

UNHCR South Sudan Learning Brief: Conflict Sensitivity

Purpose of this learning brief:

All UNHCR operations can learn lessons to strengthen their effectiveness and relevance, assessing how well they are performing in relation to UN guidelines, and drawing on best practice approaches. This learning brief is based on the findings of the Country Strategy Evaluation (CSE) in South Sudan, completed in May 2023. It focuses on the issue of **conflict sensitivity**, highlighting how and where UNHCR South Sudan is doing well, and also how it could strengthen adaptive management going forward.

Why does conflict sensitivity matter?

For UN agencies in South Sudan, as in other conflict-affected settings, ensuring their strategy and operations are conflict sensitive is an increasing priority. Adopting a conflict sensitivity approach is fundamentally important to deliver development, humanitarian and political assistance activities in a way that aims to minimize the risk that those activities could cause more harm than good and increase the risk of violence, “laying the foundation for maximizing the positive impact of activities on sustaining peace and is therefore a minimum responsibility for the whole of the UN system.”¹

The UN’s own guide to conflict sensitivity sets out that a conflict-sensitive approach has five key steps (1) understanding the peace and conflict context, including from a gender and youth perspective; (2) analysis of how UN activities interact with peace and conflict; (3) adaptation of activities to manage risk; (4) leveraging of opportunities for building and sustaining peace; and (5) ongoing monitoring and evaluation of conflict sensitivity risks and approaches.² A spectrum model to understand and plan conflict sensitivity approaches (such as the one below) is generally considered a helpful tool to show how interventions can, in the worst case scenarios, cause unintended harm to communities and community relations, through to approaches which minimize harm, and those which positively and deliberately address the causes and drivers of conflict, which are hence transformative.

