# Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into the USAID Program Cycle

## An Additional Help for ADS Chapter 201

This additional help document for **ADS Chapter 201, Program Cycle Operational Policy** provides optional guidance for Overseas and Washington Operating Units (OUs) on how to integrate conflict sensitivity across the USAID Program Cycle to promote positive peace outcomes - not just a reduction in violence but an increase in resilience and social cohesion - through development and humanitarian programming.

> **Conflict Sensitivity** is the practice of understanding how aid interacts with conflict in a particular context to mitigate unintended negative effects and to influence conflict positively wherever possible, through humanitarian, development, and/or peacebuilding interventions.

## Introduction and Overview

A quarter of the world's population now lives in conflict-affected areas and 80 percent of USAID Missions are in fragile or conflict-affected states. More conflicts rage today than at any time since the Cold War. Conflict dynamics such as exclusion, displacement, gender-based violence, conflict-related sexual violence, criminal activity, and social and political division fuel complex crises, risk reversing development gains worldwide, and directly impede USAID's ability to achieve humanitarian and development goals. Even in ostensibly stable contexts, evolving dynamics can affect programming in unpredictable ways. Conflict Sensitivity is an approach all OUs can integrate into their work to mitigate unintended negative effects of USAID programs and promote positive peace and social cohesion outcomes.

Conflict sensitivity evolved from the humanitarian principle of Do No Harm, which recognizes that aid interventions are not neutral and can cause harm if conflict dynamics - and the potential interactions between those and aid interventions - are not well understood. While the Do No Harm principle serves to prevent inadvertent damage, conflict sensitivity seeks to bring communities together, address underlying grievances, strengthen local capacities for peace, and promote the peaceful resolution of conflict. Conflict sensitivity builds on existing USAID Harm Mitigation practices to provide tools to improve planning and decision-making in support of promoting peace. To confront the greatest challenges of our time, USAID and the larger U.S. Government (USG) recognize the interrelatedness of conflict, crisis, and development through key conflict prevention and stabilization strategies including the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS), the U.S. Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities (SAPRA), the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace and Security, and the USAID Policy for Countering Violent Extremism through Development Assistance.

Integrating conflict sensitivity across the full spectrum of the Program Cycle leverages localized understanding of conflict dynamics and the nature of USAID's engagement to capitalize on opportunities to support peace and avoid reinforcing conflict. Conflict-sensitivity integration occurs at all stages in the Program Cycle. It builds on existing best practices in strategic planning, activity design and procurement, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, collaboration, learning, and adaptation. Conflict sensitivity is a way of doing business better across all development and humanitarian sectors - similar to context-

driven adaptation, collaborating, learning and adapting (CLA) and localization - not a separate stream of programming.

By integrating a conflict sensitive lens across the Program Cycle, OUs can:

- Mitigate unintended conflict related risks;
- Maximize humanitarian and development investments in volatile or conflict-affected contexts;
- Leverage investments across sectors to contribute towards peace and security outcomes;
- Design strategies, projects, and activities responsive to rapid changes in context;
- Improve evidence use for decision-making and adaptive management;
- Engage local actors to maximize impact and promote peace; and
- Identify the social, behavioral, and institutional changes that constitute success and incorporate those across further programming.
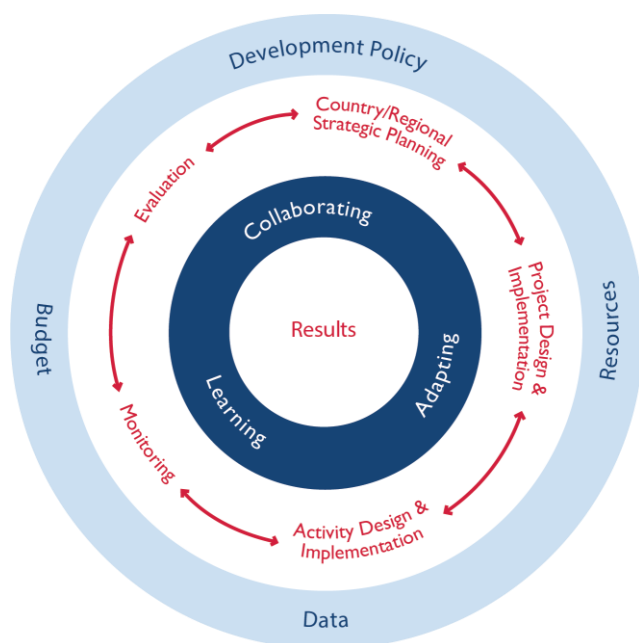


