PRACTICAL HANDBOOK | 2024





GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH

How we apply the principle of Do No Harm to transform our good intentions into good projects



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INTRODUCTION

Wherever actors in the field of Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation become involved, they will inevitably intervene in complex social, cultural, economic and political systems. Aside from the intended impacts, this often produces effects that were clearly not. Indeed, this is almost a banal observation now, more than 20 years after Mary B. Anderson developed the Do No Harm approach. But although the term Do No Harm has since been adopted into the vocabulary of development policy, its actual meaning and how it can be put into practice often remain somewhat murky. This handout is intended to provide insight into the Do No Harm approach. It was developed by practitioners to recognise and prevent unintentional, negative impacts associated with projects and the actions and behaviour of project staff at an early stage. Our intention is to encourage employees working in Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid to apply this approach in their project work and provide them with this practical guide.

The Do No Harm approach ...

- emphasises the need for a thorough and in-depth **analysis of contextuality** before any action is taken. Ideally, this should include conflict analysis that exceeds analysis of Dividers and Connectors, which lays the foundation for the **Do No Harm Framework** (refer to Figure 1, page 11). It identifies an environment's divisive and unifying forces and comprises analyses of the main conflict actors, their relationship structures, power relations, causes of conflict and types and levels of violence.
- underscores the importance of **detailed knowledge concerning a project's individual elements** and the underlying decision-making processes. Negative impacts are caused by isolated details and never by the measures as a whole.
- provides a clear framework for analysing the (potential) impact of projects on the local context, in particular on **Dividers and Connectors**. This enables the (potentially) negative impact at context level to be identified, avoided or counteracted at an early stage. The approach is relevant both for the planning of projects and during their implementation phase.
- poses questions for the planning, monitoring and analysis of projects:
 - Planning: How might the measure interact with the context?
 - **Monitoring**: How did elements of the project that have already been implemented interact with the context? Which interactions do we anticipate for future elements?
 - **Analysis**: How did the project interact with the context? How can we use this information to learn for future projects or the next phase of a longer programme?
- calls on individuals and organisations to accept ownership of their actions and to develop better and more conflict-sensitive action pathways. The approach stresses the need to think through the impacts on a specific local context.

WHY DO NO HARM?

Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid projects take place predominantly in fragile contexts. Experience has shown that the effects of this kind of support measures is not always restricted to the intended ones and that they may also have impacts that interfere with the dynamics of intra-societal relationships.

The Do No Harm approach builds on the understanding that factors exist within every armed confrontation and fraught relationship that produce conflict and division (Dividers) as well as factors that bring conflicting parties together, build bridges and possess the potential to promote peace (Connectors).

Humanitarian Aid and development projects that seek to bring about specific changes can exacerbate conflicts and heighten existing tensions (Dividers) or help to spread peace by strengthening existing links and minimising divisions (Connectors). In other words: the consequences of these measures can be positive or (unintentionally) negative. It follows, therefore, that keen conflict awareness is needed in order to plan and implement projects in a fragile environment. And even if conflicts have not spilled over into violence, there are social, economic or cultural tensions in every society that are prone to escalation.

Unintentional negative effects

Practical example I

The import of food and its distribution in an emergency situation can profoundly change the market for local producers – and create resistance. In turn, sourcing food from local producers may influence market prices to such an extent that it becomes unaffordable to low-income families.

Practical example II

A project that recruits its employees exclusively from one ethnic or religious group – who then provide services only to their own group – can have a negative impact on the community. In one case, tensions between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists escalated into violence when an international organisation hired agricultural advisors from only the farming community to work on a project.

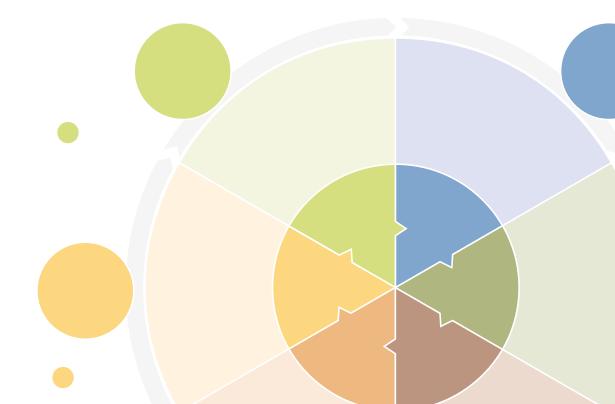
Do No Harm provides a simple framework to analyse how project measures will potentially impact the local environment, especially the Dividers and Connectors. It then becomes possible to recognise and avoid possible negative consequences for local communities at an early stage or to take countermeasures. This can occur in the planning phase and also during project completion itself.

