: Conflict Sensitivity – Constraints and Ways Forward

Participants at Alert's consultations identified some of the most common challenges faced by donor agencies, international NGOs and local partners when trying to apply a conflict sensitive approach to humanitarian assistance. The challenges are located in the policy, operational, and internal management and capacity domains of aid planning and implementation.[62] The examples listed below are not exhaustive, but indicate some of the main ways in which the ability of aid actors to have a positive impact on peacebuilding is influenced by factors external to the humanitarian crisis itself. Table 1 suggests steps to overcome these constraints.

2.1 Policy

Policy challenges are related to government, donor and media issues.

Foreign government policies: Conflicting and competing foreign government agendas, compromises on aid caused by trade and foreign policy, and a lack of cohesive and sustained multi-instrument responses remain problems that are evident on the ground, despite efforts to address them. Humanitarian assistance cannot substitute for concerted and cohesive political efforts to create peace, for which governments bear primary responsibility.

Donor policies and parameters: Humanitarian agencies' capacity for systematically adopting conflict sensitive approaches is limited by unco-ordinated policy agendas, unclear long-term goals, unrealistically short time frames for intervention, and restrictive and narrow funding parameters. Agencies' capacity to contribute to conflict transformation may thereby be undermined.

Media: Media attention can lead to a distortion of reality, and creates the need to maintain a high profile, which may in turn have a distorting effect on the planning and implementation of humanitarian programmes, contributing to the phenomenon of 'forgotten crises'.

2.2 Operations

In the operational domain, issues of resources, planning and implementation are key challenges to conflict sensitive humanitarian assistance.

Resources: Inadequate and short-term financing, connected to the risk of diversion of donor agency investments in conflict areas, restricts agencies' ability to invest in adequate context analysis and to adapt their planning accordingly. In addition, difficulties of local economic procurement and a lack of local partnerships pre-dating the emergency makes it difficult to build conflict sensitivity into the response.

Planning: Inadequate needs assessment/targeting and a lack of co-ordination of priorities among agencies may limit their positive impact on the conflict dynamics. For local partners, there is the additional tension between being a 'sub-contractor' and an advocate for reform of the root causes of conflict.

Implementation: Logistical problems (delays, theft and sabotage), as well as concerns for staff security, are recurrent challenges that may be alleviated by continual analysis of the political, social and economic context of intervention. However, lack of co-ordination, mandate constraints and donors' distance from realities on the ground often diminish the positive impact of humanitarian

assistance on peacebuilding. This may be compounded by the tendency to not fully apply lessons learned from previous interventions in conflict zones, which in turn raises issues of internal management and capacity.

2.3   Internal Management and Capacity

Communication: Poor communication and coherence between headquarters and country desks/departments, and with local partners who are too removed for access to decision-making, can reduce understanding of the operational context and have negative consequences for the impact of humanitarian programmes on conflict.

Analysis: Lack of historical understanding (most typical in the case of donor agencies) and poor analytical skills (in the case of international NGOs (INGOs) and local partners) may limit agencies' capacity to analyse the conflict environment in which they operate.

Capacity: Weak analysis and/or understanding of the local context is often a consequence of agencies' limited lessons-learned capacity, insufficient and inflexible resources (particularly for local partners), fluctuating response capacity and high staff turnover. The latter often results in a loss of institutional memory. This, in combination with short-term contracts, which in turn lead to short-term perspectives, often undermines the ability of agencies to develop the context knowledge and analytical capacity they need to 'Do Good'.[63] In addition, there can be a tendency to rely on what has worked previously, rather than think 'out of the box' and try new approaches.

These constraints are highlighted in a background survey to a conference funded by ECHO and organised by Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE) in May 2002. The survey found that only seven per cent of VOICE NGOs undertook conflict training of their staff. However, only one INGO saw matters relating to conflict as being outside its mandate, while all other surveyed INGOs mentioned lack of capacity and resources as the main constraints to undertaking conflict training of staff.[64] Despite constraints to developing and maintaining their own institutional memory, INGOs – by virtue of their presence on the ground both before and after a wider international response – in fact often have the potential to constitute the international community's collective 'institutional memory'. This is an important role that should be recognised and enhanced.

