



Strengthening institutional capability to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches

Five lessons from the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in South Sudan, 2016–2018

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September 2019

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Cover photo: A man at work in Kuajok, South Sudan.
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Acronyms

CSRF	Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility
DFID	Department for International Development
HQ	Headquarters
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
USIP	United States Institute for Peace

Executive summary

The civil war in South Sudan has resulted in one of the world's worst humanitarian crises for decades. In this context, international aid has become a lifeline for much of the South Sudanese population and economy. However, the scale and nature of this international assistance – valued at over five times the national government budget in 2017 – make it inevitable that aid will affect the economic, social and political drivers of conflict for better or worse.

Growing recognition of this interaction has led to increased interest in and support for promoting more conflict-sensitive approaches to the design, delivery and management of aid. The promotion of conflict-sensitive approaches is intended to enable organisations to understand the context better, identify risks and opportunities presented by this interaction, and adapt accordingly.

This paper presents five lessons on how to promote conflict-sensitive approaches more effectively in complex humanitarian situations, such as South Sudan. It draws on a document review and 26 interviews conducted with stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) in South Sudan. The CSRF is a multi-donor research and capacity-building initiative that provided support to over 15 donor and implementing organisations during a pilot phase between 2016 and 2018. While this paper draws on the experience from this pilot period, the CSRF has since been expanded and extended to cover the period 2019–2023.

The experience of the CSRF confirms that promoting more conflict-sensitive approaches is not without challenges. The international aid architecture and realities of working in a complex humanitarian emergency have made it more difficult for resources and attention to be invested in conflict-sensitive approaches. They have also put pressure on relationships within and between organisations, which inhibits collaboration, learning and reflection. In this context, building organisations' capacity to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches must involve systemic organisational change that goes beyond commissioning context analysis, ad hoc training and toolkits.

Despite these challenges, the CSRF has helped improve individuals' understanding of conflict sensitivity and of how to catalyse change not only in specific organisations but also the broader aid community, to create a stronger enabling environment for individuals to put the theory behind conflict sensitivity into practice.

The five lessons this paper presents are:

1. Delivering training at scale can help to create communities of practice.

Training is usually seen as a way of facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skills. However, the sustained delivery of training to large parts of the aid community in South Sudan has had a ripple effect that has stimulated additional interest in conflict sensitivity; created a common language for continued peer-to-peer learning and accountability; and motivated individuals to tackle sensitive topics with colleagues and invest in improving their organisation's approach.

2. It is important to support organisations to define their own problems and design their own solutions.

Training alone is not enough to enable individuals to apply conflict-sensitive approaches in their everyday work. Addressing organisational barriers to uptake involves helping teams to define the problems that their organisation faces and support them in creating their own solutions. This requires sustained accompaniment over a longer time frame, a highly flexible approach and a strong level of contextual awareness from the team providing support.

3. **Developing an organisational culture of learning and reflection is necessary for supporting teams to understand their context and use this information effectively.**

Successful uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches depends on staff's ability to adapt their organisation's policies and processes to the specific context and challenges they face. This critical engagement requires less focus on the learning 'hardware' (such as written analysis and logframes) and a greater focus on the 'software' of learning (which builds on relationships, encourages collective reflection and challenges power dynamics associated with the management of 'knowledge' within organisations).

4. **Visible and vocal leadership is crucial for authorising staff to take risks and supporting them to adapt.**

Leaders play a pivotal role, by signalling the importance of investing time and resources in conflict sensitivity; authorising and encouraging their staff to tackle sensitive topics; and coordinating collective action to promote conflict sensitivity. While senior management have unique influence, leadership is a shared responsibility that can be exercised from a range of positions within an organisation, including team leaders, line managers, sector experts and role models.

5. **Change at the system level requires working between organisations to promote coordination, broker relationships and build trust.**

There are many barriers to more widespread uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches that remain at the level of the aid system as a whole. These barriers are deeply entrenched, given that they often extend across multiple countries or because they represent collective action problems. A strong understanding of the history of organisations, relationships and sensitivities attached to conflict sensitivity in South Sudan can help to identify entry points and develop a tailored approach to catalyse change. The humanitarian cluster system represents one existing vehicle for coordination that can support and exercise peer effects that encourage members to adopt more conflict-sensitive approaches.

Putting these lessons into practice requires: **flexibility** to shift resources according to where there are emerging opportunities for impact and to adapt based on feedback; a **sustained approach** over a number of years; an in-country team that can develop deep contextual awareness and relationships to deliver effective support; and a **semi-independent model** that is not seen as representing the interests of only one donor or agency.

As South Sudan takes tentative steps forward in the peace process, the principles of conflict sensitivity will remain just as relevant as new challenges and opportunities emerge. The CSRF continues to grapple with these challenges, and will apply these lessons over the next five years through a second phase of the programme.

1.

Introduction

The international aid community increasingly recognises the importance of ensuring that its development, humanitarian and peacebuilding programming in fragile and conflict-affected situations is conflict sensitive. The objective of this approach is to ensure that the risks of unintentionally fuelling conflict are identified and mitigated, and that opportunities to maximise contributions towards peace are similarly identified and pursued.

Common approaches to applying the principles of conflict sensitivity have often involved two components: undertaking conflict analysis to improve understanding of the context, and providing training to staff in donor and implementing partner organisations to act on this analysis.

However, in parallel to growing interest in and support for conflict sensitivity, broader trends in the financing and management of international aid have raised new obstacles to the meaningful adoption of conflict-sensitive approaches. In this context, individuals have limited incentives or ability to change their behaviours in ways that promote conflict sensitivity. This reflects an overreliance on training as a means to build capacity when there are broader structural barriers to individual initiatives to promote change.¹

This learning paper presents a case study of South Sudan to explore how the capacity of institutions to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches can be strengthened more effectively in such 'constrained' environments. It draws on the lessons generated through the pilot period of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) between 2016 and 2018, and on interviews conducted from September to November 2018 with a wider set of stakeholders working on conflict sensitivity issues in South Sudan.

The CSRF represents a bold ambition by donors to take a more coordinated, sustained and multi-pronged approach to promoting the uptake of conflict sensitivity in South Sudan. The CSRF is the most prominent example of a small number of interventions around the world that seek to strengthen donors' and implementing partners' institutional capability to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches in ways that go beyond analysis and training.² The combination of a challenging operating environment and an innovative model of engagement provides an ideal case from which wider lessons can be learned.

¹ One review of the literature cautions that 'training does not transform people or organizations. Development partners are keen to support capacity development strategies that address systemic and organizational challenges': United Nations Development Programme (2012), 'Supporting capacity development in conflict and fragile contexts', p 34 (<https://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/crisis%20prevention/2012SupportingCapacityDevelopmentinConflictFragileSettings.pdf>). Responding to this, an evaluation of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) aid programme notes a shift in the focus of capacity-building programmes 'from primarily training individuals to strengthening organisations': DFAT (2014), 'Lessons from Australian Aid: 2013 report on independent evaluation and quality assurance', p 16 (<https://dfat.gov.au/aid/how-we-measure-performance/ode/Documents/lessons-from-australian-aid-2013.pdf>)

² Examples of similar but smaller initiatives include the Conflict Sensitive Assistance to Libya programme funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Risk Management Unit in Somalia funded by the UN, and the Risk Management Office in Nepal funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and German *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*. Note that these projects focus much more on management of security and other risks to aid, rather than on the two-way interaction between aid and the context, and tend to be more focused on providing services to their partners than building the capacity of their partners.

BOX 1 Method

The learning team adopted a primarily qualitative approach to gathering lessons, through:

- a review of existing CSRF documentation (including institutional assessments, action plans, workshop reports, survey feedback on trainings and other CSRF activities, and annual reports)
- iterative consultations with the team implementing the CSRF in South Sudan
- 26 semi-structured interviews with CSRF staff, donors, implementing partners and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in and on South Sudan, to discuss their experience of trying to integrate more conflict-sensitive approaches into their work. These included country directors, conflict-sensitivity ‘champions’ and national staff working in Juba
- a targeted review of recent comparative research and policy documents on conflict sensitivity and aid in South Sudan to triangulate emerging findings

The team compiled a database of all the potential conflict-sensitivity outcomes that had been reported. These were categorised by organisation, theme and source, and complemented with additional detail on the enabling and disabling factors in each case. Although this research is not designed as an evaluation of the CSRF and interviews were not structured to elicit information about the CSRF, many respondents noted that it had played an important role in contributing towards the changes they described.

This may in part reflect a selection bias when identifying key informants, based on their prior engagement with the CSRF or due to them mostly being based in Juba where the large majority of interviews took place. While the research provides valuable examples of the kinds of changes taking place in the aid community in South Sudan, it is important to remember that these are not necessarily representative of the broader aid sector in South Sudan.