Moreover, a thorough analysis of local conflicts helps in the identification of additional prudent interventions. Once this is done, current Connectors can be strengthened and Dividers weakened. Hence, the Do No Harm approach enables not only the avoidance of negative impacts, but also an enhancement of positive effects. By proceeding in this way, development projects and humanitarian interventions are able to create space and opportunities for peacebuilders to take action or make a significant contribution to the long-term promotion and maintenance of peace (Nexus).

HOW DID THE DO NO HARM APPROACH EMERGE?

It is not unusual for measures to produce unintentional negative effects. This is a phenomenon that many organisations encounter in their project work. It is therefore reasonable to ask: Are there very particular reasons why these effects frequently recur? And if these causes can be recognised and described, would it then be possible to develop a tool to assess unintentional effects as early as during project planning?

It became increasingly clear during the 1990s that the impacts of development policy interventions are not always positive and that they may unintentionally encourage conflict. In response, a group of international and local organisations involved in development work and Humanitarian Aid felt prompted to conduct a systematic investigation of how such unintentional effects of well-intentioned interventions arise – and how they can be avoided. They commissioned the economist Mary B. Anderson to produce a systematic analysis charting the effects of emergency aid measures and development projects on conflict dynamics. Anderson and her team evaluated 14 projects in different conflict situations and then interviewed 500 Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation practitioners to review the findings from the case studies. The findings were then sent back to NGO employees in crisis regions and reviewed again. The outcome of this six-year collaborative learning process - from 1994 to 2000 - was the so-called Do No Harm approach and the associated conflict-sensitive planning and monitoring procedure, which are laid out in the handbook entitled → Do No Harm Framework for Analyzing the Impact of Assistance on Conflict.



WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING INSIGHTS OF THE DO NO HARM APPROACH?

Mary B. Anderson's research project yielded profound insights into why unintentional negative effects occur in Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid. The following seven lessons learnt lay the foundation to grasp the effectiveness and impact of interventions.



Our actions are never neutral

Actors in Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation strive to

maintain neutrality and impartiality, especially in their relationship with belligerents and the reason for their conflict. But: their actions are never neutral! No intervention is without impact on the project environment.



All contexts are shaped by Dividers and Connectors

In every conflict situation there are separating factors, the Dividers, and unifying factors, the Connectors.

We perceive a predominance of Dividers that create tension, stimulate conflicts, tear groups and societies apart and culminate in outbreaks of violence. The media have a tendency to focus on Dividers as well. Systems and institutions, attitudes or actions, heterogeneous values or interests, varying experiences as well as symbols and events can all act as Dividers.

But experience has shown that even in highly escalated conflicts, there are still factors that continue to unite people and groups across the lines of conflict, namely the Connectors. They may be common interests – trade relationships, for instance – that are maintained despite the armed conflict. Shared values can also act as Connectors. These unifying factors are often overlooked in violent situations.



Every intervention has the capacity to weaken or strengthen Connectors and Dividers

Humanitarian interventions and development projects can have a positive impact either by strengthening Connectors or weakening Dividers. However, they may also produce unintentionally negative consequences if they exacerbate existing Dividers or undermine the Connectors. An inadequate awareness of these factors among workers involved in Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation may impact their actions and have serious consequences for conflict dynamics.



Resource transfer influences conflict

Humanitarian interventions and development projects transfer resources into an ongoing situation. The resources can be tangible or intangible. Even if the actors carefully plan and monitor the resource transfer, negative impacts may still occur unintentionally



The way we act transmits implicit messages

All actions and behaviours have consequences (ABC model: Actions + Behaviors = Consequences). Conflicts and social tensions are influenced not merely by what it done; the way in which action is taken can also trigger negative impacts. Often, the people involved in Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation remain unaware of the messages they send. For instance, the failure to include local representatives in decision-making processes sends the signal that "we know what you need". The target group in the local population are highly sensitive to these implicit messages. And these messages have an impact on mutual respect, accountability, fairness and transparency.



