

Operationalising Conflict Sensitivity: The Pragmatics of Applied Research in Violence-Affected Contexts

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This research brief delves into the pragmatics of implementing conflict-sensitive research in violence-affected contexts, with a particular emphasis on how communicative, relational and bureaucratic peculiarities can potentiate or constrain possibilities of this approach on the ground. [Conflict sensitivity](#) refers to integrating an understanding of the local context and stakeholders into engagement strategies to minimise negative effects and, where possible, enhance positive outcomes. The underlying premise is that research and action are always influenced by and interact with their surrounding context, including at different levels of society, in both visible and invisible ways. Conflict-sensitive approaches call on researchers to explicitly delineate how their work affects the conflict environment and how this environment, in turn, impacts their research.

Conceptualising applied conflict sensitivity, Roxani Krystalli and colleagues introduced a framework for [relevant, respectful, right-sized, and rigorous research](#) in development contexts. The framework highlights meaningful engagement, informed consent processes, and incorporating local knowledge and contributions into research designs, ensuring participants and research teams are represented adequately, treated fairly, and [involved ethically](#). This requires high standards of transparent documentation, internal and external validity, reproducibility, and thorough verification of research results. It underscores the relevance of research by ensuring it meets the actual needs of communities and stakeholders, integrates their priorities, and communicates findings effectively for real-world impact.

When individuals and organisations leverage these approaches, however, the vicissitudes of executing conflict-sensitive strategies under conditions of acute insecurity can subvert even the most well devised plans. For example, situated vocabularies and gestures are [vital in delicate security circumstances](#) and for conflict sensitive research. Those having worked in violence-affected contexts will be quick to recognise the (body) language used to reference-without-naming: labelling perpetrators simply as “they”, jutting out the chin and eyes the direction in which militias may be found or using silence as an answer when asked if a particular group attacked the village that day.

Gaining precise knowledge of these embodied nuances is close to impossible on a project timeline. However, by [incorporating an inception phase in the research design](#), researchers can leverage interpersonal interactions that build and strengthen connections with the community based on [trust and care](#). This creates the space and time that research practitioners need to [develop a baseline communicative understanding](#) that mitigates some immediate risks of talking within and about a conflict-affected environment when that very environment is fraught with a multitude of security threats. Initial insights from an inception phase are therefore

crucial for safely navigating through the complexities of language and communication challenges while paving the way for more relevant, respectful, right sized, and rigorous research in the subsequent stages.

Permissions and bureaucratic requirements represent another challenging terrain for the possibility of conflict-sensitive research. National and local government officials, for instance, [gatekeep the access](#) for an international agency to conduct research among their communities. There are also [socialised norms of permission](#), such as when an independent researcher requires the blessing of the local militia leader to continue her field research without being violently targeted by the group. **Notably, certain topics of significant humanitarian and moral concern, such as investigations into sexual violence and human rights abuses, may be rendered by authorities off-limits for discussion or inquiry**, which poses significant challenges for research permissions. Some states resist having their current conditions of instability classified as an armed conflict; others may be quick to do so with an eye on the expanded powers and possibilities such a classification might afford.

Meanwhile, [community leaders may be reluctant](#) to accept research on gender, ethnic, or wealth inequalities since it may be perceived as threatening to cultural norms, local interests, and relations of power. Navigating permissions can be deeply frustrating: to gain access, vast injustices central to a conflict-sensitive understanding may need to be ignored, while using language that obscures rather than reveals the extent of (structural) violence can feel like a betrayal of one's principles. This is an ethical dilemma that each researcher needs to solve. In some cases, it may be partially alleviated by [constructive dialogue](#) with potential spoilers in which [collective benefits](#) of situationally controversial research can be highlighted.

Institutional relationships – and the interpersonal ones that constitute them – are equally critical. Each organisation comes with its bureaucratic opportunities and constraints as well as relational entanglements that research practitioners need to effectively navigate to keep their research conflict-sensitive. **Success in multi-stakeholder efforts in violence-affected contexts demands interpersonal trust, agility, and bureaucratic flex.** Trusting relationships with institutional stakeholders and bureaucrats ensure the [steady and accurate flow of critical security information](#) from one entity to another, among other critical situational empirics. Original communities may become unavailable due to violence, displacement, or simply because it would be unethical to continue in light of acute insecurity. In response, organisations, donors, and researchers must be [flexible in adapting project timelines and strategies](#). This means adjusting their own budgeting and reporting standards to maintain ongoing efforts on the ground, while extending grace, care, and latitude to those closest to the threats.

As this Research brief has demonstrated, effective conflict-sensitivity in applied research requires pragmatic and flexible planning around context-specific communicative, relational and bureaucratic peculiarities. To address this, the following table presents practices related to project coordination, collaboration and concertation, alongside resulting challenges and solutions.

The table below outlines **three separate strategies for collaboration across multiple organisations**, a major institutional challenge for conflict-sensitive applied research, and the conventional best practices for each approach. It is important to note that a single project may incorporate elements from more than one of these strategies. Importantly, this table does not suggest that continuing research or project work is always the best approach; certain circumstances may demand the cessation of activities entirely. It is meant to present some of the more common challenges to each of these approaches to research and action as well as institutional and individual responses that can help **reduce risk and mitigate the impact of uncertainty and volatility** in the security landscape.