The above grouping of challenges into thematic clusters across the aid system shows that practical responses to humanitarian crises will in most cases depend on cross-sector co-ordination. Analysis, for example, should be co-ordinated and should engage INGOs and their local partners at least as much as donor agencies. Resources, and the terms under which they are allocated, are more than a donor issue. Aid agencies may often prefer smaller funds spread across a longer period of time. This preference, however, sits uneasily with donor agencies' inclination to make large sums available on a strictly time-limited basis in the expectation of 'quick impact'.

In response to the challenges above, participants at Alert's consultations identified specific actions that had contributed to more effective aid management and delivery in conflict areas. Their recommendations are summarised in Table 1, below, in the domains of policy, organisational and operational capacity, and as they relate to the different actors in the aid system (donor agencies, international and local NGOs).

Just as the above challenges include operational considerations that affect actors at one level, some of the practical recommendations in Table 1 can be implemented unilaterally or within the framework of understandings and agreements that already exist between donors, INGOs and their local partners. The recommendations are based on reflections of humanitarian actors and lessons learned from previous emergencies where conflict sensitivity has either not been a priority (and where the positive impacts of assistance have been lessened as a result) or where conflict sensitive efforts have been made and have proven successful.

Table 1. Steps to Enhance Conflict Sensitive Humanitarian Aid

Actors	Level of Activity		
	Policy	*Organisational*	*Operational*
Donor Agencies	Enhanced 'ethical' foreign policy Consistent policy objectives Increased core funding and funding of organisational capacity development	Coherence within and between departments and between HQ and country desks Enhanced capacity for conflict analysis and regular conflict indicators monitoring	Flexible, open-ended forms of support Co-ordination with other donors Listen to local voices Assess impact on local context
INGOs	Public transparency Clear and understood mandate across the whole organisation Active engagement with all parties Self-assessment of political statement, position and impact Joint lobbying of donors to send a comprehensive and coherent message Multiple funding sources	Retain staff and improve institutional memory Increase communication between departments and between HQ and field Identify comparative strengths in other partners, avoid duplication Build on existing local capacity and infrastructure Enhance capacity for conflict analysis and regular conflict indicators monitoring	Increase knowledge of the context Assess impact on local context Formulate a clear exit policy at the planning stage Security training for staff Increase inter-agency co-ordination Recruit across ethnic and social/culture divisions reflective of the implementing environment Conduct advocacy with relevant parties to create opportunities for humanitarian access Draw on local knowledge and capacity and build local capacity to understand and impact conflict dynamics Do not raise local expectations beyond ability to deliver
Local NGOs	Build advocacy capacity Build local coalitions Promote a shared and adaptive process with external agencies	Seek appropriate resources, avoid being used 'on the cheap' Undertake training in and use of appropriate analytical tools Build administration and management capacity and avoid 'one-man shows'	Challenge and lobby donors Assess impact on context Co-ordinate with other local agencies Recruit across ethnic and social/cultural divisions reflective of the implementing environment

In providing humanitarian as well as long-term development assistance, many aid agencies now recognise that there are many opportunities to support peace rather than war that do not violate their core humanitarian ethos. This recognition is reflected in, for example, the Better Programming Initiative of the Red Cross (see Box 3, below). On the donor level, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), among others, is committed to mainstreaming conflict analysis in humanitarian (and development) aid programming.[65] 'Mainstreaming conflict prevention' is also one of the focal areas of the OECD Development Assistance Committee's Conflict Prevention and Development Co-operation Network.

BOX 3. THE IFRC BETTER PROGRAMMING INITIATIVE

An example of organisational learning inspired by the Local Capacities for Peace project is the Better Programming Initiative of the IFRC. It is based on the premise that by providing large-scale humanitarian assistance in a country in conflict, the Red Cross and its local partners become part of the political environment of that country. It follows that:

'In-depth analysis of the context prior to our intervention will allow us to design our programme better'.[66]

An important element of the Better Programming Initiative is the analysis of institutional issues (mandate, headquarters' role and fundraising) and their influence in programme implementation. The IFRC, perhaps more sensitive than most agencies to issues of neutrality and impartiality, understands that engagement with the wider policy context in which it operates is an essential complement to its intervention at the grassroots level. The IFRC is currently engaged in efforts to mainstream the Better Programming Initiative across its global network.