The devil is in the detail

Projects consist of an immense number of details and individual decisions.

It is rare for an entire project to have unintentional negative effects. They are often caused by details.



Options always exist

Details can be changed and adjusted to achieve the project objective, while still mitigating or even eliminating unintentional negative effects.

HOW DOES DO NO HARM WORK?

The Do No Harm approach is not a way to simplify work – not even if it wanted to. What it does instead is to assist in acquiring a better understanding of complexities within the conflictual context in which the actors are working. Applying the approach can uncover how past decisions influence relationships between groups, which makes it easier to predict how the intervention may potentially interact with the context. The approach encourages reflection on different procedures and helps to produce better results. The underlying building blocks in the Do No Harm approach consist of seven steps that enable the analysis and realignment of projects in fragile or conflictual contexts. After all, the purpose of the Do No Harm approach is to learn from mistakes. Uncovering these mistakes may be unpleasant at first, but appreciative self-reflection is an important and integral part of this approach. Refer to the chapter on *"The importance of an error culture"* (see page 16) to learn more about this aspect.

THE SEVEN STEPS OF IMPACT ANALYSIS ACCORDING TO DO NO HARM

Step 1: Understanding the conflict
Step 2: Analysing the Dividers
Step 3: Analysing the Connectors
Step 4: Analysing the project details
Step 5: Analysing the impacts of project activities on the conflict
Step 6: Generating options for action
Step 7: Reviewing and adapting options for action

Step **1** Understanding the conflict

Conflict-sensitive project planning is predicated on a systematic conflict analysis. The analysis will generally focus on three dimensions: actors, the dispute itself and the conflict dynamics. The \supseteq <u>Conflict Tree</u> or the \supseteq <u>Violence Triangle</u> are among the established tools for analysing the context and conflict.

The following lead questions can help in the process of understanding conflicts:

- Which social, cultural or economic conflicts are shaping the project environment?
- Which actors are pursuing which interests?
- What are the central points of conflict for the various parties?
- What forms of conflict resolution are being practised?

Step 2 Systematic analysis of the Dividers

Dividers are separating factors and sources of tension. Organisations should ensure that project measures do not strengthen Dividers. A project will ideally do the opposite and contribute to weakening these factors.

The following lead questions can help in the analysis of Dividers:

- How do the social groups differ in regard to their own perceptions, and which differences are causing tension (political ideology, ethnic origin, socio-economic status, lifestyle, religious affiliation)?
- Which social structures did or do the various groups perceive to be unjust?

Step **3** Systematic analysis of the Connectors

Connectors are factors that bring people and groups together, in spite of ongoing conflicts. They are often overlooked, but possess considerable potential exert a positive influence.

The following lead questions can be helpful in the analysis of Connectors:

- Which shared experiences, systems, institutions, values and interests may promote peace?
- What resources and capacities are available on the ground?



Many project details are routine practical tasks. They build to an extent on general guidelines such as tenders or staff selection criteria. Organisations should record and document these details and all individual decisions relating to the project and scrutinise them in relation to the actual project context.

The lead questions relating to the six critical details can be helpful in the analysis of project details (see box).

THE LEAD QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE SIX CRITICAL DETAILS

Do-No-Harm users were able to identify six critical details for which formal decision-making criteria and processes are highly relevant. Most errors that produced unintentional negative effects occurred in these areas. They warrant particular attention as a result. Moreover, their analysis provides an excellent opportunity to correct imbalances between the project partners and strengthen supportive elements.

- **Targeting.** Who is the target group? How did we select them? Who does not belong to the target group? Why?
- What. Which specific resources are we introducing? Which resources will we not introduce (that could achieve the same objectives)? Why?
- **Personnel.** Who are our staff? Why did we recruit them? Why did we recruit precisely these people? Who was not recruited? Why?
- **Partners.** Who are our partners? How were they selected? Why did we agree to partner with these specific organisations? Why? With which organisations will we not cooperate? Why?
- Authorities. How do we interact and engage with local authorities? Are there local authorities with which we do not cooperate? Why?
- How. How do we approach the work? Which types of work have we dispensed with (that could achieve the same objectives)? Why?