The researchers also drew on their expertise working on conflict sensitivity and on their experience as members of the CSRF team (working mostly outside of South Sudan). While this contributed towards a stronger familiarity with the context and activities of the CSRF, this also means that the report has not been produced independently.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the context and highlights the relevance of conflict sensitivity to South Sudan. Chapter 3 outlines the global and national trends that have made South Sudan such a challenging context in which to support organisations to adopt more conflict-sensitive approaches. Chapter 4 presents five key lessons that we have learnt from the efforts of the CSRF and others to strengthen

institutional capability to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches. These lessons are designed to complement the existing literature on building capability to adopt these approaches, rather than duplicate it. Finally, the conclusion reflects on what these lessons mean for future efforts to support more conflict-sensitive aid in South Sudan and elsewhere.

2.

The importance of conflict sensitivity in South Sudan

The geography and historical marginalisation of South Sudan make it one of the most difficult contexts in which to deliver aid. This challenge has only deepened as international assistance has become intertwined with nearly four decades of intermittent humanitarian crises and violent conflict. This chapter summarises the relevance of conflict-sensitive approaches for organisations working in this context and provides an overview of mainstream approaches to addressing this challenge.

2.1

A state of conflict and protracted humanitarian crisis

South Sudan seceded from Sudan in 2011, with little national infrastructure, weak institutions and a legacy of profound mistrust between communities still reeling from decades of civil war. After eight years of unstable peace following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, South Sudan relapsed from sporadic state-level violence into outright civil war in late 2013 when President Salva Kiir accused his deputy Riek Machar of launching a *coup d'état*. Since then, 4.5 million people have been displaced (over 2 million as refugees in neighbouring countries) and about 60 per cent of the population is thought to be severely food insecure.³ Almost 400,000 deaths have been attributed to the crisis, while tens of thousands face starvation.⁴

The current national-level conflict has its roots in multiple overlapping conflict drivers – including weak state institutions and widespread poverty – and is linked to the legacy of past civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005). These conflict drivers have been reinforced by violence, leading to a vicious cycle in which the destruction, inequality, distrust and militarisation caused by conflict today provide foundations for further conflict. This conflict is further complicated by widespread and protracted inter- and intra-communal conflict at the sub-national and local levels. Despite the largest political and armed groups in South Sudan signing a ‘revitalised’ peace agreement in September 2018 and the subsequent reduction in fighting, violence between armed groups that are not participating in the peace process, as well as inter-communal conflict, persist in many areas. Key commitments made under this agreement have not been enacted and structural drivers of conflict continue unaddressed, meaning that recent progress remains fragile.⁵ In the meantime, humanitarian access remains constrained due to insecurity and bureaucratic impediments and many humanitarian indicators have continued to decline rather than improve.⁶

3 WFP, UNICEF and FAO, ‘Food Security Situation Update’, October 2018 (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Food%20Security%20Update%20-%20Aug%202018%20Final.pdf>)

4 Checchi F et al. (2018), ‘Estimates of crisis-attributable mortality in South Sudan, December 2013–April 2018: A statistical analysis’, September (<https://www.southsudanpeaceportal.com/repository/estimates-of-crisis-attributable-mortality-in-south-sudan-december-2013-april-2018-a-statistical-analysis/>)

5 International Crisis Group (2019), ‘Salvaging South Sudan’s Fragile Peace Deal’, March (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/270-salvaging-south-sudans-fragile-peace-deal>)

6 For example, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis estimated that the number of people suffering crisis acute food insecurity or worse increased from 6.1 million in July–August 2018 to 6.9 million in May–July 2019. This is historically the highest number of people in South Sudan ever to face acute food insecurity or worse. For more information, see IPC, ‘South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation in September 2018’ (<http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1151633/>) and ‘South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition Situation Projection for May–July 2019’ (<http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1152080/>)

2.2

The interaction between aid and conflict

In this context, international aid has become a lifeline for much of the South Sudanese population and economy. The total funding for international humanitarian aid in South Sudan was USD\$1.49 billion in 2017,⁷ compared to a total government budget of \$282 million for the 2017–18 financial year.⁸ International assistance has therefore played a crucial role in the delivery of basic goods and services such as food, healthcare and shelter.

However, the injection of such large volumes of aid has also exercised significant distortionary influence – for better or worse – on South Sudan’s politics, economy and society. For example:

- Securing access to vulnerable populations in the context of civil war requires aid agencies to work with or alongside unaccountable armed groups.⁹ These groups can use this interaction to boost their legitimacy and influence disbursement in support of their non-humanitarian objectives.¹⁰
- The presence and nature of international protection or aid disbursement has potential to reinforce patterns of marginalisation, reinforce claims over land abandoned by displaced groups¹¹ or create new sites of competition. These effects complicate the search for long-term solutions to conflict.¹²
- In the context of delayed government salaries and the collapse of the private sector, employment in the aid sector has become a lucrative source of personal income that enables staff to meet social commitments. This has made aid organisations themselves a site of contestation between competing groups, which has on occasion contributed to protests and retaliatory violence.¹³

2.3

The need for conflict-sensitive approaches

These interactions between aid and the drivers of conflict in South Sudan highlight the need for conscious efforts to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches to the design, delivery and management of international assistance. Conflict sensitivity involves understanding the context in which you are operating, understanding the interaction between your engagement and the context, and taking action to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict and stability. In practice this represents a spectrum of ambition, as highlighted in figure 1 below.

International organisations, donors and NGOs increasingly recognise the importance of adopting conflict-sensitive approaches in contexts such as South Sudan. These commitments are manifested in an array of policy statements, guidance notes and toolkits.¹⁴ At the multilateral level, signatories to the ‘Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations’ (2007), the ‘New Deal’ (2011) and ‘The Peace Promise’¹⁵ (2017) have made formal endorsements of the importance of conflict sensitivity.

The ultimate goal of conflict sensitivity is to improve the effectiveness of international assistance – whether humanitarian, development or peacebuilding – and support organisations in navigating the risks and opportunities involved in delivering on their objectives in these contexts.¹⁶

7 UN OCHA (2018), ‘South Sudan: Country Snapshot for 2018’, Financial Tracking Service (<https://fts.unocha.org/countries/211/summary/2018>)

8 South Sudan Ministry of Finance and Planning (2017), ‘Approved Budget Tables: Fiscal Year 2017/18’ September (<http://grss-mof.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/book-final-1718-1.pdf>)

9 CSRF (2017), ‘Contextualised Conflict Sensitivity Guidance for South Sudan’, September (<https://www.southsudanpeaceportal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CSRF-Conflict-Sensitivity-Toolkit.pdf>)

10 For example, in the past, armed groups have forcibly displaced vulnerable populations to change patterns of need, and have therefore used aid as part of a strategy to deprive certain areas and opposing groups of material support and potential recruits (for example, through Operation Lifeline Sudan). For more on this, see Craze J (2018), ‘Displacement, Access and Conflict in South Sudan: A Longitudinal Perspective’, Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, May.

11 CSRF (2018), ‘Displacement, Access and Conflict in Western Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan’, Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility.

12 CSRF (2018), ‘Housing, Land and Property, Aid and Conflict in South Sudan’, Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility.

13 Santschi M, Gworo R, White E (2018), ‘Caught Between Two Cultures: When aid in South Sudan is pulled between local norms and western systems’, Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility. See also: South Sudan NGO Forum (2018), ‘Press Release: The South Sudan NGO Forum strongly condemns the violent attacks

against humanitarian aid agencies in Maban’, July 28 (<https://docs.southsudanngoforum.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/South%20Sudan%20NGO%20Forum%20Press%20Statement%20on%20Maban%20attacks%20July%2028%20FINAL.pdf>)

14 For example, see Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012), ‘How to guide to conflict sensitivity’, February (http://conflictsensitivity.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/6602_HowToGuide_CSF_WEB_3.pdf) – this was produced and endorsed by 16 peacebuilding, humanitarian and development organisations; European Commission (2013), ‘Guidance note on the use of Conflict Analysis in support of EU External Action’ (https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/guidance-note-use-conflict-analysis-support-eu-external-action_en); UK Stabilisation Unit (2016), ‘Conflict Sensitivity Tools and Guidance’, June (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765453/SU_Conflict_Sensitivity_Guidance.pdf)

15 UN Peacebuilding Support Office (2017), ‘The Peace Promise: Commitments to more effective synergies among peace, humanitarian and development actions in complex humanitarian situations’, (<https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/THPEACE%20PROMISE.pdf>)