While NGO programme managers can influence project-level practice (i.e. react to a crisis) in a way that improves conflict sensitivity, they cannot control the policy and resource decisions that dictate the overall parameters of their work. Many of the recommendations outlined in Table 1 depend on more consultation and concerted action between donor agencies and humanitarian agencies **prior** to the launch of aid efforts. This should be accompanied by critical reflection and a willingness to adapt throughout the intervention.

Based on the above discussion of the context, debate, challenges and opportunities of humanitarian assistance in conflict areas, the following chapter summarises how humanitarian agencies can contribute to an environment conducive to sustainable peace by adopting a conflict sensitive approach.

Chapter **3**: Conclusion

Humanitarian assistance is by definition a **reaction** to levels of suffering that are perceived to be rapidly worsening, and that cannot be improved by the efforts of local actors alone. Humanitarian programmes are concentrated at times of crisis, **after** preventive steps to restrain violent conflict have generally failed, and are often terminated **before** opportunities to consolidate peace have been realised. However, complex emergencies in conflict zones do not develop overnight. They are normally preceded by a breakdown of state structures, exploitation and exacerbation of existing differences within civil society, disputed legitimacy of authorities, attempts by factions to manipulate the sympathies of foreign allies and resource providers, widespread abuse of human rights, attacks on civilians and forced displacement of populations.[67] Even when such evidence is apparent, the initial political response to the symptoms of impending crisis tends to be limited to using diplomacy and other foreign policy instruments available at the time. The call for humanitarian engagement usually only comes when that approach has failed – an arbitrary point that is defined differently in each crisis.

The end of the 'humanitarian phase' of an intervention is equally open to subjective definition. Peace agreements brokered internationally often envisage a cut-off point for emergency relief, after which donor agencies prefer to allocate resources to recovery, rehabilitation and/or sustainable development initiatives. But the idea of a tidy continuum from relief to development is rarely borne out by humanitarian needs indicators on the ground, and 'parallel programming' is paramount. Given the scale of victimisation and the complexity of conflict factors at play, it is unlikely that emergency services in conflict zone will become unnecessary overnight.[68]

The implication of this for humanitarian agencies is not only that they tend to intervene when conflict and suffering are greatest, but also that the parameters for their intervention (and its potential impact) are politically defined. Therefore, agencies should argue for humanitarian issues to have a higher profile in international peace agreements or other overarching policy frameworks, and employ their advocacy skills collectively in an appropriate manner to influence the planning of aid objectives at a much earlier stage.

3.1 Human Security and Conflict Sensitivity

The challenge of linking humanitarian assistance to peacebuilding objectives is obscured by the often conflicting political agendas that accompany the allocation of aid resources and the monitoring of expenditure. Assistance that seeks to rebuild local capacity to withstand and transform the effects of violent conflict is entirely consistent with traditional humanitarian principles. As one humanitarian colleague noted, 'conflict sensitive aid is good aid'.[69] But agencies cannot maximise aid's potential to 'Do Good' unless they are prepared to analyse the roots of conflict and the political context of each crisis they intervene in. This implies more systematic information gathering and organisational learning from past experience. Armed with that understanding, agencies must then complement their operational activity with targeted advocacy that seeks to keep donors and international governments aware of how and why conflict impacts on human suffering.

There are three main ways in which humanitarian assistance can support and reinforce more long-term efforts to build sustainable peace. Firstly, humanitarian assistance can transform the **effects** of direct and indirect violence. By providing food, water, medical treatment, shelter and

sanitation, it can reduce the suffering of non-combatants and, in doing so, strengthen the affected population's capacity to overcome the effects of further violent attacks and to engage in efforts to build peace.[70]

Secondly, the presence of humanitarian actors can alleviate human rights abuses by reminding warring factions of their obligations to non-combatants and by reporting breaches of international human rights law and humanitarian codes of conduct. In many cases, the very presence of humanitarian agencies can serve as protection for populations, thereby preventing the spread of conflict.[71] Conversely, their absence can draw the international community's attention to emerging or escalating conflict and threats to the safety of local populations. In the case of Macedonia, for example, the fact that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was denied access to Albanian majority villages under bombardment by the army served to alert the international community and mobilise pressure on the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to enter into peace negotiations. In doing so, it almost certainly shortened the duration of civil conflict.[72]