Step 5

Analysis of the project's impact on the conflict context through resource transfers and implicit ethical messages

Step 5 is divided into two sub-steps:

- The first sub-step involves recognising which resources – tangible or intangible – are transferred into the context through individual project measures and which effects this transfer will precipitate (refer to text box).
- The second sub-step examines which (implicit) messages are communicated by the way in which measures are implemented and whether they may negatively impact mutual respect, accountability, fairness and transparency.

The following lead questions can be helpful in the analysis of resource transfers and implicit ethical measures:

- What are the potential consequences of the project for the conflict context?
- Which hierarchies will be established?
- What values does the project convey?

FIVE EFFECTS OF RESOURCE TRANSFER

Do No Harm distinguishes between five effects that are caused by resource transfer and may have a negative impact. These effects are considered in order to engage in critical analysis of the envisaged measures.

The following questions are helpful in this process:

- Substitution effect: When civil society organisations take over some basic state services in the health sector, will the state then invest the money it has saved in the arms sector and in doing so support violent escalations?
- Market effect: Will the distribution of certain resources produce distortion on the local market?
- **Distribution effect:** Who does or does not receive support? How does the distribution affect relationships within the local population?
- Legitimisation effect: Which local groups and individuals unintentionally acquire or lose reputation or status due to the project measures?
- **Diversion effect:** Can a person or another group obtain advantages or individual benefits from the resources?

Step 6 Generating options for action

Organisations that identify unintentional effects in their analysis – or determine that the occurrence of these effects appears likely – must develop alternative options for action. The aim is to deliver the same measures in a different way so as to avoid aggravating the conflict. The likelihood of identifying a good, feasible option for action rises with the number of options to choose from.

The following lead questions can help in the development of options for action:

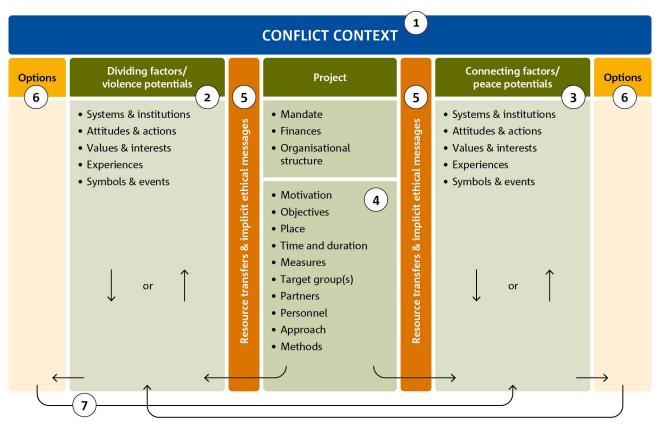
- What changes and new approaches in the project can mitigate divisive factors and promote connecting factors?
- How can negative effects be prevented?

Step **7** Review options for action and adapt measures

Once the options for action have been developed and the feasible ones selected, it is necessary then to review whether these options may, under certain circumstances, themselves produce unintentional negative effects. To do so, practitioners should invest the knowledge they have gained from experience in creative and flexible ways and share their perspectives. The best options for action are then selected and the project measures adapted accordingly. The following lead questions can help in the adaptation of measures:

- Which options can be implemented?
- Would doing so change the mission, objectives or impact of the project?

These seven steps are summarised in the Do No Harm Action Framework (refer to Figure 1).