## Primary Responsibilities

This resource is primarily intended for use by Program Offices, Technical Offices, and the Office of Acquisition and Assistance to complement ADS Chapter 201 and completion of program cycle requirements. Given the cross-cutting nature of integrating conflict sensitivity, it is recommended that OUs establish a conflict sensitivity team or working group comprised of representatives from each of these offices.  The Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention (CVP) in the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization (CPS) is available to provide support to teams as needed.

## Strategic Planning and Implementation

See *ADS 201.3.2, ADS 201mag, Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) Development and Approval Process, and ADS 201maz, Regional Development Cooperation Strategy (RDCS) Development and Approval Process.*

Strategic planning with a conflict sensitive lens implies decision-making and prioritization informed by a robust understanding of local conflict dynamics, thorough consideration of risk, and built-in flexibility to adapt to contextual changes and volatility.

Conflict sensitivity is not a standalone approach; rather, it should be integrated across the strategic planning process from development through implementation to ensure that all USAID programs, regardless of sector, contribute to peace and do no harm. Conflict sensitivity does not necessarily add complexity to programming; and if successful, can help programs address the complexity that already exists in the environment.

**Local Consultations.** OUs completing local consultations in preparation for CDCS development should consider opportunities to gain diverse local perspectives on the root causes of conflict. Meaningful engagement with marginalized communities can advance more inclusive and equitable peace outcomes, but should be pursued through safe and secure / trauma-informed approaches.

**Analysis.** During preparation for Regional/Country Development Cooperation Strategy (R/CDCS) development (Phase 0), a thorough analysis of the local conflict contexts and potential trajectories, considering identity, institutions, interests and incentives, and norms, values, and narratives, can help Missions understand the opportunities and obstacles embedded in community dynamics at the outset of their strategy. Violence and conflict assessments (VCAs - see text box) may take a variety of forms and should be fit for purpose, providing sufficient information without undue burden. Additional information on VCAs is available here and a collection of completed VCAs can be viewed here.

In addition to VCAs, a range of other Peace and Security data and analysis sources are available to inform baselines and program design commensurate with available time and resources. OUs should consult the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Early Warning Project Annual List of Countries at Risk for Mass Killings to determine if atrocity prevention considerations may apply. Other tools—including political economy analysis, gender and inclusive development analyses, and risk and resilience assessments—may also be appropriate for building a more holistic understanding of conflict dynamics. OUs should consider if iterative assessments or context monitoring (see below) may help inform strategic adaptation over time.

> **Violence and Conflict Assessments (VCAs)**
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> The Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention (CVP) developed a VCA methodology designed for flexibility and rigor to meet the needs of OUs operating in conflict-affected, non-permissive or fragile environments. The VCA can be conducted in person on the ground, remotely, rapidly, or in-depth. Participatory assessments may take longer, but offer the best approach to ensuring local actors inform USAID's understanding of the country's dynamics. This tool is not specific to strategic planning, but can be used at any point across the entirety of the program cycle.

**Flexible and Adaptive Planning**. As OUs set parameters for strategy development in Phase One, it is recommended that teams consider scenario planning and other adaptive management tools. Scenario planning is a useful tool for improving decision-making and adaptive management when working in highly complex and rapidly changing environments facing uncertain future conditions, such as conflict-affected areas. Scenario planning, as a fit for purpose tool, can follow different approaches and is overall intended to engage OUs in identifying plausible future outcomes and adjusting strategic planning

accordingly. Scenarios built on a strong understanding of conflict dynamics, such as information from a VCA, can help OUs be more proactive and prepared in responding to new risks as they emerge.

As OUs develop strategic management approaches, they should consider at what interval it is appropriate to revisit context and conflict dynamics to confirm programming approaches. Strategy-level portfolio reviews and mid-course stocktakings can be used to revisit changing conflict dynamics, integrate learning on risks and assumptions, and revalidate the overall strategic approach, adapting the strategy when necessary. For more information on conflict sensitive approaches to CLA see below.

