

# Conflict Accountability—not conflict sensitivity

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# Conflict Accountability—not conflict sensitivity

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We must strive to be conflict accountable, not merely conflict sensitive.

The analysis, the techniques, and the practice of Do No Harm, as well as the principle itself, are about the accountability we owe to those to whom we offer help. We are not merely trying to be sensitive to their experience or their plight or their needs. We are actively trying to have an impact on their lives, and with impacts arise the need to hold ourselves accountable for our actual effects on those lives.

The principle of Do No Harm calls attention to the simple, profound, extremely important, yet often overlooked, fact that in attempting to help, we can in fact hurt. Our intentions, no matter how good or just or noble we believe them to be, do not absolve of us of accountability or responsibility when we make mistakes. The techniques of Do No Harm assure that we have considered the implications of our actions, that we do take responsibility for fixing the mistakes that occur, and are accountable for our decisions.

## One decade of conflict sensitivity, two decades of Do No Harm

While Do No Harm is often considered a part of “conflict sensitivity” and conflict sensitive practice, the Do No Harm Project and the techniques it pioneered predate the development of the concept of “conflict sensitivity” by a decade. I first heard the term “conflict sensitivity” in 2004, more than a decade after the Do No Harm Project began in 1993 and five years after the publication of Mary Anderson’s influential book, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—Or War*<sup>1</sup>. It was three years after I’d become Director of the Do No Harm Project.

Conflict sensitivity was intended to serve as an umbrella term for discussing a whole group of frameworks and concepts that were being developed in response to the experiences of war, humanitarian effort, and the massive development resources deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was a time of great intellectual ferment and analysis to better understand conflict and the roles of the various actors involved. Conflict sensitivity as a term was meant to help distinguish those analyses and methodologies being developed out of an NGO perspective from those of a political or military nature.

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<sup>1</sup> *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—Or War*, Mary B Anderson. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

For the historians out there, Mary’s first writing on the topic was “International Assistance and Conflict: An Exploration of Negative Impacts”. Issue Paper no. 1. Cambridge: Local Capacities for Peace Project, Collaborative for Development Action, July 1994.

Do No Harm and Peace and Conflict Impact Analysis (PCIA)<sup>2</sup>—which also began in the 1990s—are the acknowledged and influential godparents of all subsequent conflict sensitive tools. They were roped in and gathered under the new term, to sit beside their descendants and lend a historical credence to the concept.

Neither Mary nor I were ever consulted about the term or asked if we thought it was appropriate that Do No Harm be placed under its umbrella. We did, however, go along with it, feeling at the time that it meant people were seriously grappling with the implications of working in, on, and around conflict.

The past decade of experience has caused me to reconsider.

Language matters and “sensitivity” is a metaphor

The metaphors we use shape the types of action we take as a result.

The word “sensitivity” in English is a sense of touch metaphor. Our fingertips are sensitive. This metaphor leads to two complementary and inseparable interpretations and one unfortunately all too common result.

First, sensitivity is often used to mean general awareness. It is the impression on our minds of all our sensory input. It is the impact of experience on all of our nerve endings, not merely the optic and auditory, but from fingertips to the pressure on our chest to the feeling of the shifting ground under our feet. In our understanding and use of language, however, this sensitivity is not analytical; it is pre-analytical and, importantly, pre-action. The phrase “conflict sensitivity” is understood as raising awareness about conflict, the experiences of those who suffer from it, and that—maybe—we have a role to play in the social dynamics of the situation. Analysis and action might be presumed to follow from this awareness, but are neither explicit nor are they even implicitly necessary.

As a result, “conflict sensitivity” as a practice or an element of strategy allows people who consider themselves practitioners to simply stop with awareness.

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<sup>2</sup> I believe the first published document on PCIA was Kenneth Bush’s “Good Practices for the Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of Development Projects,” A Discussion Paper Prepared for CIDA for the OECD DAC Task Force on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation, Paris, 16-17 September 1996.

The first widely available document on PCIA was *A Measure of Peace: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of Development Projects in Conflict Zones*, Kenneth Bush. Working Paper no. 1. Ottawa: The Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Program Initiative, International Development Research Centre, 1998.

Second, in English we use sense of touch metaphors to describe emotional reactions and states. This leads to the predictable response that “conflict sensitivity” must be about how much we care about victims of conflict, about how our bleeding hearts feel, and that it cannot in fact be a rigorous analytical tool.

Again, emotions are pre-analytical and pre-action. In fact, we pride ourselves on *not* acting emotionally. Therefore, being conflict sensitive—understood through the metaphor as being emotionally aware of the conflict—is actually a barrier to action. The understanding provided by “conflict sensitivity” must actually be discounted and discarded so that we can act rationally, with clear heads, and clear sight.

The barrier to taking the ideas seriously that this metaphor raises is actually insurmountable for all too many people.

Real problems growing from metaphorical gardens

I have heard over and over from people charged with implementing conflict sensitivity or conflict sensitive programs that they cannot get others to grasp that the next step after awareness is accountability. That action is in fact required when we observe that we are having negative impacts.

Reports on social impacts are not written to tick off checklists that show we are paying attention. They are supposed to be guides to make things better. Where mistakes have been made, they can be apologized for and fixed. Where success has been tentative and poorly understood, it can be amplified.

Do No Harm is not a tool for “conflict sensitivity”

I will allow that “conflict sensitivity” was a fine term in the mid-aughts for conveying that the main focus of most of the analytical structures under its umbrella were about raising awareness. However, this insistence on awareness did not fit either Do No Harm or PCIA, both of which were always concerned with impacts. Further, we should be well past the awareness raising period a decade later.

Do No Harm grew out of the experience of field workers grappling with what to do and how to act. They were already well aware of the potential for negative impacts on their work. They had seen them, caused them, been guilty of them. Those field workers did not need their awareness raised or their emotions engaged. They needed tools to recover from mistakes, make it right, and to help them get better at their work. They needed ways to anticipate harm so they could avoid it before they caused it.

Do No Harm is and always has been about accountability. If we claim to be helping people, then we need to be accountable to them. The ancient physicians from whom we adopted the phrase “do no harm” understood that. The modern intervener understands that. Do No Harm, and its frameworks and techniques, was born out of that understanding.

## Change the metaphor

“Conflict accountability” is a serious term that implies rigor and rationality. Accountability is about counting the cost.

Accountability is one of our favorite words. We are always looking to our bottom lines and trying to achieve value for money. Yet we too often fail to see the cost in trust, in quality of life, in lives, and, yes, in money when we fail to take our impacts on social cohesion and conflict seriously.

Can we afford to continue in the old ways? Can we afford endlessly struggling to reconcile “lessons learned” and “best practices” and “policy to practice”, yet never succeed in taking the social cost seriously? Can the people we claim we are helping afford the cost of our continued struggles?

By all means remain sensitive. We need your compassion. But to and for the people with whom you work, be conflict accountable.

Marshall Wallace was the Director of the Do No Harm Project from 2001 to 2013.