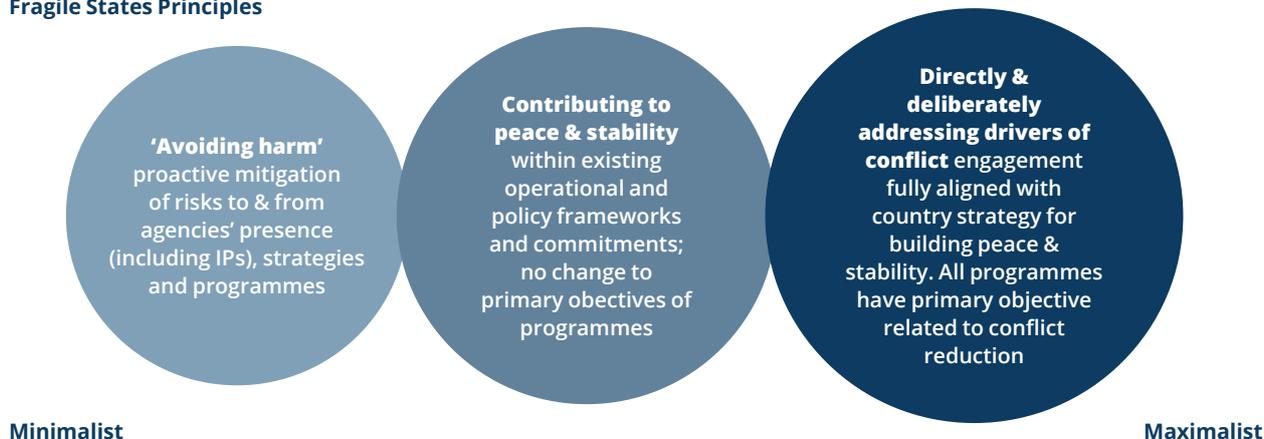
16 It is important to note that the objective of conflict sensitivity is not to fundamentally change the objectives of organisations. Instead, it seeks to ensure that organisations make conscious decisions about how to understand and navigate the ethical dilemmas involved in working towards these objectives more effectively.

Figure 1: The conflict sensitivity spectrum illustrating the differing levels of ambition

Source: CSRF (2017), 'Contextualised Conflict Sensitivity Guidance for South Sudan', September, p 5.

Minimum standard as required by OECD DAC Fragile States Principles

Aspiration outlined in SDG 16 and New Deal



2.4

Existing approaches to enhancing conflict sensitivity

The majority of efforts to promote conflict sensitivity have focused on three types of activity. First, organisations have sought to improve their staff's understanding of the context by commissioning – either internally or externally – conflict analysis to inform strategy processes and project design. Second, organisations have introduced guidance and toolkits to guide staff in thinking through the implications of this analysis on their programmes and projects. Third, organisations have invested in ad hoc training for their staff to improve their understanding of the need for such approaches and the main principles and concepts.

There are multiple examples of these approaches having been adopted in South Sudan over the past five years.¹⁷ Other initiatives have sought to encourage uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches through work on related concepts such as 'communicating with communities' or 'protection'. While these activities have undoubtedly created pockets of awareness of the importance of conflict sensitivity, there are major obstacles that inhibit individuals' efforts to translate this increased awareness and understanding into changed practice.

¹⁷ Note that the focus on these three types of activities has been largely determined by those seeking to fund and procure such support. Although the limitations of these activities are presented in this paper, the members of the CSRF consortium – including Saferworld, swisspeace and CDA Collaborative Learning Projects – have all been heavily involved in the delivery of these approaches in other contexts. The criticism of these approaches is not intended

to be targeted at other organisations, but is instead a wider comment on the sector as a whole. The fact that funders focus on these activities is often determined by their budget allocation, since these approaches are generally less expensive than more sustained and deeper engagement with processes of organisational change.

3.

The challenge of promoting conflict sensitivity in South Sudan

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of conflict sensitivity in South Sudan and elsewhere, major structural barriers exist that prevent individuals and organisations from facilitating greater integration of conflict-sensitive approaches. This chapter draws on the reflections of interview respondents and provides an overview of these barriers. It is intended as useful context for interpreting the learning described in chapter 4.

3.1

Time, resources and expertise

The majority of respondents admitted that they or their colleagues struggled to find the time to identify and implement the necessary changes to make their work more conflict sensitive. This was in part attributed to the fact that working in conflict-affected contexts, and particularly humanitarian emergencies, requires juggling a large number of urgent and competing priorities.

Several factors magnify the pressure on international staff working in South Sudan. For example, international staff are often disproportionately responsible for both upwards-facing responsibilities to headquarters (HQ) and donors and downwards-facing responsibilities for managing teams. While those in more senior roles are often viewed as having the authority to initiate changes, they can easily become 'bottlenecks' for decision-making. The majority of international staff are on rotation cycles as part of their benefits packages. This allows them 'decompression' time

(normally between one and two weeks) outside South Sudan every six to ten weeks, which poses barriers to coordination between staff and further increases the propensity for backlogs to develop while outside the country. Faced with backlogs and a frequent barrage of 'urgent' issues that staff feel may have humanitarian implications if left unresolved, staff find it difficult to proactively carve out the time necessary to consider how programmes could be adapted to be more conflict sensitive.

Although humanitarian emergencies have always been characterised by a sense of urgency and limitations on time, some respondents noted that shifts in the global aid system have contributed to an increased sense of organisations being 'overburdened' and 'under-resourced'.¹⁸ A background to these changes – notably the increasing commitments placed on implementing partners and changes in the way finances are allocated – is outlined in box 2 on p.7. The reduction in donor contributions towards core or flexible funding has reduced the resources available for central functions, which include internal capacity building, external engagement (including coordination), and uptake of cross-cutting, non-project initiatives such as conflict sensitivity. Increasingly these functions and commitments must instead be funded through 'overheads' applied to the delivery of specific activities, which have also been squeezed in the pursuit of value-for-money.¹⁹ These financial pressures can restrict access to specialist thematic and functional expertise on conflict sensitivity provided by central teams based in HQ.

¹⁸ Comments regarding the aid sector being 'under-resourced' were more a reflection of lack of time/human resources, rather than a lack of money.

¹⁹ Despite cuts to core funding, recent research has highlighted the importance of core or unrestricted funding in contributing towards greater value for money. For example, for a summary of this debate see Scott R (2015), 'Finance in Crisis: Making humanitarian finance fit for the future', OECD, Working Paper 22.

For the findings of an independent evaluation that found that 'core funding resulted in improved internal communication, improved organisational flexibility, greater accountability to key stakeholders and increased efficiency in managing multiple projects', see Brady R (2015), 'Is core funding really all it's cracked up to be?', ITAD, September (<https://www.itad.com/is-core-funding-really-all-its-cracked-up-to-be/>)

BOX 2 The effects of projectisation on conflict sensitivity

The last decade has seen significant growth in the volume of aid allocated to fragile and conflict-affected situations.²⁰ This has taken place alongside an overall increase of 46 per cent in global disbursements of overseas development aid between 2006 and 2016.²¹ These growing aid flows have been subject to greater scrutiny of international aid over time as politicians seek to justify increased expenditure in the context of global financial crisis, widespread austerity and the rise of new global powers.

This scrutiny should in theory lead to more efficient and effective resource allocation and greater accountability. However, it has led to a vociferous media debate about the pros and cons of aid across the political spectrum.²² In this context, funders of international aid have introduced more commitments to ensure that the organisations they fund are 'compliant' with donor standards. These include legal obligations to take on the 'duty of care' for all staff and suppliers and to comply with counter-terrorism, safeguarding, gender and anti-trafficking legislation. Conflict sensitivity is another such commitment introduced in recent years.

Combined with the difficulty of managing larger aid flows, this has contributed towards greater projectisation of aid. The term 'projectisation' refers to the increased allocation of aid on the basis of packages of often pre-defined activities or objectives that must be carried out in a limited timeframe with a pre-defined budget. The more 'bounded' nature of projectised aid has meant its delivery can be easily delegated to implementing partners that are responsible for meeting the donor's objectives.²³

These shifts could potentially have positive effects on the aid system. However, the same patterns also throw up new challenges and problems that place significant constraints on organisations' ability to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches. As a result, the sector needs to make a conscious effort to mitigate these challenges if it is to support staff to work in conflict-sensitive ways.

The trend of 'projectisation' has also developed in parallel with increasingly competitive procurement practices that award contracts for delivering projects to organisations that score highly on technical and commercial criteria. Whilst projectisation offers opportunities for enhanced transparency and accountability, the competition for project funding has introduced structural incentives for bidders to increase the commitments made in project proposals, while at the same time cutting costs and resources. As a result, non-project staff have become increasingly overstretched and the allocation of scarce resources to cross-cutting dimensions, such as those associated with conflict sensitivity, is more difficult to justify.

3.2

Culture and sensitivity

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that the conflict sensitivity of aid is itself a highly sensitive topic in South Sudan, which presents obstacles to speaking honestly and critically about the challenges that they and their colleagues face. Multiple examples were offered where individuals within international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) who had identified emerging or actual conflict-sensitivity risks that could have had implications for others' work had sought to avoid them altogether or address them internally.²⁴ This sensitivity is driven by several factors.