**Complexity Aware Development Hypotheses.** As OUs develop Results Frameworks in Phase Two of the R/CDCS development process, consider developing conflict sensitive development hypotheses to capture and respond to elevated complexity and fragility (see below for conflict sensitive theories of change). If appropriate, OUs may consider the use of Special Objectives (SpOs) to articulate broad lines of effort including humanitarian or stabilization initiatives responsive to highly fluid contexts. SpOs require careful management and coordination typically tied to a specific volatile sub-geography or time-limited interest.

> **Honduras: Example of a Conflict Sensitive Development Hypothesis**
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> The 2020 USAID Honduras CDCS Includes an example of a context- driven development hypothesis. It acknowledges and treats violence and governance challenges as distinct, but *also*

**Performance Management Plan (PMP).** *See ADS 201.3.2.15 and How-to Note*. PMPs are designed to capture the high level changes that the strategy seeks to achieve and include strategic indicators. Adding conflict or conflict-related context indicators in a PMP will help OUs to systematically monitor and track changes in the context in terms of conflict profile, causes, actors, and dynamics. Additionally, the PMP articulates an OU's learning priorities, identifies learning questions, and outlines approaches  for collaborating with key stakeholders and local partners to address these critical questions. Integrating conflict sensitivity into its PMP will enable the OU to answer specific fragility, conflict, and violence related questions and make appropriate adjustments to the strategy and its implementation. Finally, PMPs identify necessary or opportune pivot points in the face of changing conflict and violence dynamics and can articulate ways through which the OU will engage partners to ensure learning and adaptation are locally-based and locally-driven. For more information on conflict sensitive Monitoring, Evaluation, and CLA, see below.

**Project and Activity Design and Implementation**
*See ADS 201.3.3 on Project Design and Implementation, ADS 201sam, Project Design and Implementation Process, and ADS 201.3.4 on Activity Design and Implementation.*

Building conflict sensitivity into projects and activities from the outset can preclude costly and time-consuming efforts to correct later on. Activity design teams should consider at the outset if a conflict sensitivity lens will be part of the design process and who from the design team will lead those components. Staff from any sector with Conflict-Sensitive Aid (CSAID) training can lead conflict

sensitivity for activity design teams. Staff from the Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention are also available to provide technical assistance and advice as needed or can help schedule CSAID training. Activity design teams may use the Conflict Sensitivity Activity Design Checklist as an additional reference for steps to integrate conflict sensitivity. As part of the design process, early conversations with Contracting and Agreement Officers can identify the appropriate choice of instrument and ensure adequate flexibility and adaptability. The steps for incorporating conflict sensitivity into project and activity design and implementation are:

1. Build sufficient understanding of the operating context (e.g. conduct a VCA - see above -  or other relevant assessment), at both strategic and more local levels, and utilize these findings as part of the activity or project design. An activity-level conflict analysis will identify what divides or connects salient groups within the society in the target communities and can help map the political economy and local power dynamics.

> **Conflict Analysis in Awards**
> One way to reduce assessment burden on OUs is to include Conflict Analysis as a deliverable in awards to inform implementation plans (for example due 45 days after award). Requiring partners to update conflict analyses yearly provided timely information to the USAID Mission Leadership in Iraq.

2. Work with the Bureau for Management, Office of Acquisition Assistance (M/OAA) to select an appropriate instrument and implementation management structures that are flexible and designed to operate in a complex context. Anticipate the need to pivot programming through shock responsive and adaptive designs including crisis modifiers, scenario planning, etc.

3. Incorporate conflict dynamics and conditions in theories of change. Conflict sensitive theories of change can link understanding of context to what will be done differently in programming. For example, "if livelihoods programming is inclusive of marginalized populations, then livelihoods programs will be more effective because identity-based exclusion from job markets is a key cause of unemployment." Identity-based exclusion is frequently a driver of unemployment, but is also a conflict dynamic. Both can be addressed with the same activity. See the Feed the Future Conflict Integration guide for examples.

