SUMMARY DOCUMENT

EVENT DETAILS

On the 16th of January 2020, the Development Studies Association of Ireland's Humanitarian Action and Adaptive Management Study Groups co-hosted a public panel discussion at Trinity College Dublin on Conflict Sensitivity and Adaptive Approaches in Humanitarian Programming.

The discussion brought together stakeholders from across research, policy and humanitarian and development practice to discuss approaches and experiences that respond to both immediate and longer-term needs in a holistic way. It drew specifically on efforts to integrate conflict sensitivity as well as flexible, adaptive frameworks in humanitarian response.

Speakers drew on research conducted in South Sudan, Myanmar, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Central African Republic, as well as from three organisations applying operational flexibility to respond to needs in conflict settings.

Presentations were given by **Drew Mikhael**, Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict, Queens University Belfast and **Alice Obrecht**, ALNAP, Overseas Development Institute, and the panel was chaired by **Claire Devlin**, Christian Aid Ireland.

OVERVIEW OF DISCUSSION

The discussion began with an acknowledgement that **conflict is the single greatest driver of humanitarian needs today**, and the World Bank estimates that between 40-60 per cent of the world's extreme poor will be living in conflict-affected contexts by 2030. These protracted and evolving crises create complex needs that demand non-linear and flexible responses.

Among the **key external challenges** identified to developing these responses in conflict environments are a) limited access to vulnerable groups, which can often be very politicised due to mistrust among local authorities or patriarchal structures where gatekeepers of communities can exclude more marginalised groups; and b) the risks associated with conducting research, analysing the root causes of violence, and harnessing learning ethically and responsibly without causing further harm to communities.

Internal organisational challenges associated with systems and structures include a) high-turnover and generally low investment in humanitarian staff; b) rigidity of organisational systems and processes that are often built around a dominant donor; and c) uncertainty of staff at different levels as to how much flexibility individuals, programme teams or organisations really have to adapt and change.

The evidence presented encouraged organisations and donors to **think systematically about flexibility**. Instead of categorising organisations or programmes as 'flexible' or 'inflexible,' organisations should consider the range of flexibility they are seeking to achieve, for example, from minimally shifting location or target groups, to more fundamental changes in modalities and strategic objectives. Humanitarian actors should also consider the nature of change to which they seek to adapt: it was argued that while most organisations seek to anticipate and pre-empt change, they are relatively less flexible in response to shifts in the environment.

The panel also encouraged organisations to think more deeply about **inclusion as a method of strengthening conflict sensitivity**. To be effective, it was argued that this must move from relatively tokenistic representation of diverse groups in programming planning or consultations, to fuller participation and ultimately meaningful decision-making by under-represented or marginalised groups.

HUMANITARIAN ACTION and
ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING STUDY GROUPS

**Conflict Sensitivity and
Adaptive Approaches in
Humanitarian Programming**

Thursday, 16 January 2020
Trinity College Dublin

SUMMARY DOCUMENT

FURTHER READING

- **Alcayna, Tilly.** (2019). *Ready to Change? Bringing Flexibility into the Triple Nexus*. ALNAP Study, link.

- **Conflict Sensitivity Consortium.** (2012). *'How To' Guide to Conflict Sensitivity,* link.

- **Dillon, Neil.** (2019). *Breaking the Mould: Alternative Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation.* ALNAP Study, link.

- **Norman, Julie and Drew Mikhael.** (2019). *Integrating Conflict Prevention in Humanitarian Resilience Programmes.* Christian Aid Ireland, link.

- **Obrecht, Alice.** (2019). *Shifting Mindsets: Creating a More Flexible Humanitarian Response.* ALNAP Study, link.

- **Government of Ireland (2018)** *A Better World: Ireland's Policy for International Development*, link.

- **Development Studies Association of Ireland (DSAI)** website for updates, news, events and further resources https://www.dsaireland.org/.

A key theme across presentations was **the need to bridge the gap between formal and informal practices**. For conflict sensitivity, deep contextual knowledge and local insights are invaluable, but may not be effectively translated into formal conflict analysis for programme planning. This may be because of capacity gaps, over-burdening of local partner staff, or a reluctance to document and share potentially sensitive information (even if it informs day-to-day practice). At the same time, individual staff or teams can be extremely effective at adapting responses, but weak feedback loops and learning may mean the benefits of these changes are not captured in organisational learning or scaled more widely.

Time and again, the discussion returned to the driving question of, ultimately, **how the integration of these approaches or ways of working really translates into impact on the ground** for communities in crisis. Speakers emphasised that conflict analysis does not automatically translate into stronger programmes or better outcomes; just as a flexible approach in some areas or programmes does not automatically lead to organisation-wide changes and better impacts. In both instances, it is important that these efforts are complemented by more systematic changes across individual organisations, partnerships and donor engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Humanitarian organisations should institutionalise more flexible ways of working, including through decentralised decision-making to frontline staff.** These must be established across all sectors: for example, without effective communication, feedback and learning between systems and programmes, organisational structures may continue to inhibit meaningful flexibility and adaptation.

- **Researchers and humanitarian organisations should partner to address specific capacity gaps where they arise,** such as in formal conflict analysis and tools for ethical data collection and research, including trauma-sensitive interview techniques.

- **Governments and donor agencies should close the gap between policy and funding commitments.** Commitment to the triple nexus means making flexible funding available, guided by a clear framework and a greater tolerance for risk, that allows humanitarian actors to leverage funding for innovation, engage with researchers for learning.