



## 17 Providing Conflict-Sensitive Refugee Assistance

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*“We cannot live only for ourselves. ... our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.”*

Herman Melville

Imagine that in your hometown, several volunteers have organised an afternoon event for refugees who have been arriving from Afghanistan and Syria. The volunteers have been baking all morning, decorating the assembly room of the Catholic Church and are getting excited about introducing the new arrivals to their traditions. One of them has even made a poster inviting the refugees to the afternoon with the address and exact time in German – this has been put up in the gym where most of the refugees

**CONFLICT SENSITIVITY** | the ability to understand the conflict one is operating in, to understand the interaction between own actions and the conflict, and to use this understanding to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on the conflict.

**REFUGEE** | someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence.

are staying. The time comes, but only a few people slowly trickle in. To the volunteers' disappointment, the guests' enthusiasm remains rather low.

Does this sound familiar? It is a perfect example of a well-intended initiative that did not turn out as expected. This is how we could make it better: Together with the refugees, the volunteers meet to discuss ideas of how together they could make the new arrivals and the people in the town feel more connected. Jointly, they decide to use the next sunny weekend for a get-together in the park. Everyone can bring food or drinks typical of their home country and tell each other one remarkable story about the place they come from. An invitation in several languages will be put up across town, in shops and at the gym.

Derived from daily practice of actual hands-on refugee assistance in Germany, these two examples are almost of textbook character when it comes to visualising the relevance of conflict sensitivity in the context of displacement, migration and refugee assistance.

### **What is conflict sensitivity?**

Conflict sensitivity is the ability, for example of an organisation to understand the conflict it is operating in, and to understand the interaction between its own operations and the conflict, and to use this understanding to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on the conflict. It requires a solid conflict analysis.

Conflict-sensitive approaches were originally developed for work in conflict regions, yet are relevant to all activities relating to conflict, including refugee assistance. Conflict-sensitive initiatives ensure, for example, that they do not inadvertently create new or increase existing socio-political tensions but strengthen social cohesion. In situations where there is a high risk that well-intended actions will result in misperceptions, frustrations and might even reproduce or perpetuate discriminating structures – which could in turn culminate in the use of violence – conflict-sensitive approaches can make a huge difference, as the example at the beginning illustrates.

“Do no harm” is one of the best-known principles in this area and has become a core tool for project planning, monitoring and evaluation (e.g. CDA 2016 and others; see also → Learning Together). It seeks to analyse how an intervention may be implemented in a way that supports local communities in addressing the underlying causes of conflict rather than exacerbating the conflict. Conflict sensitivity approaches go beyond do no harm. Today, governmental and nongovernmental actors alike

### Conflict-sensitive refugee assistance as conflict transformation and peacebuilding



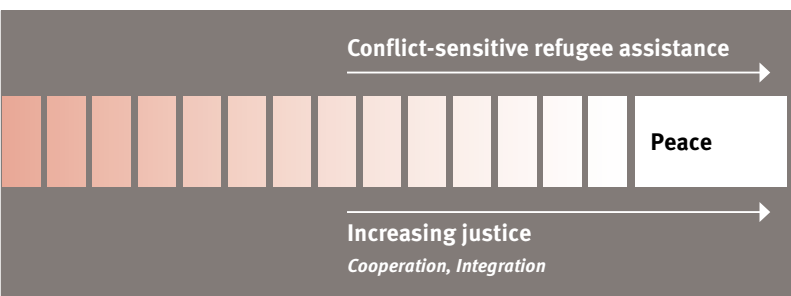
Figure 8, source: Berghof Foundation

increasingly recognise the need for conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding to strengthen the contextual understanding of actors and their settings. Conflict sensitivity is now well-established in the fields of education and journalism.

Nevertheless, conflict-sensitive approaches have yet to be incorporated and mainstreamed beyond situations of fragility and conflict despite their potential in other areas. A glance at the literature suggests that the Berghof Foundation is among the few organisations that apply the concept to the field of professional and voluntary refugee assistance in Germany.

### How to apply conflict sensitivity to refugee assistance abroad

As in any other space of human interaction, in contexts where refugees and “locals” meet, conflict may arise. Conflict may also arise for refugees from many different backgrounds meeting in precarious conditions. While many people understand conflict as a normal occurrence, they often find it exhausting to expe-



Graph by: Christoph Lang

rience and deal with it in their daily lives, as conflict indicates fundamental, yet often unconscious, differences in feelings, understandings and wants. These differences and their manifold causes need a productive space. However, refugees and others have few opportunities to meet as equals (namely as human beings with dignity and a desire to live a fulfilled life; → Averting Humiliation). We believe that creating spaces for conflict-sensitive, non-discriminatory and trauma-sensitive encounters (e.g. GIZ 2016) is an important contribution to peacebuilding (see Figure 8).

An example of the above-mentioned spaces for encounter are peace education workshops on conflict sensitivity in refugee assistance, as conceptualised by the Berghof Foundation. They move beyond transmitting the concept itself towards providing input and impetus on the three dimensions of peace education: (1) competences, (2) capacities and (3) behaviour. The overall aim is to contribute to peoples' ability to live together peacefully. (See also → Educating for Peace.)

