



Good intentions are not good enough

How we take into account undesirable effects with »Do No Harm«

All projects are planned and implemented with good intentions. But not every project with »good intentions« is automatically also good. In order to improve the quality and effectiveness of the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), VENRO wants to disseminate knowledge about useful concepts and instruments and provide assistance in applying them.

Where actors of humanitarian aid and development cooperation take action, they intervene in complex social, cultural, economic and political systems. In addition to the planned impacts, this often has effects that were not intended. More than 15 years after Mary B. Anderson published the Do No Harm approach, this is almost a banal assertion. Although the term »Do No Harm« has by now entered the development policy lexicon, there is often a lack of clarity what the Do No Harm approach concretely refers to and how it can be implemented. Many Do No Harm trainers and practitioners are surprised that few organisations check their projects for unintended effects during planning.

Why Do No Harm?

It started with the insight that development policy interventions of various actors played a significant role in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. This prompted a group of international and local development organisations and humanitarian aid agencies to systematically pursue the question of how such unintended impacts of »well-intentioned« interventions come about. It quickly became

apparent that unintended negative effects are not an occasional exception; they always exist. The question thus arises: If they always exist, could it be that they are produced by certain patterns? And if so, is it possible to describe these patterns? And to then develop an instrument with which to assess potential unintended effects during project planning, in order to then adapt the planning? These questions were addressed in the »Local Capacities for Peace Project« from 1994 to 2000 that was facilitated by Mary B. Anderson and her team¹. In this project, 14 case studies in 14 conflict zones with large and small NGOs were analysed, and 23 feedback workshops were held to examine the results. The results of this process are available in »Do No Harm. How Aid Can Support Peace – or War« (1997).

Thus, with the Do No Harm approach, Mary B. Anderson and her team of the US-American NGO »CDA Collaborative Learning Projects« presented this instrument for taking into account unintended effects during project planning. The »Framework For Considering the Impact of Projects«

¹ The project and the insights are described in detail in Anderson, Mary B., 1999

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allows an assessment whether a negative effect will occur with high probability. The project planning can be adapted accordingly. If a negative effect is possible but rather unlikely, the instrument helps in taking corresponding precautions in the monitoring. Nasty surprises can thus be avoided.

Success through »Do No Harm«

Since the presentation of the Do No Harm approach and the associated planning and monitoring instrument, many organisations worldwide have integrated it into their processes. This includes member organisations of VENRO. The Do No Harm approach implies universal insights and premises that form the analytical framework in which the seven Do No Harm steps are applied:

Our actions are never neutral! Actors (persons and organisations) can strive to be neutral and impartial, in particular in relation to parties to a conflict, but their actions are never neutral.

Conflicts are natural and unavoidable components of human relationships. This applies in particular to relationships between social groups. Societies are able to deal with most conflicts non-violently and constructively. But this is not always the case. Particularly in conflict situations with a potential for violent escalation, external actors must systematically address the question of which unintended consequences their own actions might potentially have.

A short context analysis is therefore carried out in the first Do No Harm step.

Conflict situations always consist of two realities. On the one hand, there are the factors that stimulate conflicts – the so-called *dividers*. On the other hand, the so-called *connectors* connect people and groups. Those factors that create tensions, tear apart groups and societies and lead to violence dominate our perception. These prominent *dividers* can be systems and institutions, attitudes or actions, differing values or interests, different experiences as well as symbols and occasions. Clothing, colours and logos also represent a certain conflict group as a symbol.

At the same time, between people and groups that are in conflict with each other some factors continue to exist which keep them connected to each other and which they share. As in the case of the *dividers*, these include systems, institutions, but also attitudes, actions, as well as common experiences, symbols and occasions. These so-called *connectors* can be common religious festivals or sports events such as a football World Cup. Often, connecting factors and commonalities

are no longer perceived when a situation has turned violent. The Do No Harm instrument therefore uses a context analysis to systematically focus on these commonalities that are often overlooked.

Project measures always affect both realities.

An intervention can have a positive effect either by strengthening common connecting factors or by weakening factors that create tensions and divide groups. There are also interventions that quite unintentionally have a negative effect. Here the situation is reversed: Tensions and divisions are exacerbated or connecting and common factors are undermined.

In the second Do No Harm step, the dividing factors are compiled, and in the third step the connecting factors are sought out.

»Beauty lies in the details« – This is how a woman from Serbia described her experience in applying Do No Harm. Projects consist of a huge number of details and individual decisions. This abundance of details and not the project as a whole causes the unintended effects.

The fourth Do No Harm step therefore offers the possibility of taking a closer look at one's own project in order to uncover these details.