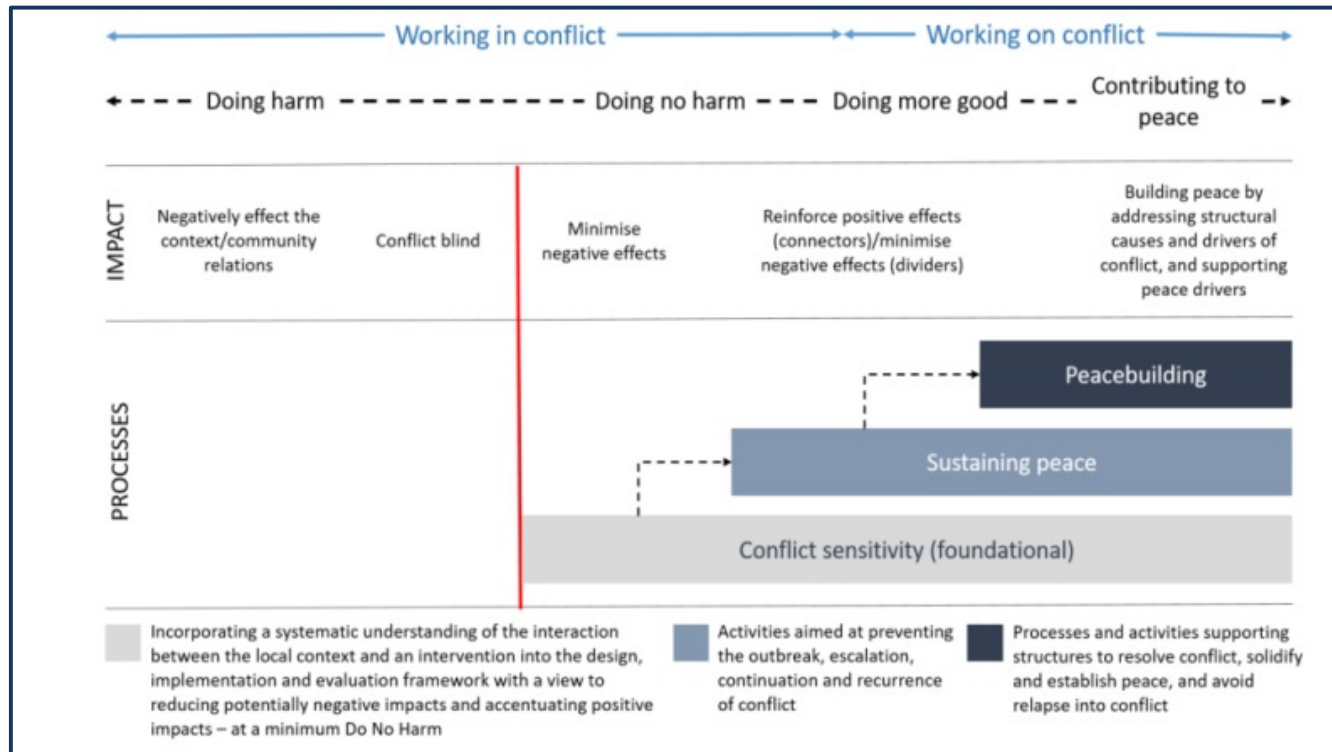


Figure 1: Conflict sensitivity model: the Peace Spectrum³

1 UN Sustainable Development Group (2022): Good Practice Note: Conflict Sensitivity, Peacebuilding And Sustaining Peace <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/good-practice-note-conflict-sensitivity-peacebuilding-and-sustaining-peace>

2 *Ibid*

3 IASC (2020): Exploring Peace Within The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-10/Issue%20paper%20-%20Exploring%20peace%20within%20the%20Humanitarian-Development-Peace%20Nexus%20%28HDPN%29.pdf>

So, how conflict sensitive is UNHCR in its work in South Sudan? And where does it sit on the conflict sensitivity spectrum?

UNHCR teams in South Sudan generally have a good grasp of the challenging local contexts they are working in. Complex local conflict dynamics are understood, particularly by national staff and longer-serving international staff. Hence **Step 1** in the UN's five steps ("*understand the context*") is generally broadly addressed. However, there is limited evidence of well-informed, up-to-date, documented conflict analysis systematically informing programmes and decision-making (**Step 2** - "*how do activities interact with peace and conflict?*").⁴ In terms of **Step 3**, there is some good practice in *adapting activities to manage risk*, although this is not uniformly evident and is not clearly documented. **Step 4**, *proactively leveraging peacebuilding opportunities*, is also an increasing focus in some areas, but this is not uniform and there are gaps and missed opportunities.

UNHCR's partners in some locations consider it to be conflict-sensitive in its approach and good at handling local conflict dynamics, including impartially negotiating humanitarian access in conflict-affected areas (and in various cases, better than some other UN partners in these respects). Broadly, UNHCR is generally considered to be operating satisfactorily at the "do no harm" end of the conflict sensitivity spectrum. However, this is not uniformly the case, and some examples were highlighted where challenging and dynamic conflict risks were not considered to have been adequately assessed and addressed by UNHCR, with consequences for the displaced persons it serves.

What examples are there of emerging good practice in terms of conflict sensitivity?

Starting with emerging areas of good practice (positives), i.e. those towards the right-hand end of the conflict sensitivity spectrum, the CSE identified a number of examples, including the following:

