Local Ownership in Conflict Sensitivity Application: The Case of Nepal

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Introduction

This Issue Brief draws from the application of conflict sensitivity approaches in Nepal and shares specific examples of best practice. These lessons learned are based on the experiences of Nepal's Interagency Programme on Mainstreaming Conflict Sensitivity led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This Brief elaborates on the changing dynamics of Nepal's conflict, from the insurgency to the social and political issues that, if overlooked, have the potential to trigger localized tensions. Here, the relevance and importance of conflict sensitivity in the overall development processes is reinforced, given that this approach seeks to maximize the positive impacts of programmes contributing to peace, whilst avoiding potential harm. The Brief also reflects on the need to repackage the 'conflict sensitivity' concept under the broader framework of 'sustaining peace'[1] for its better acceptance by national institutions in some contexts.

Given that everyone operates in different contexts, it is still important to remain aware that 'one size fits all' approaches do not work. Still, there are a few examples in this Brief explaining key considerations in creating and sustaining local capacity and ownership, the importance of policy change and buy-in from senior management, and using appropriate language, that can be applied across different contexts.

Nepal at a Glance

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2006 between the Government of Nepal and the Maoists put an end to a decade long armed insurgency. Many of the political agendas have moved forward since then including establishing the Maoists as a formal political party, holding of two constituent assembly elections in 2008 and 2013,

promulgation of the new constitution in 2015, local elections in 2017 and moving towards federalization and decentralization. Despite making good progress on the political front, it is not yet clear whether the country has been able to establish the foundations for long term peace and stability. However in Nepal there is little or no discussion around the concepts of conflict and peacebuilding given the negative past memories associated with armed insurgency. As the notion of conflict in such contexts is associated with past cruelties and fear, it is preferable to not overuse the term 'conflict' itself, when the society is moving towards positive transformation.

Nepal is characterized by multiple overlapping identities based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion and geography. Over these past ten years, the government, the international community, civil society and the UN have made a large investment in Nepal's peace process and development goals.[2] This has yielded important development gains, such as reducing extreme poverty from 33.5 percent in 1990 to 16.4 percent in 2013, thereby achieving the target of halving the rate by 2015.[3]

Concurrently, however, some areas, based on their lower Human Development Index (HDI) values especially compared to the capital Kathmandu – such as the Mid- and Far-Western Mountains, Eastern- and Central-Terai – are lagging far behind. Likewise, inequalities in human development according to caste and ethnicity remain entrenched. The status quo continues despite some evidence of improvements in poverty reduction and educational attainment etc. over time. Given that diverse social groups and identities exist together with unequal development, it is very important to observe how political and social dynamics are shaping the local landscape during the implementation of the new constitution.

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1 A concept endorsed by the UN General Assembly and Security Council resolutions (A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282, respectively), focusing on the importance of having a long-term, comprehensive vision in all responses to violent conflict, and to end vicious cycles of lapse and relapse into conflict.

2 Development Advocate Nepal - Completing Nepal's Transition: Reflections on Nepal's Peace Process,Year-2, Issue-3, UNDP Nepal.
3 MDG Terminal Report 2015-draft.

In such a scenario, even seemingly routine actions can, fairly or unfairly, be understood to favor one group over another, and prompt negative reactions.

The concept of 'sustaining peace' that reconfirms conflict prevention as a central theme to advance efforts to sustain peace, provides very good scope to promote conflict sensitive development practices. This offers an opportunity to increase the focus to prevent conflicts, so that not only the symptoms, but also the root causes of conflicts are addressed. The approach of sustaining peace places a conscious effort into the prevention of conflict, rather than working reactively once conflict is already visible.

Applying Conflict Sensitivity

Realizing the need and importance of conflict sensitivity in Nepal's post conflict transition, the UNDP in partnership with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO) initiated an interagency programme to mainstream conflict sensitivity in 2010. This programme aimed to ensure development effectiveness by applying conflict sensitivity throughout its programmes and policies. The following examples from Nepal's experiences are extracted both from UN and national institutions, and highlight basic elements that support the promotion and sustaining of local ownership.