Thirdly, adoption of a human security approach to humanitarian assistance may facilitate the creation of a secure environment where people can meet their own basic needs. The people-centred human security concept emphasises security as a basic need and right, and links humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding. In situations of violent conflict, local populations – and especially women – often identify security and protection issues as being as important as material assistance.[73] For example, local communities in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo have identified security as interconnected with and a prerequisite for meeting immediate humanitarian need.[74] Conversely, humanitarian assistance may provide direct support for community-level peacebuilding through working with and building the capacity of local civil society organisations that are legitimate and representative within their own communities.[75] This in particular applies to 'hot' conflicts in so-called 'failed states' and may be less apparent in less intense conflict situations, where the state authority remains intact. For example, Alert consultations indicate that economic development is one of the contributing factors to the prevention – and the resolution – of conflict in the Niger Delta in Nigeria.[76]

This human security approach is reflected in discussions about 'complementarity' among humanitarian, development and peacebuilding responses to crises. As the actors and impacts of these responses inter-link, so do the different levels of conflict at which they are applied. Inter-linkages among local, national, regional and international levels of conflict can be illustrated as follows:[77]
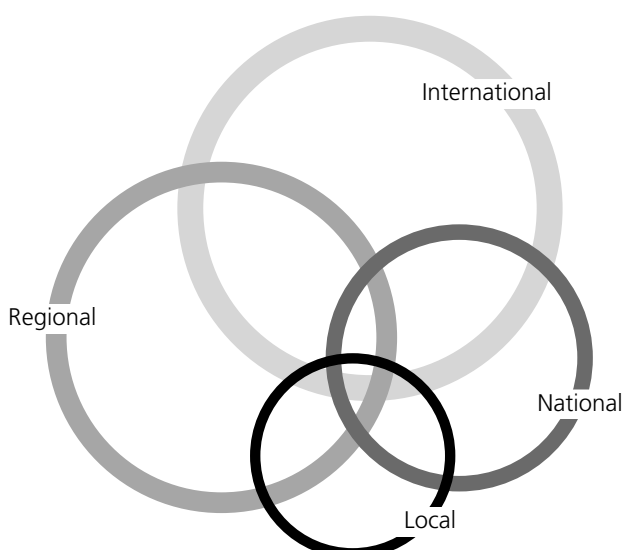
Conflict sensitive humanitarian action at the local level can complement and reinforce community-based peacebuilding and does not imply submission to a wider (national or donor) governmental political agenda. For example, ActionAid implements a peacebuilding programme in Africa that works with local communities to develop sustainable peace initiatives based on the recognition that resolving conflict demands a multi-level approach from community-level peacebuilding to high-level mediation and advocacy, reflecting the multiple levels of conflict shown above.[78]

However, while complementarity on a higher level between the overall humanitarian response and diplomatic peacebuilding efforts may sometimes be desirable, it is often problematic, because it risks compromising humanitarian principles, which may in turn have negative consequences for humanitarian access and effectiveness. This has become a particular and pressing concern in the current global climate dominated by the 'Global War on Terror'. In addition, humanitarian assistance has very limited effectiveness as a tool for foreign policy. For both these reasons, donor agencies should not attempt to persuade humanitarian organisations to undertake 'Track 1' conflict resolution, such as high-level mediation.

More importantly, learning from conflict sensitive development and humanitarian programmes[79] indicates that agencies can make their most important contribution to longer-term peacebuilding through building on their core strengths to enhance the conflict sensitive capacity of their main programme areas. However, there is currently a tendency for agencies to engage in separate peacebuilding programmes, rather than mainstream conflict sensitivity across all programmes. While these peacebuilding programmes can generate some learning for conflict sensitive humanitarian programmes, there is also a distinct risk of seeing peacebuilding as a separate, technical activity. Alert's own experience, however, would seem to demonstrate that peacebuilding activities that also contribute to concrete socio-economic opportunities for the communities concerned are often the most effective. Therefore, agencies should focus more on integrating conflict sensitivity within their core programmes than on building separate peacebuilding capacity. Conflict sensitivity can be mainstreamed via evaluations of programmes in conflict areas and reviews of policies and operational methodology, e.g. building a 'political economy' or human security approach into sustainable-livelihoods or rights-based approaches.[80]