²⁰ HM Treasury, DFID (2015), 'UK Aid: Tackling global challenges in the national interest', November (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478834/ODA_strategy_final_web_0905.pdf)

²¹ Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation, 'Query Wizard for International Development Statistics' (<https://stats.oecd.org/qwids/>)

²² Yanguas P (2018), *Why We Lie About Aid: Development and the Messy Politics of change* (London: Zed Books).

²³ As one influential researcher notes, 'while there can be good reasons for "projectising" certain forms of assistance [such as greater accountability or value for money], this often happens because it is politically easier to defend in

the donor country than the obvious alternatives' – such as budget support to governments, core funding to organisations or more flexible grants. See Booth D (2011), 'Aid effectiveness: bringing country ownership (and politics) back in', Overseas Development Institute, Working Paper 336, p 4 (<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/6028.pdf>)

²⁴ For example, two donor respondents explained on separate occasions that, during field visits to projects they fund, they had identified risks relating to the use of forced displacement to influence aid. The partners implementing the project had not reported these risks despite knowing about them and both donors regarded these as missed opportunities for facilitating learning and supporting the implementing partner in managing risks effectively.

BOX 3 The 'Unintended Consequences' report – stimulating debate or fearmongering?

In early 2018, the circulation of an unpublished report produced by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and United States Institute for Peace (USIP) on the 'unintended consequences' of aid highlighted the sensitive nature of discussions about conflict sensitivity.²⁷ Several respondents noted that the circulation of this paper – which contained direct allegations of aid fuelling drivers of conflict in South Sudan – had created new entry points for discussion²⁸ and raised the profile of conflict sensitivity on the agenda of many organisations (such as the Inter-Cluster Working Group).

However, some respondents felt that it had also made it more difficult to have an open and constructive conversation about conflict sensitivity. Two respondents noted a rumour that the ODI-USIP paper had contributed to a decision by the US Agency for International Development to cut its funding to South Sudan, which in turn increased competition for the scarce resources remaining. Regardless of the truth of this rumour, the defensive reaction by INGOs to the paper and the perception that it may be used to justify reductions in funding highlights the way funding pressures shape conversations about conflict sensitivity in South Sudan. The resulting self-censorship is a barrier to learning and to the pursuit of collective action to address common problems.

First, respondents pointed towards a perceived tension between humanitarian principles and conflict sensitivity. A minority of respondents – particularly those working for INGOs – felt that their organisations' commitment to the principles of neutrality and impartiality deterred colleagues from discussing 'power' and 'conflict'. According to this view, the role of humanitarian organisations is to 'work around' conflict to alleviate human suffering, rather than contribute towards efforts to address drivers of conflict.

Second, a larger share of respondents noted that most organisations are often dependent on the goodwill of government representatives to access sites of humanitarian need.²⁵ Being seen to actively engage with sensitive issues can put this access at risk. In South Sudan, this issue has become more acute since the government introduced general restrictions on the movement of humanitarian staff without permits in early 2017. There have also been cases where individuals working for large multilateral organisations have been blacklisted by the government from entering certain areas after they raised concerns relating to conflict or the conduct of armed groups. At the same time, diplomatic staff have increased their pressure on the government and opposition groups to make progress on the peace process since its collapse in 2016 and on delivering commitments made under the revitalised peace process since 2018. One senior representative of an INGO expressed concern that this hardline approach was perceived as more overt

politicisation of donor engagement and was further limiting humanitarian space. These dynamics make aid agencies more reluctant to openly talk about conflict or the government for fear of retribution.

Third, agencies and implementing partners are reluctant to talk about risk and failure – including in relation to conflict sensitivity – publicly or with their funders, due to a fear that this may compromise their ability to obtain future funding compared to competitor organisations. This reluctance to talk about challenges results in missed opportunities for collective reflection and learning about what it takes to work effectively in conflict. The growth of 'projectisation' and resulting competition has contributed to greater distrust between organisations for fear that positive lessons may be 'stolen' or negative experiences held against them as part of a procurement process.²⁶ The pressures on donors' risk appetites in the face of growing scrutiny have also discouraged contracted partners from being transparent about the conflict-sensitivity risks faced by sub-contracted partners or in their supply chains. For example, 'facilitation payments' to conflict actors designed to ensure access and security are not included in project budgets but instead are often covered through profits and overheads of transport and logistics firms. Aid agencies' reluctance to 'rock the boat' and jeopardise future funding by raising these issues inhibits the sector's ability to manage the shared risks raised by working in conflict.

²⁵ Registration with the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission in theory allows agencies to access sites of humanitarian need, but this can be revoked or challenged by the government and frustrated by local governmental (and non-state) representatives.

²⁶ The suppression of conversations about problems and failure is a complex phenomenon with roots that go beyond projectisation. The dramatic falls in private donations to INGOs caught up in sexual abuse scandals in 2017–18 highlight how even unrestricted funding is vulnerable to similar dynamics that disincentivise open discussion.

²⁷ ODI and USIP (unpublished), 'Unintended consequences of humanitarian assistance in South Sudan'.

²⁸ The publication of the ODI-USIP paper coincided with an increase in organisations' bilateral engagement with the CSRF.

3.3

Handovers, transitions and timing

Respondents also highlighted the short time horizons of the aid sector – and in humanitarian contexts in particular – as a hindrance to conflict sensitivity. First, international staff tend to be posted in South Sudan for short periods, which results in an extremely rapid turnover in staff. Anecdotal evidence suggests donor postings tend to last between one and two years, whereas INGO postings are generally slightly longer. This limits the ability of individuals to develop an in-depth awareness of the context and build the relationships that are so important to understanding conflict-sensitivity risks and opportunities.

The rapid turnover in staff also has an impact on wider team dynamics and makes coordination much more challenging (together with the rotation cycles highlighted in chapter 3.1). For example, nearly all of the INGOs that have received accompaniment support from the CSRF have seen significant turnover in their senior management during the period they have engaged the CSRF (in most cases engagement lasts around ten months).²⁹ The rapid turnover not only limits the organisation's own capacity but also its ability to benefit from outside support (whether HQ, donors or third parties such as the CSRF). This is worsened by slow recruitment processes that can lead to gaps in roles and reduced scope for handovers between staff.

The speed of turnover highlights a major weakness of training as a means of building organisations' capability to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches, since trained staff will soon depart the country and take their knowledge and skills with them. It should also provide a strong rationale for building the capacity of national organisations and staff who tend to be in their roles for longer periods of time.

Combined with the increased projectisation of aid and continued reliance on emergency appeals, this has meant that programming commitments have become increasingly short term, with funding obtained on a rolling basis. This limits the incentives and ability of organisations and their staff to develop an in-depth awareness of the context and maintain relationships. It can also create fertile ground for tensions between staff, partners, communities and governance actors to emerge around project start-up and close-down processes, given that these are points at which commitments and expectations are reviewed, restructured or renegotiated.

3.4

Marginalisation of national and local organisations

Another barrier to greater conflict sensitivity frequently cited during interviews was the marginalisation of national and local organisations within the aid architecture. This is despite their central role in accessing hard-to-reach areas and delivering frontline goods and services as INGOs become more risk-averse and focused on the management of their complex obligations to funders. This problematic dynamic is recognised in calls for greater 'localisation' as part of commitments to humanitarian reform under the Grand Bargain.³⁰

Several respondents noted that national NGOs are insufficiently involved in the design of international aid. As well as missing an opportunity to strengthen relationships and build NGO staff capacity, this also limits opportunities for INGOs to develop an awareness of the local contexts where they are looking to work and design projects that are aligned with broader peacebuilding efforts in target communities. Instead, national NGOs are often brought into decision-making late in the procurement process, usually after terms of reference have been designed and often after proposals have been written. There was a consensus among respondents that it was rare for national NGOs to have direct relationships with funders and donors, which further undermines their potential to contribute towards a richer understanding of the context and design of aid.

Projectisation has meant that organisations leading on contracts have fewer remaining resources to invest in building the capacity of national and local NGOs to deliver aid – and fewer incentives to do so. In most cases, national NGOs receive only a small proportion of the overall resources allocated to deliver aid. Recent research estimates that only 10.2 per cent of humanitarian funds in South Sudan reach local and national responders, which falls far short of the Grand Bargain target to allocate 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to these responders by 2020.³¹ The research also found that core running costs for these national NGOs are not fully covered, with several United Nations agencies offering no contribution towards core or unrestricted funds.

²⁹ For example, the CSRF engaged a total of eleven INGOs over a period of ten months. During this period, the CSRF team lost at least two senior counterparts in nine of these eleven INGOs.

³⁰ The Grand Bargain is a set of voluntary commitments made by UN agencies, and donor and aid organisations in 2016 to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action across nine thematic areas (including localisation).