Action framework of the Do No Harm approach

Figure 1: Do No Harm Action Framework for analysing the impact of interventions on conflicts. Caption: 1: Understanding the conflict; 2: Analysing the Dividers; 3. Analysing the Connectors; 4. Analysing the project details; 5: Analysing the impacts of project activities on the conflict; 6: Generating options for action; 7: Reviewing and adapting options for action. (Source: Author's illustration based on Mary B. Anderson)

Applying Do No Harm in the project cycle

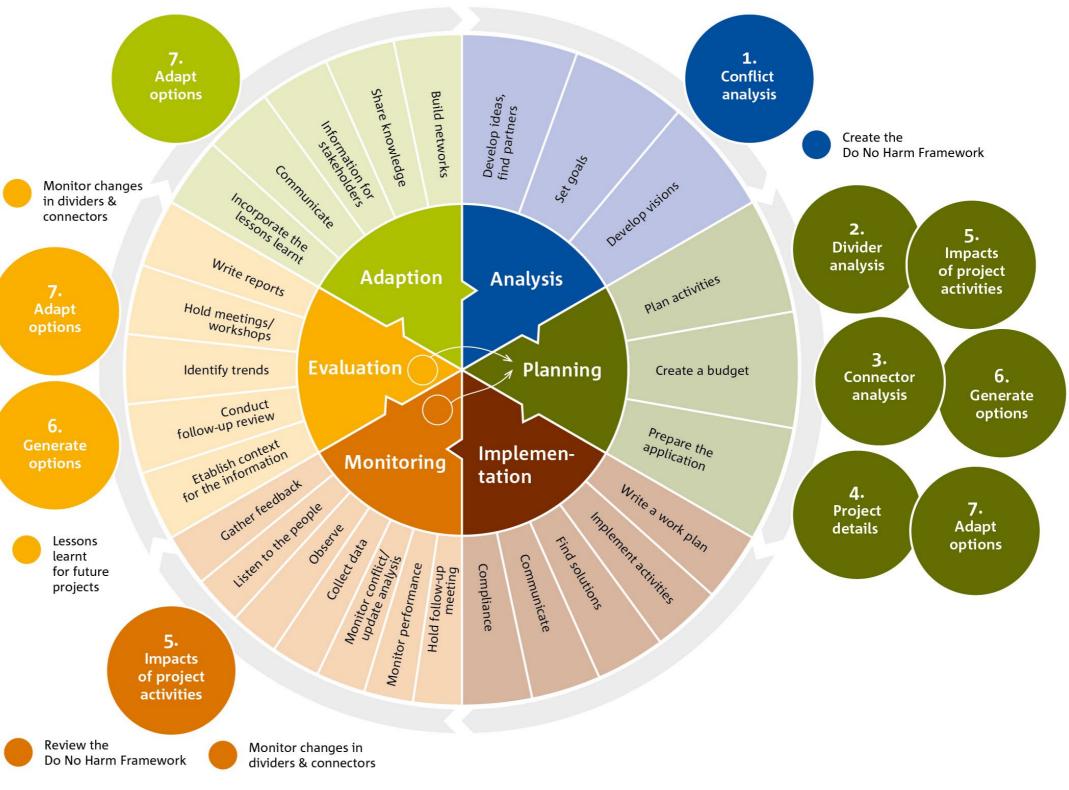
The Do No Harm approach is a tool that focuses on action. It is used to review projects and programmes for conflict sensitivity and to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate them in a way that is sensitive to conflict. Humanitarian and development organisations should embed the Do No Harm approach in their entire project cycle - from project planning to monitoring and evaluation.

Planning: How might the intervention interact with the context?

Monitoring: How did elements of the intervention that have already been implemented interact with the context? Which interactions do we anticipate for elements that will be implemented going forward?

Analysis: How did the project interact with the context? How can we use this information to learn for future projects or the next phase of a longer programme?

Figure 2 shows where the individual steps are used in the project cycle.



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Figure 2: Application of the seven Do No Harm steps in the project cycle

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HOW IS DO NO HARM INTRODUCED SUCCESSFULLY?

Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid build largely on cooperation between local organisations in the project region and organisations from abroad that act as partners. Organisations that implement projects on the ground generally receive support from other organisations, mostly from the Global North, who provide financial resources, staff postings and advice. These relationships in the spirit of partnership are complex structures involving numerous interactions. Another fact is that the organisations providing support themselves often receive grants from other donors (back donors). In Germany, for example, they include the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) or the Federal Foreign Office (AA).

All stakeholders are called upon to play their part if the Do No Harm approach is to be applied effectively in emergency aid measures or development projects. Conflict-sensitive project planning by the implementing organisation will only be effective if the funding organisation and the back donor provide it with the necessary leeway.