4. Incorporate regular conflict assessments and reflection points, such as formal or informal pause and reflect sessions, with implementing partners and local communities. Dynamic environments may trigger the need for ad hoc, rather than scheduled, pause and reflect sessions so the design should consider resources needed to implement these. These reviews not only highlight context changes, but also build open, transparent, and accountable relationships among Mission staff, implementing partners, and communities, which is itself a key part of conflict sensitivity. Political Economy Assessments can inform conflict analyses, but are not a complete replacement - the unique element of conflict assessments is the understanding they provide of how USAID activities affect the environment and vice versa.

5. During implementation, build context indicators in the Activity Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Plans and use context monitoring to monitor and track changes in the context and conflict dynamics that may impact the program and vice versa.

6. Implement conflict sensitive MEL plans that use the conflict analysis to shape MEL approaches and techniques (see below). Determine whether personal requirements and safety protocols are needed to safeguard respondents, staff, etc.

Conflict Sensitivity Activity Design resources, including those for specific sectors, such as Checklist for Conflict Sensitivity in Education Programs and Integrating Conflict Sensitivity into Food Security Programs, can facilitate activity level planning and design.

## Monitoring and Evaluation

*See ADS 201.3.5 on Program Monitoring and ADS 201.3.6 on Evaluation and the USAID Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkits for additional resources.*

Effective monitoring and evaluation generates information on program performance throughout implementation and informs learning and timely adaptation, as well as measures performance after close-out. As with conflict-sensitive planning and implementation, conflict-sensitive monitoring efforts will enable OUs to gain a detailed understanding of the context as it changes over time. Conflict sensitive monitoring and evaluation should be flexible, adaptable, and responsive to changes within the context. Navigating these adaptations and shifts in programming requires open and trusting relationships between implementing partners, monitoring partners, and USAID.

There are four important steps for conflict-sensitive monitoring and evaluation.

1. Use the violence and conflict assessment to help determine learning priorities and questions, data sources, and key stakeholders.
2. Measure changes in social attitudes and behaviors both periodically within the program lifecycle and afterwards. Are the attitudes of one group towards another more or less positive, or are they mistrustful and even dehumanizing (e.g., narratives that remove the moral prohibition of violence against a group)? Does the behavior of one group towards another change: are they antagonistic, or cooperative? Surveys, interviews, and qualitative research are common ways to collect and evaluate this information. Changes to attitudes and behaviors are reliable indicators for conflict trends and directions.
3. Share these findings across other sectors and programs to build on the observable changes and avoid potential pitfalls.
4. Translate learning into adaptation both for mid-stream course corrections and to improve future programming.

Note that the "how" of conflict-sensitive Monitoring and Evaluation is time and context-specific rather than an off-the-shelf solution, and derives from the "what" in the analysis. Once the above four points have been followed, a situationally specific process will emerge.

Suggested approaches:

**Emphasize participatory monitoring and evaluation to increase community investment in the project outcomes:** Community's feedback informs project and activities, and reinforces a collaborative relationship with the implementers.

**Match the team and processes to the context:** Ensure that conflict sensitivity is incorporated in team constitution, such as by ensuring balanced gender, disability, ethnicity, and/or religious backgrounds among team members. Doing so can open doors to a wider array of stakeholders and additional information, data, and perspectives. Women will have better access to women, youth to youth, ethnic groups will tend to be more open to "their own," etc., and both teams and community respondents will feel safer speaking to some groups than others.

**Ensure that monitoring and evaluation processes, such as data collection, analysis, and dissemination, take language and cultural sensitivities into consideration.** Include trusted and credible local partners with knowledge of the local culture, traditions, and language in Monitoring and Evaluation planning, data collection, and data analysis. In cases where stakeholders bring diverse perspectives to the table that limit the ability to build consensus or cause and effect relationships are uncertain, consider [complexity aware monitoring approaches](#).

**Increase use of context monitoring.** Context monitoring is the systematic collection of information about the conditions and external factors relevant to the implementation and performance of a Mission or Washington OU's strategy, projects, and activities. Conflict-sensitive context monitoring continuously examines the dynamic environment to help activity managers refine indicators and provide inputs for proactive decision-making on where and when programmatic adaptations may need to be made.

**Evaluation processes should include a focus on social and political change connected to activity dynamics wherever possible.** These are critical outcomes from conflict-sensitive development work and evaluation should, as much as possible, focus on outcome indicators as opposed to output indicators. In other words, it is meaningful to know how much of something was created by a USAID activity, but it is far more meaningful to know what kind of change occurred because of its creation. Social and political change are major indicators of potential need for programmatic adaptation as well as indicators of success.  Further guidance for the inclusion of conflict sensitivity in evaluation Statements of Work (SOWs) can be found [here](#).