³¹ Ali M et al. (2018), 'Funding to local humanitarian actors: South Sudan case study', Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, October (<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12469.pdf>)

All of the representatives of national NGOs interviewed as part of this research declared themselves highly committed to the principles of conflict sensitivity and often saw first-hand how aid interacted with conflict in unexpected and sometimes harmful ways.³² However, they explained that they found it difficult to make time to attend trainings and reflect on conflict-sensitive approaches when they lacked the time and resources to even deliver the basics on their projects. For example, one national NGO representative explained how their organisation lacked resources for a satellite phone but was regardless expected to send staff into highly conflict-affected areas for multiple weeks with no means of communicating back to HQ. In a country ranked as the most dangerous place for humanitarian aid workers for the last four years,³³ national NGOs are being expected to absorb huge amounts of risk operating in conflict-affected environments with relatively little financial or other support to manage risks or adopt more conflict-sensitive approaches.

This contrast between the discourse and practice of 'localisation' has led national NGOs to feel resentment that they are being exploited by INGOs and donors. The resulting tensions and sense of marginalisation has in some cases deterred national staff from contributing to collective discussions and rendered them unwilling to raise risks and problems with their INGO counterparts.



When I look at the international community in South Sudan, I feel we are being used.



At the same time, the 'localisation' agenda also brings challenges from a conflict-sensitivity perspective. The long history of conflict in South Sudan, consequent polarisation and differential patterns of access have often led to a perception that certain national NGOs are 'affiliated' with parties to the conflict because of the ethnic profile of their staff or relationships with local stakeholders. Likewise, two South Sudanese respondents noted a negative culture of backbiting and lack of solidarity amongst national NGOs that limited their ability to lobby on collective issues and cooperate on learning and capacity-building initiatives.³⁴

3.5

Implications for conflict sensitivity

While donors and INGOs have made strong commitments to furthering the cause of conflict sensitivity, the discussion above has shown how dynamics of the aid system – both globally and in South Sudan – present major impediments for those seeking to promote conflict-sensitive approaches. Donors and implementing partners are faced with strong external incentives to show that they are conflict sensitive – without the internal resources or enabling environment that allows them to deliver on this approach. In this context, there is a risk that implementing partners feel obliged to 'signal' or 'perform' conflict sensitivity through changes to policies and discourse without meaningful change to their processes and practices. In other words, the mismatch between incentives and ability to deliver can lead aid agencies to prioritise adapting their 'form' over 'function'.³⁵

Multiple respondents feared that this was a problem with certain aid agencies in South Sudan. For example, one interviewee noted a tendency for organisations to include generic sections on 'conflict analysis' in proposals without investing time or resources in reflecting on the conflict drivers or their implications. Similarly, another respondent noted how organisations explain that they are conflict-sensitive by referencing the fact that they conduct due diligence checks to comply with counter-terrorism legislation. Although these may sometimes be components of conflict-sensitive approaches, they are not sufficient and can still instil a false sense of 'confidence' that undermines more meaningful uptake of these approaches.

The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility

These systemic and organisational dynamics pose a fundamental challenge to mainstream approaches to capacity building that prioritise provision of conflict analysis, ad hoc training and toolkits. This contributed to a decision by four donors – initially the UK, Switzerland and Canada, and later the Netherlands – to fund a more ambitious approach to enhancing the conflict sensitivity of aid in South Sudan.

The CSRF was started as a pilot project running from October 2016 to December 2018 that differed in several respects to more mainstream approaches to conflict sensitivity. First, it adopted a multi-pronged approach to building conflict sensitivity, with pillars of work structured

³² For national staff, 'conflict sensitivity' primarily provides a means to articulate and initiate discussion of the dynamics that, from their sustained engagement at the local level, they already know take place.

³³ Stoddard A et al. (2019), 'Aid Worker Security Report 2019', Humanitarian Outcomes, June (<https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSDR2019>)

³⁴ It should be noted that these dynamics are not restricted to the national NGO community; INGOs face similar issues.

³⁵ This reflects a more widespread concern within the aid sector that many governance reforms and capacity-building initiatives promote 'isomorphic mimicry'. For more on this, see Andrews M, Pritchett L, Woolcock M (2012), 'Escaping Capability Traps through Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)', Center for Global Development, Working Paper 299, June (<https://www.cgdev.org/publication/escaping-capability-traps-through-problem-driven-iterative-adaptation-pdia-working-paper>)

around collective action, research and analysis, capacity building, and monitoring, evaluation and learning. Second, these four pillars were predominantly delivered by a permanent team of five staff based in Juba. These staff were able to leverage their understanding of the conflict and aid sector to develop support for organisations that was more context-specific than the ad hoc assistance provided by outsiders typically allows. Third, it operated at a larger scale than other initiatives, providing support across four donors and eleven implementing partners. Fourth, the commitment to a two-year pilot meant that the approach was more sustained than other forms of support. Fifth, it was funded by a group of donors, which gave it greater autonomy and flexibility than common models where support is delivered as 'services' provided exclusively to a single 'client'.

During the two-year pilot phase, the CSRF delivered 27 trainings on the context in South Sudan, conflict-sensitive approaches, and monitoring and evaluation for conflict sensitivity; produced seven research papers; carried out

institutional assessments and provided ongoing accompaniment to 15 donors and implementing partners; provided mentoring to ten national NGOs; and held several public reflection events. Although it primarily supported the four funding donors and their implementing partners, it also provided an informal 'help desk' function for support and guidance to a range of other organisations and sought to promote wider change across the aid sector in South Sudan. Based on the initial success of the CSRF, the funding donors committed to a five-year, follow-on project that started in January 2019.

The remainder of this paper draws on the experiences of the CSRF and of a wider range of 'conflict-sensitivity champions' seeking to build the institutional capability of the aid sector in South Sudan to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches. In particular, it seeks to understand how these actors have navigated the structural and organisational constraints outlined in this chapter and what the lessons are for future initiatives in South Sudan and elsewhere.

4.

How to promote conflict-sensitive approaches more effectively

The design of activities to develop organisations' capability to adopt more conflict-sensitive approaches requires an agile approach that both works around and seeks to overcome the challenges discussed in chapter 3. The CSRF pilot and experiences of other stakeholders in South Sudan provides a growing evidence base that change at the organisational and system levels is possible. This chapter outlines five lessons drawn from the CSRF and others about how to promote conflict-sensitive approaches more effectively.

Lesson 1

Delivering training at scale can help to create communities of practice

Although the organisational and systemic obstacles described previously can diminish the effects of training, the latter can still play a useful role in promoting uptake of more conflict-sensitive approaches. Multiple respondents noted that awareness of the basic principles of conflict sensitivity has increased significantly over the past two years, in part due to trainings received through the CSRF. Nevertheless, there is still significant uncertainty about how participants can apply these principles in their everyday work and decision-making.

Consequently, practitioners need to consider training as part of a broader change process in organisations and the sector more widely. This means approaching training not only as a vehicle for imparting knowledge and skills but also recognising that it adds value through its social impact.

First, a large number of respondents said that CSRF trainings had provided a space for aid workers to take a step out of their busy day-to-day schedules and reflect with their peers on the broader issues that often get pushed aside. The added value here is not knowledge transfer, but instead enabling participants to make the most of their existing experiences through collective reflection. Second, CSRF training equips participants with a common language and shared understanding of basic concepts to continue the process of learning in their day-to-day jobs and hold their peers to account. Third, respondents noted how trainings contribute towards a sense of empowerment by replacing humanitarians' existential concerns ('should we even be here?' or 'are we doing more harm than good?') with more constructive reflection on how to strengthen their work in conflict.



Trainings are creating a community of people that are visibly engaged. This gives people 'permission' to reflect and talk about conflict sensitivity.

Representative of a CSRF donor



Figure 2: Network effects from delivering conflict sensitivity training and events at scale

Each of these 'secondary' outcomes taps into valuable network effects that increase with scale of training. This was characterised in various ways by those interviewed for this report. Several respondents referred to CSRF trainings and other public CSRF events³⁶ as contributing towards a sense of a common community to promote conflict sensitivity in South Sudan. Both the scale and the public visibility of this engagement have helped create a 'buzz' around the topic that stimulates further interest and legitimises discussion of these issues. This is a particularly important change given that respondents had also highlighted how individuals are often unsure whether they are free to talk about how their work interacts with conflict, given a perceived tension with humanitarian principles. One respondent referred to this change as a "mass sensitisation" that gives staff the confidence to raise difficult issues relating to conflict sensitivity with their peers – whether donors, colleagues or partners. The greater public attention also enables staff to justify to their managers spending more time on conflict sensitivity.

By contrast with more ad hoc or organisation-focused training, the experience of the CSRF suggests that delivering training at scale has the potential to help build a 'social movement' that can promote more conflict-sensitive approaches across the aid sector more broadly.

Lesson 2

It is important to support organisations to define their own problems and design their own solutions

Despite the benefits outlined in lesson 1, training alone is insufficient to deliver meaningful change within organisations. When individuals take new knowledge or skills back from these trainings, they are faced with the difficult task of applying this to their work and navigating various organisational and systemic barriers that often stand in the way. While having a network of supportive peers can help overcome these barriers, those interviewed for this study emphasised the benefit of having sustained support from people with specific context and specialist conflict expertise to translate theory into practice. In a small number of cases this was provided by internal conflict advisers (based in Juba or HQ); in most other cases, it was provided by the CSRF.