Projects transfer resources into an existing situation. This process **is often accompanied by unintended negative effects.** »Do No Harm« distinguishes five mechanisms through which the transfer of resources can impact the context of a project. They need to be critically analysed and scrutinised. One mechanism is the **substitution effect**: If aid organisations contribute to basic governmental services in the health sector, will the state invest more in the arms sector, thus supporting violent escalations? **Market effect**: Will it lead to a market distortion and low prices if only a single product is supported in a project? **Distribution effect**: Who won't receive support and what impacts will this decision have within the local population? **Legitimation effect**: Which local groups and individuals will unintentionally lose legitimacy through the agenda setting of aid organisations? **Diversion effect**: Will the resource perhaps be used by others than the target group?

But not only **WHAT we do** has an influence on the context; unintended negative effects can also be triggered by **HOW we do something**. Mary B. Anderson's book describes seven »implicit [ethical] messages« which the senders are usually not aware of. By contrast, the recipients from the local population pick up these messages quite accurately. In the meantime, a number of further implicit messages

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have been revealed through the experience gained with the method. For instance, a classical message is: »We know what you need«. It is conveyed when local communities are not involved in the project planning. An evacuation plan can also convey such a message. If it only includes the international personnel, this indirectly communicates: »The life of the international personnel has a higher value.«

The fifth Do No Harm step addresses the questions of which messages we send with our project and which mechanisms we promote through a transfer of resources.

The corresponding details can then be changed during project planning in order to reduce or entirely avoid unintended negative effects. Thus, **options** are developed so that a project can be realised within the framework of its goals and under the given conditions – with as few unintended negative effects as possible, or none at all.

In the sixth Do No Harm step, options are developed through an open brainstorming. The seventh and last step envisages a phase for testing and adapting these options.

Do No Harm allows us to convert our good intentions into good projects.

How is the Do No Harm approach successfully introduced?

It helps not to carry out the seven steps of the Do No Harm analysis on one's own. The exchange among colleagues and appreciation for each other are equally important for a critical examination of our projects.

Organisations with practical experience confirm that the instrument »Do No Harm« does not require significantly more work or time. However, this presumes that »Do No Harm« was introduced as a work instrument. This requires some effort, but it pays off.

The introduction of Do No Harm at numerous organisations has shown that the method addresses three levels. »Minds« – the cognitive level of understanding; »Action« – the practical level of use and application; »Systems« – the level of institutional structural change through revision of rules, methods and procedures within an organisation.² If the process is to be successful, the method must address all three levels. If only the cognitive and the practical level are addressed, this does not necessarily result in a systematic structural change in the organisation. However, this is necessary in order for methods, instruments and concepts to be systematically applied. Recent training concepts for Do No Harm therefore focus not only on the training but embed the method in the Project Cycle Management (PCM) in order to facilitate the necessary institutional structural adaptations.

² Heinrich, Wolfgang and Marshall Wallace, 2001: Helpful Hints for Mainstreaming: NGO Mainstreaming in Practice. Published by CDA 2001 (out of print)



SOURCES

Information and Studies on Do No Harm

- **Original text by Mary B. Anderson:** Anderson, Mary B., 1999: Do No Harm. How Aid Can Support Peace – or War. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, London
- **Field study by Mary B. Anderson:** <https://is.gd/H6bNFS>
- **Wallace, Marshall, 2002:** The Learning Process of the Local Capacities for Peace Project. In: Roper, Laura and Jethro Pettit, 2002: Development and the Learning Organisation: an introduction. In: Journal Development in Practice Volume 12, 2002 – Issue 3–4 <https://is.gd/LoXUgH>

Recommendations for implementing Do No Harm

- **User's guide by Marshall Wallace:** <https://is.gd/MpYrLR>
- **Manual from CDA:** <http://venro.org/fileadmin/redaktion/material/dokumente/allgemein/2017/Do-No-Harm-DNH-Participant-Manual-2016.pdf>
- **General recommendations for implementation from CDA:** <https://is.gd/94bON5>
- **Case study CARE Nepal:** <https://is.gd/egxhTw>
- **Case study Senegal:** <https://is.gd/AWdBvP>

Recommendations for mainstreaming Do No Harm

- **Study on mainstreaming:** <https://is.gd/vMv10H>
- **Pitfalls in mainstreaming:** <https://is.gd/m7uUSf>

WHAT VENRO OFFERS



- **Some VENRO member organisations have developed useful Do No Harm guides, for instance Welthungerhilfe:** <https://www.welthungerhilfe.de/ueber-uns/mediathek/whh-artikel/orientierungsrahmen-konfliktsensibles-handeln-in-der-auslandsarbeit.html>
- **Blog post on the individual Do No Harm steps:** <http://blog.venro.org/do-no-harm-was-sich-dahinter-verbirgt-und-warum-es-notwendig-ist/>
- **VENRO offers trainings and webinars on subjects such as Do No Harm and participation. You can find the current schedule of trainings at** <http://venro.org/service/fortbildungen-und-webinare/>