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UN FORUM SERIES – Measuring progress on human rights, and peace, in conflict affected areas

Damiano de Felice

This post was contributed by Andrea Iff, Head of Business and Peace, swisspeace.

Conflict-affected and high-risk areas are characterized by specific political, economic and social conditions. An area can be conflict-affected either because of a violent conflict that exists between language, religious or identity groups independently from a business operation or because of a violent conflict between a company and a community surrounding a business operation.

Progress in human rights and business is particularly relevant for these areas. In its [2014 report](#), the UNWG called upon states to “identify steps to support business enterprises while integrating guidance on conflict-sensitive business practices into their human rights due diligence processes”.

And integration of conflict-sensitivity and human rights approaches to business conduct is fruitful on different levels outlined below. Apart from ‘doing no harm’/conflict-sensitivity in conflict affected areas, companies are more and more interested in the opportunity to jointly with other organizations support peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas. While this is a new and ‘cutting edge’ topic, it goes hand in hand with a conflict-sensitivity lens.

There are three different areas where an integration of conflict-sensitivity methodology into a human rights approach can be fruitful.

It is in the assessment phase of human rights impacts analyses that conflict-sensitivity is very well positioned to complement human rights approaches, as it can help companies understand the different kinds of conflict-related risks. We distinguish three different kinds of impacts:

- impacts relevant from both, a human rights and conflict sensitivity perspective (i.e. environmental damages such as water pollution or business relations to rebel groups);
- impacts that are not likely to stir broader societal conflict (i.e. unequal payment of women and men);
- impacts that are not in the first place associated with human rights (i.e. who does economically benefit from a company’s presence or does the company support one groups preference for economic policy more than another’s) but that can drag companies into a conflict spiral.

The third kind of issues tend to be overlooked by standard human rights impact assessments but are highly relevant to the overall human rights risks of the company in conflict affected areas.

Furthermore, for the first and second kinds of impacts, a conflict-sensitivity lens can clarify if measures taken to mitigate negative human rights impacts are themselves conflict-sensitive or if they trigger conflict. We can think of an example where a company introduces measures to fight child labour, leading to less income for some families, which can have an impact on a fragile balance within a community or amongst age groups in a particular region.

The second area apart from risk and mitigation assessment where conflict-sensitivity can inform a human rights perspective is the remediation process.

Conflict sensitive business is geared towards transforming and institutionalizing conflicts from violent into non-violent conflicts. Grievance mechanisms are similar as they to prevent conflicts from becoming violent, but they do not offer a way out of a situation where a company is already in a conflict spiral.

A conflict sensitivity approach can mainly (but not only) inform the establishment of non-judicial grievance mechanisms, as these are designed to include the parties to a conflict taking the local customs and practices into account. They are highly relevant for re-establishing trust amongst the different stakeholders to a conflict.

The third area where integration can be fruitful is in the overall process of impact assessments in conflict-affected areas. Besides helping to grasp the third dimension of impacts, assessing the conflict sensitivity of mitigation measures and integrate conflict sensitivity insights into grievance mechanisms and remediation, conflict sensitivity methodology offers guidance on *how* to conduct human rights impact assessments and *how* to report on due diligence in conflict affected areas that are characterized by mistrust and strong political tensions.

When gathering information that can be either utilized to assess risks or assess mitigation impact, individuals might be at risk by providing information or acting as 'whistle blowers'. Furthermore, in situations of conflict, it is very relevant to make sure that all involved parties know how, why and who communicates on what, otherwise this can again stir conflict.

While conflict-sensitivity (or do no harm) is highly relevant in conflict affected contexts, companies can even engage in [peacebuilding](#). A recent publication by the UN Global Compact's Business for Peace (B4P) Platform is looking into [measuring peacebuilding activities](#) of companies.

Peacebuilding for companies seeks to "deliberately understand, address and engage key drivers of conflict in a given context. Maximize contribution to peace through operations, programmes and partnerships." This involves activities that end violence and address key driving factors of conflict and forge alliances and partnerships to coordinate and advocate for comprehensive and multi-sectoral strategies to promote peace.

Only rarely can or do companies engage in peacebuilding alone, these are endeavors that they enter with other organizations or institutions that suffer from the same negative impacts of conflict as they do. Thus, peacebuilding projects are joint endeavors by companies, NGOs, international organizations and local communities.

As discussed in the publication, peacebuilding for companies includes five steps:

1. Commit to peace – understand why contributing to peace is important for business.
2. Assess – use conflict analysis to determine how business can make a positive contribution to peace.
3. Define – setting goals and developing context-relevant approaches for maximizing impacts on peace.
4. Implement – monitoring and evaluating programme effectiveness and peace effectiveness.
5. Communicate – reporting on impact and progress towards peace.

While for some companies this seems to be 'cutting edge' and something very new, several companies already engage in peacebuilding initiatives like the [NDPI Initiative](#) in Nigeria and they are always characterized by a joint effort with other organizations or government agencies and can have a huge impact on the situation for the affected communities.

Peacebuilding is a slow process that involves several levels of participatory conflict analysis. Even though it is new to the language of businesses, it is not far away from a conflict-sensitivity lens to business operations. With the growing emphasis of the international development community on the private sector as a new important development actor in conflict affected and fragile environments, peacebuilding for business will become even more relevant in the future.

Andrea Iff

Andrea Iff heads the Business and Peace / Statehood and Conflict Program at [swisspeace](#). She holds a PhD in Political Science and lectures at the University of Basel. She is currently doing a post-doc at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, on economic power sharing.



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