Defining problems

Respondents explained that successful support tended to involve helping individuals both define the 'problem' that they were seeking to solve and identify potential 'solutions'. The CSRF was engaged in both of these steps. The initial entry point in most cases was a discussion with each organisation's senior leadership and identification of someone responsible for acting as the main counterpart for the CSRF. Given that not all organisations had volunteered for support, initial meetings focused on building a shared understanding of conflict sensitivity and its importance to the organisation's work.

³⁶ These include events to present research findings and facilitate reflection around specific topics (such as cash or housing, land and property).

This was followed by an institutional assessment carried out over two to three months, during which CSRF staff conducted a survey of the partner staff and carried out interviews with a range of staff and, in some cases, with external stakeholders. The value of the interviews was therefore as much in the process of building a common awareness of how conflict sensitivity was relevant to each interviewee and demystifying key concepts and 'jargon', as it was in gathering information to inform a written output. The counterpart was engaged at regular intervals throughout the process and in most cases was able to help the researchers tease out implications and guide further interviews by suggesting key informants.

In at least one case, the CSRF accompanied donor staff on a field visit to engage implementing partners and explore issues relating to conflict sensitivity as part of an assessment of the donor's largest humanitarian programme. This approach was extremely well-received: one respondent noted that the sustained engagement with CSRF staff over a number of days helped to ingrain an understanding of how to articulate conflict sensitivity and gave them the confidence to engage their partners on sensitive issues on a bilateral basis in the future. The CSRF team also presented the counterpart and senior staff with a draft assessment that allowed for feedback on emerging findings and greater ownership of the final review.

The definition of the 'problem' was also facilitated by the research strand of the CSRF. One of the concerns raised by participants in CSRF's early trainings was that they found it difficult to relate conflict sensitivity back to the specific themes or sectors that they worked in. This led the CSRF to focus more on producing thematic research that helped CSRF institutional assessments explore the specific issues that were most relevant to an organisation's mandate or projects. Over time, institutional assessments have also identified demand for additional research and gaps in existing research that have together informed the future CSRF research agenda, creating a virtuous circle linking 'research' and 'policy'.³⁷

Designing solutions

Several respondents explained that, in their experience, externally provided support usually concludes with a diagnosis of a problem and recommendations that are not practical or tailored to the organisation. The CSRF has learned from this and has sought to build on the participatory approach adopted for the institutional assessments by jointly developing action plans with counterparts in these organisations. As the name suggests,

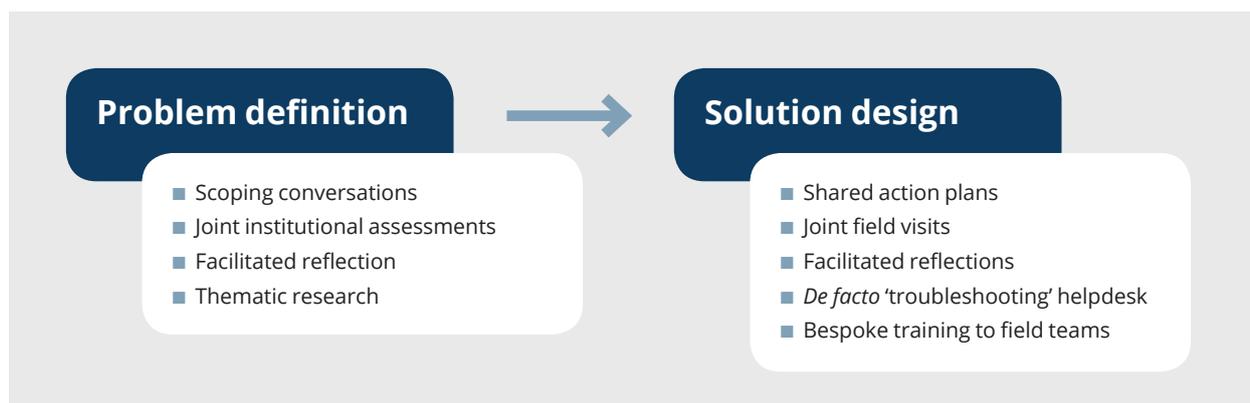
these action plans outline practical steps for promoting uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches. The responsibility for implementing these tasks is divided between staff within the organisation and the CSRF, thereby striking a balance between two common failings of capacity-building initiatives: first, that external engagement ends prematurely and, second, that external involvement can substitute for an organisation's own investment in building its capacity (thereby promoting 'form over function'). In the CSRF's case, ongoing involvement has included: tailored training to teams within the organisation; accompaniment of staff on field visits to implementing partners or beneficiary groups; supporting the redesign of written policies or processes (for example, context analysis templates, partnership guidelines, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks); and participation in handovers and inductions for new staff.

In most of the organisations that the CSRF pilot worked with, this participatory accompaniment approach enabled counterparts to make changes that constitute improvements in their organisation's conflict sensitivity.³⁸ Given that this support was only provided to most implementing partners for six to twelve months, the improvements are modest and progress has not yet been evaluated through follow-up assessments. However, feedback has been positive and these changes do suggest proof-of-concept of the CSRF model or at least improvements in the organisation's ability to undertake more meaningful changes in future. In some cases, these changes have helped to authorise, motivate and incentivise further change.

This participatory approach has implications for how organisations should design capacity-building support. First, it requires a highly flexible design. Staff need to have sufficiently flexible capacity to work around partners' availability, which means adopting a different pace of work for each organisation. Flexibility also enables the CSRF team to provide timely responses to emerging needs identified by partners, which helps to strengthen trust and avoid losing momentum. In practice, this means that 'deliverables' can be re-defined and do not require committing 100 per cent of the team's availability in advance. Second, the approach's emphasis on person-to-person engagement and ongoing support requires more resources than typical approaches. The CSRF team has five staff based in Juba together with several staff providing remote 'surge support'. Third, a multi-pronged approach that includes both capacity building and research has enabled the team to ensure research is more practice focused and that capacity-building support draws on the most recent research to inform its approach.

³⁷ Research also provided senior management with concrete questions to ask staff to ensure programming is conflict sensitive.

³⁸ A final survey conducted in November 2018 by the CSRF found that 70 per cent of individuals who had engaged with the CSRF believed that changes had been made to the programme they work on as a result of interaction with the CSRF. This excludes 21 respondents that were 'not sure' whether changes had taken place as a result of interaction with the CSRF.

Figure 3: Summary of activities to support problem definition and design of solutions

By contrast, the CSRF has been less effective where counterparts have changed part way through the process or where there was less opportunity for a genuinely participatory approach (for example, due to restrictions on partners' availability or less initial appetite for support).

Lesson 3

Developing an organisational culture of learning and reflection is necessary for supporting teams to understand their context and use this information effectively

Formal policies and processes are necessary conditions for organisations' successful pursuit of conflict-sensitive approaches, but are usually insufficient.³⁹ Policies and processes designed to support these approaches rarely provide staff with specific instructions of what action to take in a given context (or where they do, they can result in bad practice if not properly contextualised). Instead, staff must exercise significant discretion on deciding how to interpret these policies and processes and decide what this means for the decisions they are confronted with. This is particularly the case in humanitarian contexts, where decision-making is often highly decentralised and decisions need to be taken quickly to respond to rapidly evolving situations. The extent of conflict sensitivity ultimately depends on staff's ability to think and adapt in conflict-sensitive ways, and not just rely on the conflict-sensitive policies and processes that their organisation happens to have in place. Indeed, several interviewees were concerned that an overemphasis on compliance with formal policies and processes in larger multilateral organisations tends to 'crowd out' thinking and adaptation to the context.

Nearly all respondents reflected on the importance of trying to find ways to encourage this mindset within their organisations, with many explaining this in terms of the need for more learning and reflection. While formal monitoring and evaluation processes tend to focus on project results, learning to support conflict sensitivity was characterised as a curiosity about the context, people and relationships. Greater awareness of these elements would enable staff to think critically about how they and their programme interact with the changing context and identify potential adaptations to ensure they are aligned with efforts to promote peace and ultimately deliver more effective aid. There are several examples of initiatives to promote this mindset within teams in South Sudan, as highlighted in box 4 on p.16.

Although efforts to shape organisations' approaches to learning must be championed by leaders within that organisation, the CSRF has sought to support these changes from the outside. For example, the CSRF has received positive feedback on its accompaniment of donor or INGO staff on field visits and has been invited to facilitate problem-solving exercises among teams facing specific challenges relating to conflict sensitivity. The CSRF has sought to exercise some leadership in creating these spaces for collective reflection by organising events to bring different organisations together to consider common problems emerging in institutional assessments or research. Lesson 5 discusses these inter-organisational initiatives to promote conflict-sensitive approaches in more depth.