Implementing organisations

Based on current knowledge, Do No Harm and a conflict-sensitive planning and implementation process should be viewed as standard for all projects. It can be helpful here if the seven steps in the Do No Harm analysis are not completed alone. Dialogue with colleagues is just as important for critical analysis of the own projects as appreciative interaction with one another. Organisations with practical experience confirm that the Do No Harm tool does not involve any significantly greater workload or time frame. However, Do No Harm must already have been rolled out as a working tool. And while doing so will take some effort, it does pay off.

Do No Harm is introduced at three levels:

- at the cognitive level of understanding (Learning);
- **2.** at the practical level of application (Doing);
- **3.** at the level of structural change within the organisation (Embedding).

The Do No Harm approach must be applied at all three levels in order to be successful (known as 'mainstreaming'). Systematic structural change will not be induced within the organisation if only the cognitive and practical levels are addressed. But this change is necessary in order to enable the evolution of regulations, tools and processes within an organisation according to the principle of Do No Harm. It makes sense to embed the method in the project cycle in order to facilitate the necessary structural adjustments (refer to Figure 2, page 12).

Funding organisations

Organisations that provide financial resources, human resources or their expertise to support development projects and Humanitarian Aid must also enshrine conflict sensitivity into their policies, criteria, procedures and guidelines. The <u>Better</u> <u>Programming Initiative</u> by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IRFC) is an interesting example. They can also assist their partner organisations in adapting Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity to their specific context and embedding the principles in their work.

Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity therefore mean two things for funding organisations: Firstly, Do No Harm can – and should – be translated into questions in order to engage in a form of dialogue that encourages partners to perform a systematic analysis of their context. The questions must not be framed as test or control questions or even come across as lecturing. Instead they should encourage people to scrutinise current perceptions and certainties in relation to the context in a spirit of self criticism.

Another key factor is that the funding organisation must ensure that its financing terms permits adequate flexibility. Only then will the implementing organisations be in a position to respond quickly to unintentional effects and adapt the measures in order to 'avoid harm' (Do No Harm), instead of inhibiting the opportunities for forces of peace to take action (conflict sensitivity).

Donor institutions (back donors)

In many cases, funding organisations not only have their own funds they generate themselves, but also receive grants from other donors (back donors). Mainstreaming Do No Harm in a spirit of partnership with implementing organisations means that these organisations must also check the requirements and guidelines imposed by their back donors to check whether they promote or perhaps even inhibit conflict-sensitive action in the project region. In the latter case, it is important to engage in dialogue with the back donor to ensure that conflict-sensitive project work remains possible and is strengthened in the interests of all parties.

Donors can also promote the embedding and, at the same time, adaptation and continued improvement of conflict-sensitive project work, not only by including Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity in their funding policies and guidelines, but also by actively seeking to share experience with their grant recipients and their implementing partner organisations. Donors and funding organisations can also help to ensure that implementing organisations can draw on the necessary resources and time to conduct in-depth conflict and context analyses. By doing so, they can analyse the lessons learnt from conflict-sensitive project work and use it to improve their own routines.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ERROR CULTURE

Self-critical scrutiny of one's own practices is a crucial factor in order to introduce and enshrine Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity: asking about what we can learn from mistakes is more conducive to improving the quality of one's own actions than simply listing success stories. Therefore, far more than success, mistakes must be viewed and used as an opportunity to learn. A conscious appraisal of power structures and the effects of one's own commitment is also essential. It is always possible to integrate fresh insights into established routines and to enable projects to evolve.

- Do opportunities exist to share experience and build networks for frank dialogue, as well as to address challenges and failures?
- Can mistakes be discussed in the team, and are they perceived as an opportunity to learn?
- Are there opportunities for further training and how is the knowledge transferred back into the organisation?

The six-year collaborative learning process that gave rise to the Do No Harm approach brought together numerous international and local Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid organisations to learn from mistakes Yet still, only a few organisations have already institutionalised an internal error culture. Do No Harm practitioners remain in dialogue in order to continue improving and professionalising the practice of conflict-sensitive action. The most frequently posed question in these discussions is: "what was our most instructive experience?"

> VENRO offers training and online seminars on topics such as Do No Harm and Participation. For the current programme of courses, visit: <u>www.venro.org</u>

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