3.2 Accountability and Local Participation

Enhancing both the effectiveness and the conflict sensitivity of the humanitarian response is in large part dependent on listening more to local populations and other local stakeholders, in order to help the true 'owners' of the conflict develop the capacity to transform the current crisis and prevent future ones.[81] In particular, greater emphasis must be placed on understanding the historical and political context, as well as the incentive systems of those waging war and those suffering from it.[82] Local communities who suffer the consequences of violent conflict, and who will be living its aftermath, should be recognised by international actors as the primary force for sustainable peace and development.

Consultations should include a gender perspective of the realities of men and women in conflict and in post-conflict peacebuilding. Building social capital and enhancing local participation in decision-making through genuine local partnerships are essential parts of any peacebuilding efforts.[83] They are equally central to strengthening the peacebuilding potential of humanitarian interventions.[84] The contribution of humanitarian interventions to processes of local ownership and community peacebuilding is in turn highly dependent on the willingness of each actor in the aid chain to demonstrate accountability and transparency of decision-making to both 'downstream' and 'upstream' stakeholders.[85]

Accountability demands greater consultation in each intervention by those who determine the overall objectives (and provide the resources) with other actors whose understanding of the conflict environment may not be the same. Indeed, the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP) stresses that accountability to the least powerful is essential to the principles and activities of humanitarian work. This in turn requires an understanding of the power dynamics of any given situation.[86] Analysing the conflict dynamics and actors as well as the impact of humanitarian assistance on these is an essential component of this understanding.

3.3 Recommendations

In sum, humanitarian assistance can go beyond 'Doing No Harm' to 'Doing Good' in terms of making a positive contribution to sustainable peace and a return to peaceful coexistence between former warring parties. It does this already by well-managed programmes on the ground allied to advocacy at higher levels. But to maximise its potential for influencing policy and having a positive impact on the ground, it must be based on continuing analysis of underlying conflict trends, a willingness to adapt in the light of changing evidence of human suffering, and a strengthened ability to learn and apply the lessons that emanate from local partners and their civil society constituencies. This does not imply any compromise with traditional principles of impartiality or neutrality. On the contrary, these are principles that remain evident and underpin effective interventions by NGOs and UN agencies active in conflict-driven complex emergencies worldwide. However, 'Doing Good' does demand that agencies should be prepared to modify a 'back-to-basics' stance strategically and tactically, in the light of increasing politicisation on the part of donors.

Despite good progress in many agencies, this is perhaps the greatest challenge confronting humanitarian agencies. Organisations increasingly willing to 'reckon with politics' are in general still reluctant to commit themselves to contributing to structural change, if this means collaborating with donors and the political institutions they represent to promote objectives (like peacebuilding) that go beyond the relief of suffering. This may not fundamentally be an ideological problem, but one that illustrates many humanitarian agencies' traditionally weak capacity to analyse,[87] and their low-key involvement in, the political context of aid.[88] Participants in Alert's consultations recognised this weakness, but they were unsure how it could be remedied, given constant pressure on the humanitarian sector to 'act first, think later'. This pressure inhibits learning from past experience, encourages a rapid turnover of skilled personnel who take their knowledge with them when contracts come to an end, and, in all but the largest agencies, militates against the storage and processing of lessons learned.[89] Agencies' analytical capacity may be boosted by developing closer partnerships with independent organisations that are more deeply involved in analysis of this political context. However, the question remains whether agencies are willing or able to make the changes to their organisational culture that will be necessary to make conflict sensitivity a reality.