- **Conflict sensitivity analysis to support building social cohesion:** In some areas, UNHCR's implementing partners (both current and former) have conducted conflict analysis to support their work focused on relations between refugees and host communities, for example in Maban and Jamjang, and there is much to learn from their conflict sensitivity approach.⁵ This aligns with Step 2, *analysis of how activities interact with peace and conflict*.
- **Managing migration risks:** In Western Bahr El Ghazal, support was provided to escort cattle herders to reduce the risk of migration related conflict. This is in line with Step 3, *adapting activities to manage identified conflict risk*.
- **Water source management to promote social cohesion:** In Jamjang, construction of reservoirs was designed with a view to improving local community relations and reducing conflict over scarce water resources, by jointly serving refugee and host communities. Water sources have, in practice, acted as a catalyst for social cohesion. This is positive from a conflict sensitivity perspective and fits Step 4, *leveraging opportunities for peace*.
- **Conducting of peace dialogues:** Establishment of peace committees in refugee areas by UNHCR, for example in Maban where joint peace committees have been set up between refugees and the host community, is an example of Step 4, *leveraging opportunities for peace*.
- **Joint peacebuilding projects:** Well-designed, joined up, multiagency initiatives to address underlying structural drivers of conflict have the potential to sit at the most conflict-sensitive end of the conflict sensitivity spectrum if they apply a transformational approach. The multi-agency project in Jonglei in which UNHCR is a partner focused on tackling child abduction, a key driver of conflict, is a good example of such a project with transformational potential.
- **Drawing on conflict sensitivity expertise:** The South Sudan Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRFF) is a member of the Central Equatoria State Level Solutions Taskforce and provided support in developing some of its tools (March 2022). The CSRFF has also been approached by the Protection Cluster to bring conflict sensitivity considerations into some decision-making processes (e.g. around returns/resettlement and housing, land and property [HLP]). Conflict sensitivity training and a reflection workshop for the Protection Cluster were conducted in March 2022.

4 While protection risk assessments are fundamental to how UNHCR operates and contribute towards conflict sensitivity, these do not currently explicitly incorporate assessment of conflict dynamics and risks.

5 See, for example, DRC. (2016) 'Conflict and cohesion in Maban: Towards Positive Refugee/ Host Community Relations', Forcier Consulting, and DRC. (2020) 'Competing vulnerabilities: an assessment of conflict dynamics among host and refugee communities in Maban County, South Sudan'

What are some of the main areas for improvement?

Despite the above positive examples, UNHCR South Sudan's approach to conflict sensitivity is not yet comprehensive or systematic, and is still in many cases focused on "do no harm" rather than developing approaches which proactively leverage opportunities for peace and address underlying drivers. Conflict sensitivity risks are not as yet built into UNHCR's risk management approaches.⁶ The overall approaches of the Protection Cluster which UNHCR leads was also considered by some observers to often frame its approach at the "do no harm" end of the spectrum. Some specific examples where conflict risks are not considered to have been properly identified and managed and where, despite best intentions, risk of harm has not been adequately mitigated in practice are highlighted below. In some of these cases, joint UN decision-making in which UNHCR has played a role has negatively affected the context and the persons UNHCR serves.

(i) Camp management and handover:

- In the case of Mangala IDP camp (near Juba), a lack of prior conflict sensitivity analysis is considered by various key informants to have led to poor decision-making by the UN, including UNHCR, in relation to the siting of the IDP settlement. This has in turn led to serious ongoing issues between IDPs and the host community, including outbreaks of violence.
- The POC site to IDP camp transition jointly managed by the UN with UNHCR support on protection issues, has led to IDPs in Juba, Wau and Bentiu reporting that they are now living under the management of security actors who perpetrated violence against their communities.⁷

Lesson learned:

- *UNHCR needs to thoroughly assess and mitigate the risks of harm involved in establishing and managing sensitive IDP sites, working with its governmental and UN partners, particularly in respect of the handover to government of security and protection responsibilities, supported by advocacy where necessary.*

(ii) Conflict-sensitive returns:

- The guidance note on returns endorsed by the HCT is clear that accountability for due diligence assessments, including in relation to conflict sensitivity, is an essential requirement.⁸ A concern was raised by various of UNHCR's partners that the IDP return that took place from Melut to Baliet in Upper Nile State in April to May 2021 was based on inadequate recognition of the complex conflict dynamics in, and contested nature of, the proposed area of return by the UN and partners, including failing to listen adequately to the expressed concerns of community leaders. In the event, many returnees returned to Melut due to severe flooding. Nonetheless, the CSE team heard concerns from a variety of stakeholders that while an assessment of the current security situation was carried out, this failed to factor in the way in which this return would likely have fuelled local grievances and risked exacerbating conflict.⁹
- There are also concerns that the selection of some "Pockets of Hope" areas has not been based on an adequate assessment of conflict dynamics (Step 1), or inclusion of measures to mitigate conflict risk (Steps 2 and 3). A concern was raised by various of UNHCR's partners that the IDP return that took place from Melut to Baliet in Upper Nile State in April to May 2021 was based on inadequate recognition of the complex conflict dynamics in, and contested nature of, the proposed area of return by the UN and partners, including failing to listen adequately to the expressed concerns of community leaders. In the event, many returnees returned to Melut due to severe flooding. Nonetheless, the CSE team heard concerns from a variety of stakeholders that while an assessment of the current security situation was carried out, this failed to factor in the way in which this return would likely have fuelled local grievances and risked exacerbating conflict.