I. Creating and sustaining local ownership:

Developing local capacity and ownership are a central element of conflict prevention and peacebuilding work. UNDP Nepal's effort in conflict prevention is focused on supporting national and local institutions and leaderships in their efforts to prevent violence, manage conflicts constructively, and engage peacefully in political transitions and rapid change processes. UNDP Nepal attempted to develop and sustain national capacity and ownership through the application of conflict sensitivity, by working with the Government training academies such as the Nepal Administrative Staff College and Local Development Training Academy. The strategy here was to reach out to national counterparts and officials through their own institutions. It was a challenge to convey to the Government counterparts the importance of UNDP's guidance in this regard. Key lessons learned in relation to creating and sustaining local ownership include:

• Applied and tested examples help influence national ownership. One of the strategies of UNDP Nepal was therefore to apply and test examples from its own experience; in other words, 'practice what it preached'. The two years of pilot testing within UNDP, UNICEF, UNRC's Office and different UN agencies through UN Peace Fund in Nepal (UNPFN) funded projects showed the importance of conflict sensitivity. This helped to revise orientation and training packages to make them more appealing and appropriate in the local context. Case studies developed, and visuals and videos prepared for training and orientations, were mostly based on real-life scenarios.

This approach helped bring the national institutions on board in integrating conflict sensitivity into their regular curricula.

• Equally important was to come up with a menu of services by introducing different options and remaining flexible to the needs of a given audience. For example, the Interagency Programme on Mainstreaming Conflict Sensitivity provided a one hour orientation to its management team focusing on how their agencies could have positive impact on the ground through their actions and behavior. In addition, a longer orientation was provided to staff members who are part of the programme and policy issues and intensive practical sessions were facilitated to those who implement programme on the ground and Training of Trainers (ToT) to those who actually deliver training.

• The third element which contributed to bringing national institutions on board and sustaining this effort was to commit to long term support without imposing ideas and determining the pace of work. Initially, this started in the form of basic orientations to the management and the training team in the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC).[4] Gradually they started inviting UNDP to deliver conflict sensitivity sessions in the relevant trainings. Then they asked for technical support to organize ToT for the trainers who could deliver these sessions with minimal support. This helped to promote supporters of the conflict sensitivity approach, as well as develop a resource pool within NASC to deliver further sessions. Progressively, NASC made a decision to incorporate conflict sensitivity in their regular training curriculum and worked with the technical team in UNDP to develop training manuals for trainers and workbooks for participants.

• Technical accompaniment and troubleshooting when necessary helped build trust with the national institutions. The terms 'capacity building' or 'training' from outside entities are less welcomed by national institutions. While introducing conflict sensitivity at NASC, the process was led not only by UNDP but jointly with the NASC management team and the trainers. UNDP provided technical accompaniment to the NASC trainers, delivered training in tandem and helped troubleshoot when necessary. This was very much appreciated by the NASC officials and contributed to sustaining national ownership.

II. Policy change helps to kick off the process:

UNDP together with the UN RCO introduced the idea of mainstreaming conflict sensitivity in all the projects supported by UNPFN. Realizing that the UNPFN could be a strategic platform to affect programming policy, the decision was taken to include conflict sensitivity as an integral part of all future UNPFN-funded interventions. Initially, there was a lukewarm response from the agencies who were applying for peacebuilding funds to incorporating

4 NASC is a national level autonomous institution that provides necessary training for the employees of the Government of Nepal and Public Enterprises.

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conflict in their programming. Later, when conflict sensitivity was put as a basic criterion to assess the concept notes and proposals being submitted by different agencies, there emerged a high demand for technical support. This indicates the importance of creating incentives for peacebuilding actors when introducing new ideas that demand extra effort.

• A strategy for mainstreaming conflict sensitivity was developed for UNPFN to facilitate policy decisions that included basic assessment criteria to guide the panel who were assessing proposals. This helped to ensure that panels had a consistent approach in analyzing contexts, identifying geographical locations and selecting beneficiaries, identifying the unintended consequences that could exacerbate conflict dynamics, and assessing whether proposals contained clear exit strategies.

• Once the projects were selected, orientations and training were organized with project staff together with technical assistance and troubleshooting when necessary, as well as orientation being provided to management teams to allocate resources for capacity development and be more sensitive during the staff hiring process etc. These experiences showed that incentivization through technical assistance can provide better grounds for applying conflict sensitive practices.

III. Buy-in and support from senior management is essential, though not sufficient:

Conflict sensitivity mainstreaming becomes an add-on exercise unless there is strong-buy-in from senior management. This has been true both within the UN as well as within national institutions. Mainstreaming should not be a one-off event but rather a regular process which needs to be integrated into the values and principles of an organization. It needs to be reflected in the actions and behavior of the staff – meaning a longer-term commitment is required. This is not possible unless there exists strong management buy-in from the start.[5]

• Conflict sensitivity mainstreaming requires programmes and projects to remain flexible to make changes in the case of unintended negative consequences because of their actions and behavior. Unless buy-in from management exists, it would be difficult to make changes in programmes, policies and/or strategies.

• Management buy-in is key but not sufficient in itself. Project managers who are responsible for planning, implementation and review, and training teams (in the case of NASC), should also be prepared for conflict sensitivity mainstreaming. Without their active involvement and support, conflict sensitivity can become another indicator from a checklist of cross-cutting themes included as a directive of the senior management.