Some key recommendations for how humanitarian agencies can consciously seek to develop and strengthen a conflict sensitive approach can be drawn from this paper, and are as follows:

- Identify, partner with and build the capacity of local civil society organisations that are viewed by their communities as legitimate and representative and that can play a positive role in more long-term local peacebuilding efforts.
- Integrate conflict sensitive principles and methods into core programming areas (rather than establishing separate peacebuilding programmes), so as to minimise unintended negative consequences, increase accountability and strengthen positive spill-offs on peace.
- Where appropriate, seek to develop new partnerships with other international and local agencies who can assist in meeting the diverse needs created by violent conflict.
- Think through the potential impact of the humanitarian activity on the conflict dynamics and vice versa in the planning stage and incorporate women's and men's perspectives into the design. This includes appreciating the gendered impact of violence and the particular roles of women and men in post-conflict peacebuilding.[90]
- Advocate for a higher profile for humanitarian issues and human security realities in overarching (donor) policy frameworks, based on in-depth understanding of realities on the ground.
- Develop and strengthen capacity to understand and analyse the operational context, including the profile, actors and causes of conflict. Comprehensive and on-going conflict analysis that extends beyond the immediate locale of operations to the national and regional levels should be considered an important element of adequate risk assessment, needs assessment and targeting.[91]
- Invest in evaluations and lessons learned that are based on the perspectives of legitimate and representative local partners, who are committed to peaceful change, and their constituencies, and ensure that these lessons are applied in on-going and future programmes.

Conflict sensitivity requires both developing sufficient capacity within agencies and advocating for changes in the external environment, in particular the political and funding climate within which agencies operate. These are challenges agencies have long faced and overcoming them necessitates both organisation-wide commitment and a high level of inter-agency co-operation and co-ordination. Based on extensive research and interviews with large international NGOs, a forthcoming Alert publication explores concrete avenues for building institutional capacity to mainstream conflict sensitivity.[92]

The impact of humanitarian agencies adopting conflict sensitivity would be extremely limited in the absence of a willingness and capacity of donor agencies to do the same. There is, therefore, a vital need for donor agencies to take certain appropriate steps. Recommendations for donor agencies include:

- Promote a co-ordinated approach to conflict analysis with other donors. A co-ordinated policy framework is a key prerequisite for subsequent conflict sensitive humanitarian operations.
- Commit staff and resources to conflict analysis and to implementing and evaluating the approach suggested by this analysis.
- Invest in developing humanitarian agencies' analytical ability and conflict sensitive capacity generally.
- Develop stronger downward accountability and listen more willingly to advocacy messages from NGOs and, in particular, legitimate and representative local civil society organisations that are committed to peaceful change.
- Mainstream conflict transformation objectives in intervention strategies and, where this is not feasible in the short term, insist on a principled humanitarian approach.

Finally, conflict sensitivity has implications for Western governments' policies and practices in conflict-affected countries. Recommendations include the following:

- Ensure that all policies and actions (diplomatic, military, trade) are clearly strategised, planned, implemented and evaluated with their impact upon conflict and peace dynamics in mind (rather than just assessing aid and/or humanitarian assistance in this way).
- The long-term peacebuilding impact of a 'coherent' approach depends on the quality of the underlying policy guiding governments and other actors. A policy or framework that is based on limited analysis and that lacks a sufficient international and local constituency should be avoided, as it is unlikely to promote sustainable peace and may damage humanitarian access.
- Avoid using humanitarian action as the sole response to complex political problems in countries and regions that are perceived to be of less strategic interest and/or consistently 'poor performers'.
- Pursue conflict prevention and transformation objectives with respect for humanitarian values and space.
- Invest in long-term, sustainable and locally owned solutions to conflict that address accompanying humanitarian crises.

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Endnotes

[1] Policy seminar on 'Conflict and Aid: Operationalising Lessons Learned', December 13, 2001; consultative meeting on February 28, 2002; discussion meeting on 'Afghanistan since the Bonn Agreement – Relief, Reconstruction & Peacebuilding: Constraints and Opportunities', April 17, 2002; discussion forum on 'Civil-Military Co-operation in Complex Emergencies: How to Enhance Sustainable Peace?', April 26, 2002; workshop on 'Humanitarian Assistance – Working with Local Partners to Enhance Sustainable Peace', June 7, 2002; and forum on 'Aid in Conflict-Affected Areas – Developing Institutional Capacity for Better Practice', June 4–5, 2003.

[2] International Alert et al., forthcoming.