At the Berghof Foundation, we have developed the following ten propositions for conflict-sensitive refugee assistance:

- ≡ Conflict is a chance to grow, if we strengthen capacities for dealing with conflict constructively.
- ≡ We try to be mindful of our own attitudes towards conflict, our behaviour in conflict and the (cultural) norms and experiences that may shape them.
- ≡ It is important to be aware that any action can exacerbate or escalate conflict, but can also foster peaceful coexistence between people.
- ≡ We strive to include all interested stakeholders early on, following the principle of multipartiality, and meet each other as equals while aiming to overcome all forms of discrimination and racism.
- ≡ We need to be aware of our own needs, wishes, goals and limitations in any interaction and reach out to understand the needs, wishes and goals of our fellow human beings as well as the specific limitations they face.

- ≡ It is important to understand and critically reflect on the context and conditions we come from and currently live in, and the (historically evolved) power structures and dependencies associated with them.
- ≡ It is necessary to develop an understanding of the effects of psychological trauma in someone's life and how in turn this may affect others, e.g. through secondary traumatisation caused by memories of the events.
- ≡ Dedicating time to exploring one's emotional resources and replenishing them on a regular basis is essential for one's capacity to act in a sensitive and empathetic manner in challenging circumstances.
- ≡ The current situation of refugees and their continuing arrival require a change of mindset and changes in behaviour – in the receiving societies and among the people arriving.
- ≡ It is important to acknowledge and learn about the global consequences of our own localised actions, and to begin to act accordingly.

Following these principles, conflict sensitivity raises awareness of the need of critical (self-)reflection. It helps to answer the question: “Do we really do good when we mean to do good?” In order to answer this question, it is important to understand the (historically evolved) structures and dependencies often underlying assistance, as it can otherwise reproduce and strengthen these injustices despite being well-intentioned. Thomas Gebauer describes the prevalent discourse: “A world that only knows helpers and helped appears a lot more peaceful than a world split into privileged and humiliated, into might and plight. Might and plight appal, but who could possibly take offence at help?” In the context of conflict-sensitive refugee assistance, it is thus important to identify and overcome differences in opportunities for political and social participation (e.g. access to the job market), inequalities in living conditions and resource distribution (e.g. land ownership), and economic power, as well as all forms of discrimination and racism. In that sense, conflict sensitivity not only helps to analyse current and past

situations in order to better understand the factors underlying their conflictual dynamics. It also provides a framework and empowerment to foresee and manage potential future challenges by encouraging a change of perspectives and real dialogue with “the other”, be it the beneficiary of assistance or all other actors in the field.

### **Dealing with difficulties and dilemmas**

Adding conflict sensitivity to the already demanding work in professional and voluntary refugee assistance can appear to be a daunting proposition. However, implementation (even if only partial) can help to reduce stress on all actors as opportunities within conflicts come to the forefront and frustration, coercion and other escalating dynamics can be avoided. The Berghof Foundation’s experience shows that learning and applying conflict sensitivity is a process that itself includes progress as well as setbacks.

In public and academic discourse, the role of culture, intercultural communication and so-called cultural conflicts are topics of heated debate. Our conflict-sensitive approach does acknowledge differences and similarities between people, in their socio-cultural backgrounds and in their behaviour in conflicts. However, attributing conflicts to cultural differences is often an attempt to find a quick and easy solution to a difficult situation. Instead of efforts being made to analyse and deal constructively with the root causes of the conflict, perceived cultural differences are either brushed away with calls for tolerance or are exploited to delegitimise the other person or group.

Many fundamental approaches to managing conflict between different groups are similar, e.g. dialogue, mediation and negotiation. Training people to become more “literate” in reading common situations and finding more creative ways to deal with them can help in addressing and resolving some of the root causes of conflict. Knowledge of cultural particularities is useful in

this context, as is any other knowledge about the conflict context or parties.

Everyone – regardless of their socialisation, circumstances or legal status – has capacities for constructive conflict transformation, which can be developed (further). These capacities, together with the interdependence of all people provide an ideal ground for societies to move towards more justice, tolerance, cohesion and, indeed, peace.

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### References and Further Reading

- Isabella Bauer (2017).** *Unterbringung von Flüchtlingen in deutschen Kommunen: Konfliktmediation und lokale Beteiligung.* State-of-Research Papier 10. Bonn: BICC. [in German]
- CDA (2016).** *Do No Harm Workshop Trainer's Manual.* Cambridge, MA: Collaborative Learning Projects.
- Thomas Gebauer (2016).** *Mit Zäunen gegen Staatszerfall und soziale Ungleichheit? Fluchtursachen bekämpfen geht anders! Speech in Hannover.* [in German]
- GIZ (2016).** *Psychosocial Support in Crisis and Conflict Settings.* Eschborn: GIZ.
- Dagmar Nolden and Cassandra Schützko (2016). Conflict Sensitive Refugee Assistance. Documentation of Project Activities “Nonviolent Education in Jordan”. Tübingen: Berghof Foundation Peace Education.
- Swisspeace (2017).** *Migration and Peacebuilding.* A Propos Magazine No 153. Bern: KOFF.

### Online Resources

- Resources on conflict sensitivity,** [www.conflictsensitivity.org](http://www.conflictsensitivity.org)
- INEE,** <http://www.ineesite.org/en/conflict-sensitive-education>
- UNESCO,** <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/conflict-sensitive-reporting-state-of-the-art-a-course-for-journalists-and-journalism-educators/>
- kontext.flucht [in German],** [https://www.ida-nrw.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/brosch\\_flyer/IDA-NRW\\_Reader\\_kontext.flucht.pdf](https://www.ida-nrw.de/fileadmin/user_upload/brosch_flyer/IDA-NRW_Reader_kontext.flucht.pdf)