

Global: Training on “Do No Harm”

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Any intervention into a conflict can cause harm, particularly if groups attempt to intervene without first understanding the local context. The “Do No Harm” approach includes two key ideas. First, analysing the local context to identify “connectors” and “dividers” will help any group – civil society, military, or police – understand more about how their intervention might help or hurt the local context. Connectors are institutions, values, people, or processes that help people connect with each other across the lines of conflict. Dividers are institutions, values, people or processes that increase divisions between groups. As with the medical profession, the concept of “do no harm” implies that the first responsibility of any intervener is not to make the conflict worse through their intervention. Second, the Do No Harm approach provides a set of tools for planners to ensure their planning is “conflict accountable.” Civil society peacebuilding efforts as well as police and military operations should all be “conflict accountable.” All groups should ensure that they anticipate potential impacts of the efforts, identifying how they might inadvertently increase divisions within a context and how they could maximise connections between groups so as to foster better relationships across the lines of conflict.

The challenge

Any type of assistance can unintentionally cause harm.

Theory of change:

Training can help groups anticipate potential negative impacts and plan to minimise harm while maximizing connections.

The Do No Harm approach is the product of a collaborative learning project involving thousands of people from 1993-2014, organised by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.⁴⁰ Because of the collaborative nature of the learning process, training is available from several organisations and individuals.

Many NGOs operating internationally have received training in the Do No Harm approach, recognizing that in the past NGO humanitarian and development efforts have inadvertently increased conflict and violence, fuelled corruption, disempowered local volunteerism or leadership, and led to a variety of other unintended impacts. As military forces engage in more humanitarian crisis, and become involved in a wider range of civilian tasks, there is a greater need for them to recognise the potential for causing harm when building a school, setting up a humanitarian camp for displaced peoples or delivering medical aid.

In Kosovo, in the early 2000s, a consultant trained the US military in the Do No Harm approach in a brief workshop. A checklist was developed out of the training to help the US military identify the connectors and dividers in the context so as to avoid potential unintended impacts and maximise opportunities for supporting local connectors.

In Afghanistan, the Australian government’s aid agency AUSAID moved into forward positions with the Australian military during the period 2010-2012. AUSAID developed a training module for deploying soldiers on relating to NGOs that included a section on Do No Harm to help explain what NGOs do, how they do it, and why it matters to the Australian military operating in Afghanistan. The positive feedback on the Do No Harm approach was so strong that while it was only given a one hour block in the first round of training, it was given an entire day in the second training course. One Australian major reported it was the most important part of the training. The operational reports were not as positive. Despite preparation to analyse the connectors and dividers in Afghanistan communities where the Australian military and AUSAID

⁴⁰ Organisations conducting Do No Harm training include: Brevity, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Local Capacities for Peace International, RedR, Swedepace.

were serving, they ended up inadvertently supporting projects with a warlord that increased conflict between Australian forces and Afghan communities. However, a US-based NGO, the Center for Civilians in Conflict, found that the Australians were far ahead of other countries intervening in Afghanistan when it came to addressing civilian harm.

In the Philippines, local civil society initiatives to train the military and police (see other case studies in this report) emphasised the Do No Harm approach through short workshops for the Office of the Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process (OPAPP). The Filipino military reported that the Do No Harm training has been very useful for helping them interact with civilians. Trainings that involve both police and community together are on-going as of 2015.

An organisation working on security sector reform in Zimbabwe and Honduras, among other countries, has used the Do No Harm approach as part of the toolkit they teach to stakeholders. An evaluation of the now completed work in Zimbabwe said their contribution was “invaluable.” The work in Honduras is on-going (2015).