	Coordination	Collaboration	Concertation
Definitions	Behaviours such as task decomposition or division of labor, resource pooling, communication, and integration among partners intended to achieve specific goals. ¹	Behaviours – e.g., negotiating roles, responsibilities, goals, interests, and the social order - that support cooperative interorganizational relationships that are negotiated on an ongoing basis in order to achieve joint problem-solving and knowledge transfer. ² Requires greater trust and integration than coordination.	Traditionally, a form of cooperation primarily focused on policy-making that foregrounds negotiation and consensus building among major stakeholders with potentially divergent interests. This is particularly relevant when major stakeholders are crucial for the success and legitimacy of decisions. ³
Traditional Best Practices for inter-organisational action	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognise resource dependence. 2. Frequent communication. 3. Formalisation and monitoring. 4. Consensus building. 5. Reducing mandate redundancy – i.e., duplication of actions.⁴ 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultivate trust. 2. Exercise strong, inclusive leadership that fosters a shared vision. 3. Leverage technology. 4. Utilise expertise. 5. Manage power dynamics. 6. Foster a collaborative culture. 7. Implement clear governance structures that respect autonomy while promoting accountability and collective action.⁵ 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognise relative weaknesses and strengths among partners. 2. Evaluate previous experiences and integrate continuous learning. 3. Leverage political and electoral momentum. 4. Institutionalise dialogue and concession practices. 5. Ensure inclusive representation from implicated actors. 6. Align policies across stakeholders and different levels of engagement. 7. Implement democratically determined monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.⁶
Challenges with execution in violent contexts	<p>Variability in security protocols and thresholds among organisations, including criteria for country mission withdrawal.</p> <p>Mutually exclusive geographic coverage prioritised in projects or institutional mandates due to conditions of violence.</p> <p>Differential criteria for project or program suspension.</p>	<p>Contextually informed histories and dynamic evolutions of fear, mistrust, interpersonal, and interinstitutional antagonisms.</p> <p>Reactive and radical changes in political will and budget priorities that paralyse actors' participation: e.g., unitary focus on defense and security.</p> <p>Political instability that undermines or ruptures entirely technology, infrastructure, and convening capabilities.</p> <p>Radical disparities in resource allocation that challenge the ethics of continued dedication to projects that do not address fundamental issues of survival.</p>	<p>High turnover of government officials during periods of instability.</p> <p>Increased pressure on multiple forms of capital that erodes dispositions to engage in concessions.</p> <p>Currency fluctuations and economic disruptions erase previously available budgets.</p> <p>Previously aligned objectives irreparably disrupted due to radical unplanned shifts in priorities.</p>
Responses	<p>Flexible (geographic, temporal), complementary, and staggered deployment for field activities.</p> <p>Mix of sectors and institutions with intentional planning and balancing of project timelines, agility, and responsiveness capabilities with regard to changing conditions of violence and alacrity of execution.</p> <p>Explicit and intentional coordination planning that identifies floor (minimum requirements for engagement) and ceiling (maximum tolerance for instability) criteria.</p>	<p>Inception phase stakeholder engagement that includes increasing the empirical basis for understanding contextualised relations of power among institutions, between the governing center and local governments, and embedded within the sociohistorical and political context.</p> <p>Development of an understanding of the contextualised practices of (mis)trust and their potential for facilitating or undermining project or program objectives.</p> <p>Presentation of research and policy agendas in a way that is politically sensitive, ethically appropriate for the existential priorities of communities and states, and legible to the audiences who must dedicated resources and will to collaborative capabilities.</p>	<p>Prioritisation of institutionalising processes to survive political tumult.</p> <p>Identification of Tier 2 (non-political appointee) institutional allies to push the effort forward.</p> <p>Scaled down or renegotiated actions that adapt to changing priorities.</p> <p>Expanded input or advisory roles for stakeholders forced by circumstances to withdraw.</p> <p>Good faith actions that honor the original spirit of the endeavour, and prioritisation of maintaining political capital and will.</p>

¹ Xavier Castañer and Nuno Oliveira, "Collaboration, Coordination, and Cooperation Among Organizations: Establishing the Distinctive Meanings of These Terms Through a Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Management* 46, no. 6 (July 1, 2020): 965–1001, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206320901565>.

² Samuel S. Holloway and Anne Parmigiani, "Friends and Profits Don't Mix: The Performance Implications of Repeated Partnerships," *Academy of Management Journal* 59, no. 2 (April 2016): 460–78, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2013.0581>.

³ Darius Ornston and Tobias Schulze-Cleven, "Conceptualizing Cooperation: Coordination and Concertation as Two Logics of Collective Action," *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 5 (April 1, 2015): 555–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414014554690>.

⁴ Andrew H. Van de Ven and Gordon Walker, "The Dynamics of Interorganizational Coordination," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1984): 598–621, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2392941>.

⁵ Tyrone S. Pitsis, Martin Kornberger, and Stewart R. Clegg, "The Art of Managing Relationships in Interorganizational Collaboration," *M@n@gement* 7, no. 3 (2004): 47–67, <https://doi.org/10.3917/mana.073.0047>.

⁶ K. M. Devries et al., "The Global Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women," *Science* 340, no. 6140 (June 28, 2013): 1527, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1240937>; Wolfgang Streeck and Lane Kenworthy, "Theories and Practices of Neocorporatism," in *The Handbook of Political Sociology: States, Civil Societies, and Globalization*, ed. Thomas Janoski et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 441–60.