³⁹ As the former Head of Profession for DFID's Conflict Cadre wrote, 'while appropriate policy may be necessary for conflict sensitivity, it is not sufficient to ensure that it happens'. See Segal M (2016), 'Putting Conflict Sensitive Development into DFID's Practice: A Personal Perspective', in Handschin S, Abitbol E, Alluri R (eds.) (2016), 'Conflict Sensitivity: Taking it to the Next Level',

swisspeace/CSC Hub (https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/downloads/Working-Papers/950ee9877e/Conflict-Sensitivity-Taking-it-to-the-Next-Level-Working-Paper-16-swisspeace-sabina_handschin-eric_abitol-rina_alluri.pdf)

BOX 4 Strengthening team relationships to promote information sharing and more critical mindsets

The Swiss Cooperation Office has experimented with a number of ways to promote more conflict-sensitive approaches. For example, they have encouraged more frequent joint field visits of international and national staff to implementation sites outside Juba. This provides a prolonged period – generally a few days or more – in which to strengthen relationships between staff and deepen each other’s understanding of the context and risks. These visits also present an opportunity to work alongside implementing partners and build the trust that is crucial to overcoming barriers to open discussion and mutual learning, as described in chapter 3. Each field visit is followed by a ‘brown bag’ seminar in Juba where the visitors present an update on the local context, share findings from their project and facilitate collective reflection on conflict sensitivity. The British Embassy in Juba has a similar initiative, in which a Conflict Sensitivity Working Group brings together representatives from each team in the office. These meetings support collective reflection and ensure that conflict sensitivity is kept on people’s agendas. However, respondents noted challenges with maintaining the regularity of and decent attendance at such meetings in a high-pressure environment such as South Sudan. Lesson 4 discusses the role of leadership in creating an enabling environment for these activities in more depth.

Despite the emphasis on organisational culture, changes to the formal organisational apparatus can still play an important role in contributing towards conflict-sensitive approaches. However, the importance of such changes often lies in the process by which the changes occur. Several respondents emphasised that these change processes also have the potential to stimulate fresh reflection, generate new conversations, forge relationships and shape the values of an organisation.

For example, one conflict sensitivity ‘champion’ working from the HQ of a large INGO argued that the highly participatory approach they had taken to introducing new policies and guidance around conflict sensitivity had been as important in promoting a more conflict-sensitive organisational culture as the policies and guidance themselves. The experience highlighted “the importance of creating the spaces for people to hear what [they each] are working on and what some of the challenges are”. The INGO’s South Sudan team welcomed the opportunity to reflect, and this approach had contributed to a greater curiosity about how conflict dynamics and conflict sensitivity could inform their everyday work.

The informal processes described earlier can be captured in a contrast between the organisational ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ to support learning, summarised in figure 4 on p.17. While the learning ‘hardware’ is characterised by written outputs, reporting processes and formal relationships of accountability, the learning ‘software’ emphasises the social element of learning and tends to focus more on building understanding of context and relationships.

As highlighted in chapter 3, the high turnover of donor and INGO staff in South Sudan is a major obstacle to ensuring that the learning ‘software’ persists beyond just one or two generations of staff. While organisational hardware such as guidance and checklists have the potential to reinforce these changes, they are not necessarily the only tools available. Repeated discussion and practice can help to develop values, mutual expectations and behaviours among teams, which can outlast change in one or two members. Together, these constitute elements of organisational culture that play an important role in socialising new team members into the same values, norms and practices. National staff also tend to be in their roles in donor organisations and INGOs for much longer than international staff, making them potential guardians of organisational culture if they are sufficiently supported and respected to hold their international peers to account. However, organisational culture and mindsets are slow to change and require conscious reinforcement. The following two lessons reflect on the processes that can contribute towards an enabling environment for this reinforcement to take place.

Figure 4: Examples of 'hardware' and 'software' to support learning

Learning 'hardware'	Learning 'software'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Written conflict analysis ■ Research reports ■ Operational monitoring ■ Logframe design ■ Third-party monitoring ■ External evaluations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Joint field visits ■ Brown bag/lunchtime seminars ■ Handover processes ■ Empowerment of national staff ■ Participation in formal change processes (for example, strategy reviews or development of new policies or guidance)

Lesson 4

Visible and vocal leadership is crucial for authorising staff to take risks and supporting them to adapt

Leadership has played a vital role in facilitating change within each of the organisations discussed so far. Although country directors and heads of office are highly influential within their organisations and programmes, leadership can be exercised from a range of different positions within an organisation, including team leaders, sectoral advisers, line managers or role models. Staff in most roles have the potential to be seen as 'leaders' by others and this means that responsibility for exercising leadership is shared.

In the cases explored earlier, leaders have influenced behaviour by signalling that conflict sensitivity is an important issue and thereby motivating and incentivising staff to invest more time, energy and resources in the uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches. This signalling can be done explicitly (for example, through including standing items on conflict sensitivity on agendas for management and team meetings) or implicitly (for example, by allowing staff to attend context-awareness or conflict sensitivity trainings, or by allocating budget lines for meetings designed to support more conflict-sensitive delivery or specialist inputs).

Effective leaders also authorise their staff to talk about conflict sensitivity and be more open about the challenges of working in this way. As explored in chapter 3, conflict sensitivity is a sensitive topic in humanitarian contexts given the practical need to work with or alongside armed groups and to comply with humanitarian principles.

Leaders' decisions to talk about conflict sensitivity send strong signals that it is permissible to do so and provide staff with an opportunity to learn how to talk about conflict in sensitive ways that align with the organisation's own approach and risk appetite.

Finally, senior leaders can coordinate collective action within organisations to promote conflict sensitivity. This is particularly useful in breaking down activity or informational silos between different parts of an organisation. For example, senior leaders can use their authority to encourage the sharing of information or expertise or to restructure activities – in a way that more junior staff are unwilling or unable to do.

In both of the cases discussed in box 5, a 'tag team' dynamic between senior leadership and more specialist technical leadership has proved effective in encouraging staff to improve their understanding of conflict sensitivity. While these leaders have created the necessary space and identified entry points, the CSRF has sought to provide the additional capacity and expertise required to support these change processes.

By contrast, there were far fewer examples of strong leadership on conflict sensitivity cited by INGOs, national NGOs or other implementing partners that were consulted as part of this research. This may be driven by higher workloads of INGO senior management responsible for large-scale operations, a lack of incentives to prioritise adoption of conflict-sensitive approaches, or the fact that these organisations tend to have fewer in-house technical specialists in conflict sensitivity.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Two of the implementing partners that CSRF staff felt had made the most progress were Concern Worldwide and International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Both organisations have internal technical staff that can follow through on commitments made by senior management and support staff to

apply conflict-sensitive principles. The appointment of a specific Conflict Adviser within IOM's Programme Support Unit was a recommendation of the CSRF institutional assessment.

BOX 5 Two examples of leadership behaviours that support efforts to promote conflict sensitivity

The Swiss Cooperation Office provides a good example of how strong and shared leadership can promote more conflict-sensitive approaches. All the respondents working for or involved in the Swiss Cooperation Office cited the major influence of two individuals – the former Head of Office and former Human Security Division Adviser. These two ‘leaders’ created numerous spaces for greater reflection. These included greater emphasis on context updates⁴¹ during office meetings; consideration of conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities during these meetings; initiation of brown bag meetings; encouraging staff to attend CSRF trainings; organising an internal simulation training on conflict sensitivity; and development of a short conflict sensitivity ‘checklist’ designed to prompt ongoing reflection by staff. These leaders actively sought opportunities to encourage greater involvement of national staff in these spaces and delegated decision-making functions to these staff. This sent strong signals about the value of national staff and encouraged them to take a more proactive role in identifying and communicating conflict sensitivity risks to the rest of the office. This delegation of responsibilities from international to national staff was in part intended to ensure that there is greater continuity and improved institutional memory.

Visible signalling and greater autonomy have also been important in creating an enabling environment within the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) South Sudan team. Respondents noted that a new Head of Office had provided renewed leadership on conflict sensitivity by providing clarity around the office’s risk appetite, which encouraged staff to seek more innovative ways of integrating conflict sensitivity principles into their work. The Head of Office challenges staff on whether they have thought about key conflict sensitivity questions and makes it clear to staff that key documents would not get approval if they do not include meaningful consideration of conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities. This has been complemented by the presence of an in-house Senior Conflict Adviser based in Juba who provides ongoing advocacy of conflict-sensitive approaches and specialist support in considering implications on DFID staff’s work.

Lesson 5

Change at the system level requires working between organisations to promote coordination, broker relationships and build trust

Previous chapters have outlined various barriers at the level of the aid system – that is, beyond the internal affairs of organisations – that inhibit the uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches. These are entrenched problems that are difficult to solve – in part because the root causes exist ‘outside’ South Sudan (for example, in global policies or decisions) and in part because they represent collective action problems that require coordination to solve.