• Conflict sensitivity application is likely to be effective when it is tailored to a given type of support. For example, conflict sensitivity could relate to programme design, planning, monitoring, developing exit strategies etc. Human resource, administration and procurement teams might not be interested to attend all the sessions related to programme

planning and monitoring. Rather, they would be interested to hear how the selection process could be made more conflict sensitive and how to be more conflict sensitive in their actions, behavior and decisions. Similarly, quick and easy methods for understanding conflict sensitivity are required when there is a need for quick response. During the aftermath of Nepal's 2015 earthquakes, efforts were made to develop a quick checklist for conflict sensitive assessment, programme design, monitoring and implementation, to be used by the international team who were being deployed for early response.

IV. The language challenge:

There is a tendency of development practitioners to stay away from discussions related to conflict sensitivity. It is typical to hear responses such as "I have nothing to do with the conflict. This is not something that interests me. I work on education, livelihoods or governance so why should I bother to attend conflict sensitivity sessions?" The word 'conflict' itself becomes problematic and is often understood as something applicable to only conflict prevention and peacebuilding programmes. Thus, generating interest becomes a key to begin the process.

When using the words 'conflict sensitivity', it is essential to frame them in such a way that people do not lose their focus. This concept should be promoted through different names such as 'peace sensitivity', as a 'development effectiveness tool', or 'good practice design', in order to create greater acceptability. Alternatively, acceptance of 'conflict sensitivity' can be increased by contextualizing words. For example, 'conflict sensitivity in electoral violence prevention', 'conflict sensitivity in emergencies' or 'conflict sensitive livelihood programmes'. The use of language determines acceptability especially while working with national institutions. One of UNDP's strategies was to repackage the concept as a tool for 'development effectiveness' or as a 'peace sensitive approach', without losing the concept's essence.

• Through the election support project, a resource pack was prepared with several examples to show that election related work in a conflict affected setting could negatively influence conflict dynamics, despite good intentions. Examples illustrated how the voter registration and voter education processes could trigger violence if they are not inclusive, and showed how to maintain integrity in a diverse society during an election process.

• The orientations conducted with emergency response teams included stories on how a small action could perpetuate structural inequalities, e.g. choosing a temple to distribute food during the aftermath of floods, which is restricted for Dalits.[6] The more we analyze the unintended indirect impacts of programmes in a given context, the better such structural inequalities can be minimized.

• Understanding the local context and adapting to the local needs has been one of the important factors in creating acceptability within national institutions. The Ministry

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5 Lessons learned on Conflict Sensitivity from pilot phase-UNDP.

6 A caste group. The term is mostly used for the ones that have been subjected to untouchability.

of Peace and Reconstruction (MoPR) did not entertain the word 'conflict' because it has a negative connotation when translating it into the Nepali language where it is generally associated with past atrocities. Therefore, the term 'peace sensitivity' was used to foster a greater acceptability and national ownership. With the change of terminology, MoPR not only adopted the concept but put 'peace sensitivity' as one of its priority work areas in its five-year strategy.

Conclusion

Conflict sensitivity is at the heart of conflict prevention. This is because of the dimension of predictability that conflict sensitivity can bring to all types of work, from peacebuilding to governance, from poverty to the environment.

A thorough analysis of conflict can provide a foundation to help prevent potential sources of conflict and assist peacebuilding actors to be prepared to respond in ways which cause less harm. The conflict sensitive approach came into practice in the context of war and insurgencies. Its acceptability is still a challenge given it is problematic to even use the words 'conflict prevention' and 'peacebuilding'. There are good reasons for not using such terminology as it is associated with past atrocities and suffering. Therefore, responding to this challenge demands repackaging conflict sensitivity as good development practice and using 'sustaining peace' frameworks that help address structural causes of conflict and move towards positive peace.

About the PDA Fellowship:
UNDP's Oslo Governance Center in partnership with the Joint UNDP-DPA Programme has established a PDA Fellowship Programme in 2016 consisting of several cohorts, each involving between 4-6 PDA's and/or PDA like conflict prevention specialists over a period of two weeks. The Fellowship Programme involves guided reflections to help draw out the Fellows' experience on pre-identified conflict prevention and peacebuilding issues.

About the Author:
Archana Aryal is the current Team Leader of the Democratic Transition Unit in UNDP Nepal where she oversees the implementation of UNDP's transition projects in the country and monitors implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and issues relevant to Nepal's transition. She has more than a decade of experience working in conflict prevention and peacebuilding in Nepal analysing political, social and economic trends related to peacebuilding, and giving policy and programme management advice.

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