[3] Goodhand & Atmar, 2002. The reports on Sri Lanka (Goodhand, 2001) and Liberia (Atkinson et al., 2001) are in-house studies. The findings of these three studies are synthesised in Goodhand & Atkinson (2001).

[4] National Intelligence Council, 2001; summary on >http://www.cia.gov/nic/pubs/index.htm<.

[5] Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Russia/Chechnya, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda.

[6] Bosnia-Herzegovina, Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Yugoslavia/Kosovo. The term 'internal conflict' is problematic because it disguises the fact that these conflicts often cross international borders and can be heavily influenced by external actors (states and others). In the absence of a more appropriate term, it will, however, be used in this paper.

[7] Haiti, Ivory Coast, India/Pakistan (Kashmir), Kenya, Macedonia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

[8] Angola, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan are examples.

[9] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (2003) highlights the risk of humanitarian complicity in facilitating abuses and the potential for aid to have a negative effect as two of five central humanitarian dilemmas.

[10] See Goodhand & Atkinson (2001).

[11] Perrin, 1998.

[12] Operation Lifeline Sudan has been quoted as an example of a situation where a negotiated agreement with UN agencies conferred a degree of international recognition on the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA); see Loane & Moyroud (2001).

[13] Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), 2002.

[14] Some donors have incorporated a regional dimension into their programming. However, there is a pressing need for further progress in this area; see Camara Santa Clara Gomes et al. (2001) and International Alert & Saferworld (2003).

[15] Minear, 2002. ALNAP (2002) notes that participation by the local communities in planning and decision-making as opposed to implementation continues to be a problem, as was also noted in the 2001 ALNAP Annual Review.

[16] Quinn, 2002.

[17] The problem of co-ordination is, for example, mentioned in Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (2000).

[18] Regarding disbursement flexibility, a number of evaluation reports found a lack of flexibility on the part of head offices; see European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) (1999) and World Food Programme (2000).

[19] See, for example, Danish International Development Agency (1999a).

[20] The lack of application of lessons learned and earlier evaluations is mentioned in ECHO (1999).

[21] Goodhand & Atkinson, 2001.

[22] However, there were significant exceptions to this overall conclusion, notably in Liberia after 1991, when aid agencies adopted joint Principles and Protocols of Humanitarian Operations (PPHO) that led to improved aid assessment and delivery procedures and prompted increased dialogue with local military and political factions; see Atkinson et al. (2001).

[23] Goodhand, 2001.

[24] Loane & Moyroud, 2001.

[25] Apthorpe, 2002.

[26] Duffield, 2001, and MacRae, 2002a.

[27] MacRae, 2002b.

[28] Bryans et al., 1999.

[29] Comment by NGO participant to the forum held at Alert on 'Aid in Conflict Affected Areas – Developing Institutional Capacity for Better Practice', June 4–5, 2003.

[30] See, for example, Jackson & Walker (1999), Duffield (1996) and African Rights (1994). For a listing of further sources, see Sherriff & Vaskio (2000).

[31] Curtis, 2001.

[32] This is reflected in the fact that in eighteen out of twenty 2003 UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal (CAP) countries and regions, conflict has contributed significantly to the deteriorating humanitarian situation (see ReliefWeb, <http://www.reliefweb.int>).

[33] Gaigals & Leonhardt, 2001.

[34] International Alert et al., forthcoming.

[35] OECD – Development Assistance Committee, 2001.

[36] Indeed, peacebuilding NGOs have been markedly less organised or vocal in the 'defence' of their terminology and principles than humanitarian NGOs.

[37] The term 'Doing Good' is used here in the sense of 'positively contributing to peace through aid'. We fully acknowledge that the 'Do No Harm' terminology developed by the Local Capacities for Peace Project (led by Mary B. Anderson) is not focused exclusively on avoiding harm. Indeed, Anderson has directly addressed the question of how aid can support the prevention and cessation of violence and the promotion of peace; see Anderson & Spelten (2000). However, the term is often (mis)interpreted as focusing only on avoiding harm.

[38] 'Equitable' is understood as 'needs-based allocation' and is distinct from 'equal', which refers to a pure arithmetic calculation.

[39] International Alert, 1998.

[40] International Alert et al., forthcoming.