6 Review of UNHCR South Sudan risk registers (May 2023)

7 CRSF (2021): Conflict Sensitivity Analysis: UNMISS POC sites transition

8 Operational Guidance Note for Humanitarian Support for Returns endorsed by the HCT (July 2022)

9 This specifically focused on the risk of returning Padang Dinka while Shilluk communities remained displaced.

Lessons learned:

- **Returns are a key potential source of conflict risk.** Under the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions, all returns or resettlements should be voluntary, safe, dignified and informed, and adhere to international standards. However, this alone is not adequate when there are conflict risks involved – hence it is important that supported returns should also be conflict sensitive.¹⁰
- **Conflict sensitive returns require carefully managed analysis and consultations** to assess the risk of the proposed return (including how this compares with the option/risk of keeping communities in their current location).
- **Current UNHCR returns assessment forms can be strengthened:** while the SOP developed for IDP Returns by HCT stresses the need for conflict sensitivity, current UNHCR assessment forms tend to focus on security, but less on the overt as well as underlying conflict dynamics, including potential ethnic tensions, as well as locally specific HLP issues which could drive conflict.¹¹ All these factors need to be addressed, together with a plan of measures which can mitigate identified risks.
- **A conflict-sensitive approach to returns, as well as “Pockets of Hope”, require following all the five steps, i.e:** (i) good context analysis which identifies potential conflict drivers (before the intervention, and regularly updated), (ii) analysis of how the return /Pockets of Hope initiative will interact with these dynamics, (iii) plans of action to mitigate conflict risks, (iv) activities to positively leverage peace opportunities and (v) ongoing monitoring of conflict sensitivity risks and impacts.

Key takeaways for UNHCR South Sudan

1. **UNHCR needs to be open to learning:** constructive critiques of the conflict sensitivity of its approaches are an opportunity to improve, learn and maximise positive impact. Conflict sensitivity is a natural extension of humanitarian and nexus principles and hence in a context such as South Sudan, has to be at the heart of UNHCR operations.
2. **Enhanced staff competencies in conflict sensitivity will have multiple positive benefits:** more conflict sensitive approaches will enhance UNHCR operations and approach, including supporting staff to simultaneously think with a climate sensitivity and gender sensitivity lens – hence supporting integrated, nexus-oriented approaches.
3. **Conflict sensitivity is an ongoing, embedded approach and mindset, rather than periodic activity:** conflict sensitivity questions can be integrated into other activities (e.g. protection risk assessments, UNHCR’s overall risk management processes). Capturing conflict-sensitive analysis and decision-making is key – for example using conflict sensitivity risk matrices, which can be regularly reviewed.
4. **Conflict sensitivity is based on collaborative approaches:** this is not something UNHCR can do in isolation, but rather needs to be approached as UN-wide, joint with implementing partners, with government, civil society and affected persons.
5. **Good conflict sensitivity is a prerequisite for the funding of many key UNHCR donors:** UNHCR’s resource mobilisation will therefore benefit if its strategy and operations become more explicitly conflict sensitive.

10 CSRF (2021): Ready to go? Conflict sensitivity and the dilemma of returns in South Sudan <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/blog/ready-to-go-conflict-sensitivity-and-the-dilemma-of-returns-in-south-sudan/>

11 For example, the **SSD Areas of Return Information Sheet** (September 2022). This is based on a UNHCR regional template but could usefully be enhanced to focus more specifically on conflict sensitivity risks.