Such difficulties have also affected the CSRF. The Terms of Reference for the CSRF included a request for the facility to agree common standards for conflict sensitivity among participating donors. However, various barriers led to this objective being dropped. In the early stages of the CSRF,

donors were focused on re-establishing operations following the resurgence of violence and evacuation of international staff in 2016. Staff turnover, varying levels of commitment and genuine differences in policy positions and risk appetites further inhibited progress. However, the abortive process of trying to agree common standards prompted useful reflection on how to work more effectively at the system level.

One option involves tapping into existing mechanisms that seek to promote greater coordination and horizontal accountability between organisations. For example, the humanitarian cluster system brings together organisations working towards common objectives within a particular sector to promote a more coordinated and effective approach. In doing so, they constitute a space in which organisations can discuss the relevance of conflict sensitivity to their sector, share lessons and exercise ‘peer pressure’ to encourage uptake of more conflict-sensitive approaches. Box 6 provides an example of this in practice.

⁴¹ Although updates on the context are common in INGOs, they tend to focus on security and operational risks. Respondents noted that the Swiss meetings had a broader perspective that extended beyond this.

BOX 6 Uptake of conflict sensitivity within the Shelter/Non-Food Items Cluster

The Shelter/Non-Food Items Cluster in South Sudan offers one example of a coordination mechanism that has taken steps to increase uptake of conflict sensitivity in its work. The Cluster Coordinator has exercised leadership in getting members to agree on the relevance of conflict sensitivity and incorporate requirements to demonstrate context awareness and conflict sensitivity as part of project proposals.⁴² The CSRF has supported the Cluster Coordinator to design revised proposal templates and guidance on the methodology for members to follow. Early pilots of these have incentivised greater reflection on conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities and have helped to identify gaps in members' understanding of the context. It is possible that the Cluster's role as gatekeeper to a shared supplies pipeline and warehouse enables it to exercise more influence over its members compared to other clusters. However, progress has also been made elsewhere, as demonstrated by the Cash Cluster's establishment of a working group on 'Cash and Conflict' to support members to adopt more conflict-sensitive approaches.

The CSRF has also been experimenting with attempts to create informal spaces in which conflict sensitivity can be spoken about more honestly and trust can be built. Successfully identifying these entry points – whether clusters or informal meetings – and developing a tailored approach requires a solid understanding of the history of organisations, relationships and sensitivities attached to conflict sensitivity in South Sudan. It is also important that participating individuals trust a project like the CSRF to provide this support. The long-term presence of the CSRF in South Sudan and its independence from other donors or organisations has been crucial in building this strong contextual awareness and trust as a neutral broker or mediator.⁴³

In some cases, the CSRF has sought to go 'upstream' to address factors at the regional or HQ level that constrain organisations' abilities to adopt these approaches. In these cases, the CSRF can act as a broker of relationships between field and HQ offices, and provide evidence to justify changes on behalf of a country office. Again, successfully operating at this level requires flexibility in the CSRF's design and for partners to trust the CSRF's ability to engage on sensitive issues and represent the country office's interests.

⁴² The Cluster Coordinator noted that they first really became aware of the importance of conflict sensitivity and its implications through participation in a CSRF training event in Juba.

⁴³ The longstanding presence of the CSRF Director in southern Sudan (2010–11) and South Sudan (2011–2018) undoubtedly also contributed towards this contextual awareness and trust.

5.

Conclusion

The premise of this paper is that aid organisations play a crucially important role in South Sudan. While this involves life-saving assistance to some of the world's most vulnerable groups, the scale and nature of assistance means that interaction between the aid system and drivers of violent conflict is inevitable. The promotion of conflict-sensitive approaches is intended to enable organisations to understand the context better, identify risks and opportunities presented by this interaction, and adapt accordingly.

However, promoting these approaches is not without challenges. The international aid architecture and realities of working in a complex humanitarian emergency have made it more difficult for resources and attention to be invested in conflict-sensitive approaches. They have also put pressure on relationships within and between organisations, which inhibits collaboration, learning and reflection. In this context, building organisations' capacity to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches must involve more than the provision of context analysis, ad hoc training and the provision of toolkits.

This paper has presented five key lessons that have emerged from the efforts of the CSRF and others to adopt a more holistic approach to addressing these challenges in South Sudan. These lessons are:

1. Delivering training at scale can help to create communities of practice.
2. It is important to support organisations to define their own problems and design their own solutions.
3. Developing an organisational culture of learning and reflection is necessary for supporting teams to understand their context and use this information effectively.

4. Visible and vocal leadership is crucial for authorising staff to take risks and supporting them to adapt.
5. Change at the system level requires working between organisations to promote coordination, broker relationships and build trust.

This paper corroborates the diagnosis of challenges identified in previous reviews.⁴⁴ Taken together, the lessons set out a constructive vision for what an alternative approach to capacity building would look like on the basis of the CSRF's practical experience in South Sudan. Additional learning could be gained by comparing these lessons with those from similar – albeit smaller – initiatives in Libya, Syria and Nepal.

The CSRF will continue to grapple with these challenges and apply these lessons over the coming five years through a second phase of the programme. Despite recent progress in the peace process and the signature of a 'revitalised' peace agreement in September 2018, conflict sensitivity remains highly relevant to the aid sector in South Sudan. First, sub-national armed conflict involving non-signatory armed groups and violence between communities persist, and humanitarian access continues to be restricted in some areas. Second, even where levels of violence have decreased, structural drivers of conflict remain unchanged and conflict prevention must be a priority to prevent a relapse into violence. Third, the potential shift from humanitarian to development assistance raises new conflict-sensitivity challenges. These include how to deal with the legacies of violence, how to manage transitions between response phases, and how to work with government and traditional authorities in ways that strengthen prospects for peace.

⁴⁴ For example, see Handschin S, Abitbol E, Alluri R (eds.) (2016) 'Conflict Sensitivity: Taking it to the Next Level', swisspeace/CSC Hub; Goddard N (2014), 'Conflict Sensitivity Mainstreaming Efforts', CDA Collaborative Learning Associates, December.

The five lessons identified in this paper build on emerging thinking across three different bodies of literature. In the spirit of critical reflection, these may offer complementary perspectives to guide further experimentation on how to adapt capacity-building approaches in South Sudan or elsewhere. First, calls for more adaptive approaches⁴⁵ to development and aid have increasingly focused on how to support individuals within organisations to identify and respond to emerging opportunities and risks more effectively, leading to calls for greater 'navigation by judgement'⁴⁶ rather than by rules. This paper highlights the challenges of promoting this approach in conflict-affected contexts and humanitarian emergencies, which should be factored into future discussion of adaptive programming. Second, the findings align with a similar strand in the literature on management and innovation. This explores how groups of people – whether individuals, teams or organisations – can work effectively together to solve complex problems. Future research should draw on this to explore the role of mental models, shared visions and critical reflection in creating 'learning organisations' and 'collective intelligence' in the aid sector.⁴⁷ Third, initiatives seeking to overcome systemic barriers to conflict sensitivity would benefit from exploring the literature on collective action and social movements in changing norms and building trust.⁴⁸ Future experimentation and learning could seek to identify ways to convert the interest and relationships created through 'mass sensitisation' into more sustainable changes in the norms of the aid system itself. The approval of a follow-on phase to the CSRF pilot represents a good opportunity to explore these alternative framings and approaches.

Overall, the experience derived from the CSRF pilot suggests that sustained, flexible and country-focused approaches to promoting conflict sensitivity present a more effective way to catalyse uptake of conflict-sensitive approaches across the aid system than traditional approaches. Such models should be considered in other complex, conflict-affected contexts where aid actors have struggled to embed these approaches in their work. If there is one overarching lesson from the CSRF, however, it is that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to capacity building that can be lifted from a textbook or one body of literature. The experience has demonstrated that finding the right approach is often a case of 'learning by doing', with every effort needing to adapt its approach as the team learns more about the context, personalities, relationships, opportunities and constraints that are unique to each organisation and context. Aspiring capacity builders must therefore 'practice what they preach' when it comes to flexibility, self-reflection and learning.

⁴⁵ This literature in fact encompasses a range of related approaches framed in terms of 'problem-driven iterative adaptation' (PDIA), 'doing development differently' (DDD), 'thinking and working politically' (TWP) and 'adaptive management'.

⁴⁶ Honig D (2018), *Navigation by Judgment: Why and When Top Down Management of Foreign Aid Doesn't Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁴⁷ Senge P (2007), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* second edition (London: Random House); Mulgan G (2017), *Big Mind: How Collective Intelligence can Change our World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

⁴⁸ Haider H, McLoughlin C, Scott Z (2011), 'Topic Guide on Communication and Governance', GSDRC, CommGAP (<https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/CommGAP2.pdf>); Marcus R, Page E (2014), 'Drivers of change in gender norms: An annotated bibliography', Overseas Development Institute, August (<https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9184.pdf>)

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