## Collaboration, Learning and Adapting (CLA)

See [ADS 201.3.7 on Collaborating, Learning and Adapting](#) and the [USAID CLA Toolkit](#).

The intentional adoption of CLA approaches can help deliver holistic and flexible program implementation that meets the complex needs of local communities in conflict settings. Collaboration and coordination are necessary components of multisectoral, multilevel, and multi stakeholder conflict-sensitive programming. Creating structures and expectations that facilitate collaboration and information sharing across activities can improve coherence, maximizing synergies while minimizing potential harm. Opportunities for meaningful collaboration among USAID staff, across implementing partners and with local communities and stakeholders should all be considered. What kind of collaboration and with whom are critical questions to answer early, followed by cultivating broad buy-in around a chosen approach.

CLA can also improve the quality and relevance of USAID's programs by grounding them in evidence, including findings from conflict analyses. The CPS/CVP learning agenda connects Missions with a worldwide effort to improve operations in challenging environments. Staff can use the CPS/CVP learning agenda to access knowledge and best practices that can inform their own programming decisions. Missions are also invited to actively contribute to this learning agenda by including conflict-related learning questions in Activity Monitoring Evaluation and Learning Plans (AMELP) and PMPs, and sharing their findings as new evidence emerges. Catalyzing learning among development actors and local communities can also help build capacity and facilitate locally-led development.

While it is important to have a plan - a theory of change, assumptions, and anticipated results - it is equally important to be sufficiently flexible when working in dynamic environments. This is especially true in conflict-affected areas where conditions can change rapidly and without warning. CLA approaches help programs adapt to new learning and changing contexts in ways that are both tactical and strategic. Organizing pause and reflect sessions that focus explicitly on conflict sensitivity and provide internal guidance for shock-responsive pivots can enable better, more timely decision-making. Practicing adaptive management can also help ensure that we do not undermine local systems and prospects for development. By adopting an adaptive mindset and developing the skills needed to manage programs adaptively, we improve our ability to leverage what is working well and respond thoughtfully when circumstances shift.

Finally, consider the enabling conditions: the extent to which organizational culture, processes, and resource allocation support conflict-sensitive CLA approaches. For instance, collaboration does not work if people aren't willing to share and listen to a range of perspectives. When staff aren't connected to networks through trusting relationships, it is much harder to understand complex system dynamics. Collaboration time is wasted reinventing the wheel if effective processes aren't in place to capture and share information. Including CLA skills and processes in work plans, job descriptions, performance reviews, and professional development plans is one way of reinforcing enabling conditions supportive of conflict-sensitive CLA.

For specific examples of conflict-sensitive CLA in action, visit the CLA Case Competition Library and filter for cases tagged as "Working in Crisis and Conflict."

**Institutionalizing Conflict Sensitivity**

OUs can develop internal processes for integrating conflict sensitivity to clarify roles, responsibilities, and clearance processes through the creation of a Conflict Sensitivity Mission Order. Missions may choose to update existing Mission Orders (e.g., activity design, MEL, portfolio reviews) with conflict-sensitive elements and/or develop new specific guidance for conflict sensitivity (e.g., [USAID Honduras Conflict Sensitivity Mission Order](#)).

**Additional Resources and Support**

The CPS/CVP team is available to provide support to these teams as needed in order to integrate conflict sensitivity. CVP can assist with analysis (either the VCA  or on a more ad-hoc basis); provide technical assistance with strategy, project, or activity design; provide conflict monitoring and evaluation expertise; support pause and reflect activities; and promote field-based learning on conflict. CVP can also arrange to provide conflict sensitivity training to groups or individuals as needed.

**Conclusion**

Conflict sensitivity is a fundamental part of effective, sustainable programming in the conflict and violence-affected areas that make up most of USAID's program areas, as well as a positive goal in its own right. This additional help document outlines ways in which existing structures (such as the program cycle and CDCS) should be shaped to include conflict sensitivity as part of existing lines of work, maximizing results while minimizing additional input.

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