[41] For example, the British government has established a Global Conflict Prevention Pool across the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development to assist in the promotion of coherence.

42 United Nations, 2000.

43 Council of the European Union, 2000.

44 For example, the 'Communication from the Commission on Conflict Prevention' (April 2001) states: 'The Commission will ensure that its development policy and other co-operation programmes are more clearly focused on addressing root causes of conflict in an integrated way'.

45 These terms do have distinct implications; however, a discussion of these falls outside the scope of this paper.

46 For a discussion of peacebuilding aspects of civil-military relations in complex emergencies, see Lilly (2002).

47 See ReliefWeb (>http://www.reliefweb.int<) for details on the UN Consolidated Appeal Process.

48 Pugh, 2001.

49 The Sphere Project (2000, new edition 2004) illustrates this trend.

50 See the principles of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in this regard, in ICRC (1986).

51 Like 'impartiality' the meaning of the concept of neutrality is highly contested. However, a detailed discussion of these concepts falls outside the scope of this paper.

52 This is the definition of impartiality used by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

53 For example, Relief and Rehabilitation Network (1997).

54 Sphere Project, 2000 (new edition 2004).

55 First and foremost, the IFRC's 'Code of Conduct', drawn up by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response.

56 See the report from workshop on security management in conflict situations in Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE) (2002).

57 USAID has recently indicated that if other actors than NGOs 'do a better job', then they will be prioritised in the interest of efficiency.

58 Sen, 1999.

59 Former Prime Minister of Japan, Obuchi, quoted in Uvin (2002). The web site of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (>http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca<) offers a more narrow definition of human security as 'an approach that recognizes that lasting stability cannot be achieved until people are protected from violent threats to their rights, safety or lives'.

60 However, Srebrenica showed the frailty of human security measures in the absence of clear, shared political objectives amongst different actors within the international community.

61 See Lilly et al. (2002).

62 The internal organisational constraints to incorporating a 'conflict sensitive' approach and possible measures to overcome these are explored in depth in a forthcoming Alert publication.

63 Many of these constraints to learning, knowledge transfer and capacity-building are also touched upon in ALNAP (2002).

64 VOICE, 2002.

65 See Swedish International Development Agency (2000), which emphasises 'developmental humanitarian assistance with a conflict perspective'.

66 IFRC, 2000.

67 Borton, 1998.

68 On the need for parallel programming, see Camara Santa Clara Gomes et al. (2001).

69 Alert consultation, 2002.

70 See Perrin (1998).

71 Paul, 1999.

72 Comment by UN staff member on the ground. For a discussion of this, see ibid.

73 Several studies highlight the need for security as a prerequisite for survival and therefore a priority for the use of material assistance; e.g. see Danish International Development Agency (1999b).

74 Consultations by Alert, February 2002.

75 International Alert, 2002; Quinn, 2002.

76 Alert Niger Delta stakeholder consultations, Nigeria, July 2002. Although the level of violence in the Niger Delta is not as intense as in, for example, the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, there is widespread conflict and suffering, which urgently require addressing.

77 Diagram source: International Alert et al. (forthcoming).

78 ActionAid, 2001.

79 The importance of dialogue as a foundation for developmental activities is highlighted in Mercy Corps' case study of peace programming in the Balkans; see Preuss (2003).

80 On using political economy analysis within a sustainable-livelihoods framework, see Collinson (2003).

81 Quinn, 2002.

82 Goodhand & Atkinson, 2001.

83 Leonhardt et al., 2002.

84 For a discussion of both the potential and the challenges of local partnerships, see Quinn (2002).

85 However, maintaining a measure of confidentiality can at times be essential to the success of peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts; see International Alert (1998).

86 Humanitarian Accountability Project, un-dated >http://www.hapgeneva.org<.

87 Lack of capacity to carry out analysis is one of the problems highlighted in ALNAP (2003); see >http://www.alnap.org<.

88 Schloms, 2001.

89 Ibid.

90 Pankhurst & Anderlini, 2000.

91 The new 2004 edition of the Sphere Minimum Standards recognises the importance of understanding the nature and source of conflict and how it might influence decisions about targeting assistance.

92 This publication should be available from Alert's web site (>http://www.international-alert.org<), by March 2004.